



# *Bear in the Forest Hut*

Polish Fairy Tales

Polish

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*Intermediate*

*18 min read*

There was once an old man, who was a widower, and he had married an old woman, who was a widow. Both had had children by their first marriage; and now the old man had a daughter of his own still living, and the old woman also had a daughter.

The old man was an honest, hard-working, and good-natured old fellow, but too much under his wife's thumb. This was very unfortunate, because she was wicked, cunning, and sly, and a bad old witch.

Her daughter was only too like her in disposition; but she was her mother's darling.

But the old man's daughter was a very good sweet girl; nevertheless her stepmother hated her; she was always tormenting her, and wishing her dead.

One day she had beaten her very cruelly, and pushed her out of doors; then she said to the old man:

“Your wretched daughter is always giving me trouble; she is such an ill-tempered, spoilt hussy, that I cannot do anything with her. So if you wish for peace in the house, you must put her into your waggon, drive her away into the forest, and come back without her.”

The old man was very sorry to have to do this; for he loved his own little daughter most dearly. But he was so

afraid of his wife that he dared not refuse; so he put the poor girl into his waggon, drove a long way into the forest, took her out, and left her there alone.

She wandered about a long time, gathering wild strawberries, to eat with a little piece of bread, which her father had given her. Towards evening she came to the door of a hut in the forest, and knocked at the door.

Nobody answered her knock. So she lifted the latch, went in, and looked round—there was nobody there.

But there was a table in one corner, and benches all round the walls, and an oven by the door. And near the table, close to the window, was a spinning-wheel, and a quantity of flax.

The girl sat down to the spinning-wheel, and opened the window, looked out, and listened; but nobody came.

But as it grew dusk she heard a rustle not far off, and from somewhere not far from the hut, a voice was heard, singing:

“Wanderer, outcast, forsaken! Whom the night has overtaken; If no crime your conscience stain, In this hut to-night remain.”

When the voice ceased, she answered:

“I am outcast and forsaken; Yet unstained by crime am I: Be you rich, or be you poor; For this night here let me lie!”

Once more there was a rustle in the branches; the door opened, and there came into the room—a bear!

The girl started up, very frightened; but the bear only said:

“Good evening, pretty maiden!”

“Good evening to you, whoever you are,” she replied, somewhat reassured.

“How did you come here?” he asked. “Was it of your own free will, or by compulsion?”

The maiden told him all, weeping; but the bear sat down beside her, and stroking her face with his paw, replied:

“Do not cry, pretty one; you shall be happy yet. But in the meantime you must do just what I tell you. Do you

see that flax? You must spin it into thread; of that thread you must weave cloth, and of that cloth you must make me a shirt. I shall come here to-morrow at this same time, and if the shirt is ready I will reward you. Good-bye!”



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So saying the bear made her a parting bow, and went out. At first the girl began to cry, and said to herself:

“How can I do this in only twenty-four hours—spin all that flax, weave it into cloth, and make a shirt out of it? Well! I must set to work! and do what I can.... He will at least see that my will was good, though I was unable to perform the task.”

Thus saying, she dried her tears, ate some of her bread and strawberries, sat down to the spinning-wheel, and began to spin by the light of the moon.

The time went by quickly, as she worked, and it was daylight before she knew.

And there was no more flax left; she had spun out the last distaff-full.

She was astonished to see how fast the work had gone, and began to wonder how she was to weave the thread without any loom.

Thinking, she fell asleep.

When she woke the sun was already high in the heavens. There was breakfast ready on the table, and a loom under the window.

She ran down to the neighbouring brook, washed her face and hands, came back, said grace, and ate her breakfast; then she sat down to the loom.

The shuttle flew so fast that the cloth was all ready by noon.

She took it out into a meadow, sprinkled it from the brook, spread it out in the sun, and in one hour the cloth was bleached.

She came back with it to the hut, cut out the shirt, and began to stitch at it diligently.

The twilight was falling, and she was just putting in the last stitch, when the door opened, and the bear came in, and asked:

“Is the shirt ready?”

She gave it to him.

“Thank you, my good girl; now I must reward you. You told me you had a bad stepmother; if you like, I will send my bears to tear her and her daughter in pieces.”

“Oh! don’t do that! I don’t want to be revenged; let them live!”

“Let it be so then! Meanwhile make yourself useful in the kitchen; get me some porridge for supper. You will find everything you want in the cupboard in the wall; but I will go and fetch my bedding, for I shall spend to-night at home.”

The bear left the room, and the maiden made up the fire in the oven, and began to get the porridge ready.

Just then she heard a sound under the bench, and there ran out a poor, lean little mouse, which stood up on its hind-legs, and said in human tones:

“Mistress! help me lest I die A poor weak, little mouse am I! I am hungry, give me food; And to you will I be good.”

