



Ermine and the Hunter

Canadian Fairy Tales

Canadian Native American North American

Intermediate
10 min read

Far away in the Canadian North Country an old man lived with his wife and children. They lived far from other people, but they were never lonely, for they had much work to do. The old man was a great hunter, and in summer he and his wife and children lived on the fish and game he captured in the winter. In the springtime he gathered sap from the maple trees, from which he made maple syrup and maple sugar with which to sweeten their food. One day in summer he found three small bears eating his stock of sugar. When he came upon them, his sugar was all gone, and he was very cross. With a stout club he killed the little bears and skinned them and dried their meat. But his wife said, "No good can come of it. You should not have killed the three little bears, for they were too young for slaughter."

The next day the old Bear came along, looking for his lost children. When he saw their skins hanging up to dry he knew that they had been killed by the hunter. He was very sad and angry, and he called to the hunter, "You have killed my little motherless cubs, and in return for that wickedness, some night when you are off your guard, I will kill your children, and then I will kill you and your wife, and I will devour all your food." The old man shot at him with his arrows, but the arrows did not harm him, for he was Brown Bear of the Stony Heart, and he could not be killed by man. For many nights and days the old man tried to trap him, but he met with no success. And each day he saw his store of food growing smaller, for Bear of the Stony Heart always stole it in the night. And he thought, "We shall all surely starve before the winter comes, and game is plentiful again."

One day in despair, he resolved to look about him for someone who would tell him how to kill the Bear. He

went to the bank of the river and sat there in thought and smoked long at his pipe. And he called to the God of the River and said, "Oh, River-God, help me to drown Bear when he comes to fish." The river came from the Lime Stone country far back among the rocks, and it was flowing rapidly to the sea.

And the River-God said, "My water cannot tarry. There are millions of oysters down on the ocean shore waiting for shells, and I am hurrying down there with the lime to make them," and he rushed quickly past.

Then the old man called to the Spirit of the Wind, and he said, "Oh, Spirit of the Wind, stay here with me tonight and help me to kill Bear of the Stony Heart. You can knock down great trees upon his back and crush him to the earth."

But the Wind Spirit said, "I cannot linger. Many ships with rich cargoes lie silent on the ocean waiting to sail, and I must hurry along with the force to drive them." And like the River-God he hastened on his way.

Then the old man called to Storm Cloud, which was just then passing over his head, and he said, "Oh, Spirit of the Storm Cloud, stay here with me tonight and help me to kill Bear of the Stony Heart, for he seeks to destroy my children. You can send lightning and thunder to strike him dead."

But the Storm Cloud said, "I cannot loiter on the way. Far from here there are millions of blades of corn and grass dying from thirst in the summer heat, for I see the heat waves rising on the earth, and I am hurrying there with rain to save them." And like the River-God and the Wind Spirit he hurried along on his business. The poor old man was in great sorrow, for it seemed that no one would help him to rid the land of Bear of the Stony Heart.

As he sat wondering what he should do, an old woman came along. She said, "I am very hungry and tired, for I have come far. Will you give me food and let me rest here a while?" And he said, "We have very little food, for Bear of the Stony Heart steals it from us nightly, but you may share with us what little we have." So he went away and brought back to her a good fat meal. While she was eating her dinner he told her of his troubles with Bear, and he said that no one would help him to get rid of the pest, and that Bear could not be killed by man.

And the old woman said, "There is a little animal who can kill Bear of the Stony Heart. He alone can save you. You have done well to me. Here is a wand which I will give you. Go to sleep here, soon, on the bank of the river. Wave this wand before you sleep and say what I shall teach you, and when you awake call to you the first animal you see when you open your eyes. He will be the animal of which I speak, and he will rid you of the

Bear.” She taught him a little rhyme and gave him a wand which she took from the basket on her arm; then she hobbled away, and the old man knew that she was the weird woman of the Fairy Blue Mountain, of whom he had often heard. He marvelled greatly, but he resolved to do as she had told him.

After the old woman had gone, the man waved the little wand three times, and cried:

“Animal, animal, come from your lair, Help me to slaughter the old Brown Bear! Make with my magic a little white dart, To pierce in the centre old Bear’s Stony Heart!”

He repeated the rhyme three times. Then he felt himself getting drowsy and sleep soon came upon him. He slept but a short time when the heat woke him up, for the hot sun beat down upon him. He rubbed his eyes and looked about him. Watching him from behind a tree was a little animal with a shaggy brown coat. The old man thought to himself, “Surely the weird fairy woman of the Blue Mountain has played a trick on me. That scraggy little animal with the dirty coat cannot kill the Bear.” But he resolved to test her word. He repeated his rhyme again, and the little animal came quickly towards him.

“Who are you?” said the man.

“I am Ermine,” said the little animal.

“Are you the animal of which the fairy woman of the Blue Hills has told me?” asked the man.

“I am indeed the same,” said Ermine. “I have been sent to you to kill the Bear, and here I have the little darts made powerful because of your magic wand.” He pointed to his mouth and showed the old man his sharp white teeth. “So now to your task,” said the old man in high spirits. “Oh, not so fast,” said Ermine, “you must first pay me for my work.”

“What can I do for you?” asked the man.

“I am ashamed of my dirty brown coat, which I have worn for a long time,” said the animal; “you have great magic from the wand you received from the fairy woman of the Blue Hills. I want a sleek and shining white coat that I can wear always, for I want to be clean.”

The man waved his wand again and wished for what the animal had asked him, and at once the shaggy brown coat of Ermine was replaced by a sleek and shining white coat as spotless as the new snow in winter. Then the animal said, “I have one more condition to impose on you. You must promise never to kill a bear’s young cubs

when they are still following their mother in the summer time. You must give them a chance to grow strong, so that they may be able to fight for their own lives.” And the man promised, placing his hand upon the wand to bind his oath. Then, when he looked again, the wand had vanished from his hand. It had gone back through the air to the fairy woman of the Blue Hills.

Then Ermine set out on his search for Bear. The afternoon was very hot, and the forest was still, and not a leaf or a blade of grass was stirring, and there was not a ripple on the stream. The whole world was drowsy in the dry summer heat. But Ermine did not feel the heat, he was in such high spirits because of his new white coat. Soon he came upon Bear, stretched out at full length on the bank of the river, taking his afternoon nap, as was his custom after his fat midday meal. He was lying on his back, and his mouth was open wide, and he was snoring loudly like a waterfall.

“This is your last sleep,” said Ermine, creeping softly to his side, “for you are a dangerous thief; you shall snore no more.” And with a bound he jumped down Bear’s throat, and in an instant had pierced with his teeth his strong stony heart, which the arrows of the Indians could never reach. Then as quickly as he had entered the Bear’s mouth, Ermine jumped out again and ran from the place. Bear snored no more; he was quite dead, and the land was rid of his thefts and terrors.

Then Ermine went back to the old man and told him that the deed was done; and that night was a great feast night in the old man’s home. And since that time Ermine in the North Country has worn a sleek white coat as spotless as the new snow in winter. And to this day the hunters in the far north will not kill, if they can avoid it, the young Bear cubs while they are still following their mothers through the forest. They give them a chance to grow up and grow strong, so that they may be able to fight for their own lives, as the fairy woman of the Blue Hills had asked.

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