The girl was sorry for the mouse, and threw it a spoonful of porridge.

The mouse ate it, thanked her, and ran away to its hole.

The bear soon came in, with a load of wood and stones; these he laid upon the stove, and having eaten a basin of porridge, he climbed upon the stove, and said:

“Here, girl, is a bunch of keys on a steel ring. Put out the fire; but you must walk about the room all night, and keep on jingling these keys, till I get up; and if I find you alive in the morning you shall be happy.”

The bear began snoring directly, and the old man’s daughter kept walking about the hut, jingling the keys.

Soon the mouse ran out of its hole, and said:

“Give me the keys, mistress, I will jingle them for you; but you must hide yourself behind the stove, for the stones will soon be flying about.”

So the mouse began to run up and down by the wall, under the bench. The maiden hid behind the oven, and about midnight the bear woke up, and threw out a stone into the middle of the room.

But the mouse kept running about, and jingling the keys. And the bear asked:

“Are you alive?”

“I am,” replied the girl, from behind the oven.

The bear began to throw stones and billets of wood, thick and fast from the stove, and every time he did so, he asked:

“Are you alive?”

“I am,” replied the girl’s voice from behind the oven; and the mouse still ran up and down, jingling the keys.

With the dawn the cocks began to crow, but the bear did not wake. The mouse gave up the keys, and ran back to its hole; but the old man’s daughter began to walk about the room, and jingled the keys.

At sunrise the bear came off the stove, and said:

“O daughter of the old man! you are blest of heaven! For here was I, a powerful monarch, changed by enchantment into a bear, until some living soul should spend two nights in this hut. And now I shall soon become a man again, and return to my kingdom, taking you for my wife. But before this comes to pass, do you look into my right ear.”

The old man’s daughter threw back her hair, and looked into the right ear of the bear. And she saw a beautiful country, with millions of people, with high mountains, deep rivers, impenetrable forests, and pastures covered with flocks, well-to-do villages, and rich cities.

“What seest thou?” asked the bear.

“I see a lovely country.”

“That is my kingdom. Look into my left ear.”

She looked, and could not enough admire what she saw—a magnificent palace, with many carriages and horses in the courtyard, and in the carriages rich robes, jewels, and all kinds of rarities.

“What do you see?” asked the bear.

She described it all.

“Which of those carriages do you prefer?”

“The one with four horses,” she replied.

“That is yours then,” answered the bear, as he opened the window.

There was a sound of wheels in the forest, and a golden carriage presently drew up before the cottage drawn by four splendid horses, although there was no driver.

The bear adorned his beloved with a gown of cloth-of-gold, with diamond ear-rings, a necklace set with various precious stones, and diamond rings, saying:

“Wait here a little while; your father will come for you presently; and in a few days, when the power of the enchantment is over, and I am a king again, I will come for you, and you shall be my queen.”

So saying the bear disappeared into the forest, and the old man’s daughter looked out of the window to watch for her father’s coming.

The old man, having left his daughter in the wood, came home very sad; but on the third day he harnessed his waggon again, and drove into the forest, to see if she were alive or dead; and if she were dead at least to bury her.

Towards evening the old woman and her own daughter looked out of the window, and a dog, the favourite of the old man’s daughter, suddenly rushed to the door, and began to bark:

“Bow! wow! wow! the old man’s here! Bringing home his daughter dear, Decked with gold and diamonds’ sheen, Gifts to please a royal queen.”

The old woman gave the dog an angry kick. “You lie, you big ugly dog! Bark like this!

“Bow! wow! wow! the old man’s come! His daughter’s bones he’s bringing home!”

So saying she opened the door; the dog leaped forth; and she went with her daughter into the courtyard. They stood as if transfixed!

For in drove the carriage with four galloping horses, the old man sitting on the box, cracking his whip, and his daughter sat inside, dressed in cloth of gold, and adorned with jewels.

The old woman pretended she was overjoyed to see her, welcomed her with many kisses, and was anxious to know where she got all these rich and beautiful things.

The girl told her that they were all given to her by the bear in the forest hut.

Next day the old woman baked some delicious cakes, and gave them to her own daughter, saying to the old man:

“If your wretched, worthless daughter has had such good luck, I am sure my sweet, pretty darling will get a deal more from the bear, if he can only see her. So you must drive her out in the waggon, leave her in the forest, and come back without her.”

And she gave the old man a good push, to hasten his departure, shut the door of the cottage in his face, and looked out of the window to see what would happen.

The old man went to the stable, got out the waggon, put the horse to, helped his stepdaughter in, and drove away with her into the forest.

There he left her, turned his horse’s head, and drove quickly home.

The old woman’s daughter was not long in finding out the hut in the forest. Confident in the power of her charms she went straight into the little room. There was nobody within; but there was the same table in one corner, the benches round the walls, the oven by the door, and the spinning-wheel, under the window, with a great bundle of flax.

She sat down on one of the benches, undid her bundle, and began eating the cakes with great relish, looking

from the window all the time.

It soon began to get dark, a strong wind began to blow, and a voice was heard singing outside:

“Wanderer! outcast, forsaken! Whom the night has overtaken; If no crime your conscience stain, Here this night you may remain.”

When the voice ceased she answered:

“I am outcast and forsaken; Yet unstained by crime am I: Be you rich, or be you poor, For this night here let me lie.”

Then the door opened, and the bear walked in.

The girl stood up, gave him a winning smile, and waited for him to bow first.

The bear looked at her narrowly, made a bow, and said:

“Welcome, maiden ... but I have not much time to stay here. I must go back to the forest; but between now and to-morrow evening you must make me a shirt, out of this flax; so you must set at once about spinning, weaving, bleaching, washing, and then about sewing it. Good-bye!”

So saying the bear turned, and went out.

“That’s not what I came here for,” said the girl, so soon as his back was turned, “to do your spinning, weaving, and sewing! You may do without a shirt for me!”

So saying, she made herself comfortable on one of the benches, and went to sleep.

Next day, at evening twilight, the bear came back, and asked:

“Is the shirt ready?”

She made no answer.

“What’s this? the distaff has not been touched.”

Silence as before.

“Get me ready my supper at once. You will find water in that pail, and the groats in that cupboard. I must go and fetch my bedding, for to-night I will sleep at home.”

The bear went out, and the old woman’s daughter lit the fire in the stove, and began to prepare the porridge. Then the little mouse came out, stood on its hind-legs, and said:

“Mistress! help me, or I die! A poor, weak little mouse am I! I am hungry, give me food; And to you will I be good.”

But the unkind girl only caught up the spoon with which she was stirring the porridge, and flung it at the poor mouse, which ran away in a fright.

The bear soon came back with a huge load of stones and wood; instead of a mattress he arranged a layer of stones on the top of the stove, and covered this with the wood, in place of a sheet. He ate up the porridge, and said:

“Here! take these keys; walk all night about the hut, and keep on jingling them. And if, when I get up to-morrow, I find you still alive, you shall be happy.”

The bear was snoring at once, and the old woman’s daughter walked up and down drowsily, jingling the keys.

But about midnight the bear woke up, and flung a stone towards the quarter whence he heard the jingling. It hit the old woman’s daughter.

She gave one shriek, fell, and expired instantly.

Next morning the bear descended from the top of the oven, looked once at the dead girl, opened the cottage door, stood upon the threshold, and stamped upon it three times with all his force. It thundered and lightened; and in one moment the bear became a handsome young king, with a golden sceptre in his hand, and a diamond crown on his head.

And now there drew up before the cottage a carriage, bright as sunshine, with six horses. The coachman

cracked his whip, till the leaves fell from the trees, and the king got into the carriage, and drove away from the forest to his own capital city.

The old man having left his stepdaughter in the forest came home rejoicing in his daughter's joy. She was expecting the king every day. In the meantime he busied himself with looking after the four splendid horses, cleaning the golden carriage, and airing the costly horse-clothes.

On the third day after his return the old woman came down upon him and said:

“Go and fetch my darling; she is no doubt all dressed in gold by this time, or married to a king; so I shall be a queen's mother.”

The old man, obedient as ever, harnessed the waggon, and drove off.

When evening came the old woman gazed from the window; when the dog began to bark:

“Bow! wow! wow! the old man's come! Your daughter's bones he's bringing home!”

“You lie!” exclaimed the old woman; “bark like this:

‘Bow! wow! wow! the old man's here! Driving home your daughter dear, Decked in gold and diamonds' sheen, Gifts to please a royal queen.’”

So saying she ran out of the house to meet the old man, coming back in the waggon; but she stood as if thunderstruck, sobbed, and wept, and was hardly able to articulate:

“Where is my sweetest daughter?”

The old man scratched his head, and replied:

“She has met with a great misfortune; this is all I have found of her—a few bare bones, and blood-stained garments; in the wood, in the old hut ... she has been devoured by wolves.”

The old woman, wild with grief and despair, gathered up her daughter's bones, went to some neighbouring cross-ways, and when a number of people had gathered together, she buried them there with weeping and lamentation; then she fell face downward on the grave—and was turned to stone.

Meanwhile a royal carriage drew up in the courtyard of the old man's cottage, bright as the sun, with four splendid horses, and the coachman cracked his whip—till the cottage fell to pieces with the sound.

The king took both the old man and his daughter into the carriage, and they drove away to his capital, where the marriage soon took place.

The old man lived happily in his declining years, as the father-in-law of a king, and with his sweet daughter, who had once been so miserable, a queen.

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