The Little Bear

Аn old apple-tree with white branches grew in a meadow. Beneath its branches stood a small cottage, in which an old man lived. When the summer was over, the grass in the meadow turned yellow and the apples - red. One day the old man mended his shabby old bag and filled it with ripe apples. He tightened his sandals, twisted his moustaches, flung the bag over his shoul­der, and set out for the market to sell his apples and put some money aside for a rainy day. It was late in the afternoon. A little hear came out of the forest.

And this is the beginning of a tale.

‘Please, Granddad, give me two apples, one for me and one for my sick little brother. We are two orphans and live alone in this dark forest among the beasts. In the spring hunters killed our dear mother. How hard our life is without a mother among the beasts! I beg you, Granddad! If you are not willing to give me two apples, give me at least one for my sick brother!’

The old man picked up a big stick and ran after the shaggy little bear. But as soon as he turned round and set out for the market again, it followed him with pleading eyes.

‘Just one apple, Granddad!’ and the bear stretched out its little paw, whining pitifully and licking its lips.

The wicked old man, however, refused to give the little bear a single apple. He walked firmly on to the market, whistling, pretending to be deaf and not even turning backwards. But all of a sudden he came to a hawthorn which, when it understood what the mat­ter was, bent a little and hooked in the bag full of ap­ples. The old man pulled it strongly and the old, worn out bag was torn. All the apples were scattered on the ground and rolleddown along the road into the cart-tracks. The old man bent down to gather them, his heart full of anger at having bruised the apples. He was afraid that they would turn black before he reached the town.

The little bear looked at him in bewilderment, then seized one and rushed back to the forest. The stingy old man noticed it, left the bag with the apples and ran af­ter it. He caught it by the tail, dragged it out, took the apple and pulled its ears. But when he went back to the hawthorn he found neither the torn hag nor the ap­ples. While he was chasing the little bear, travelers had passed by, had gathered the apples and eaten them, throwing the torn bag away.

The old man grew angry, returned to his hut, took a pick and set out to uproot the hawthorn, which he thought was the cause of his mishaps. He unbuttoned his shirt, rolled up his sleeves and started digging. He uprooted the hawthorn before it grew dark. When he threw it down and looked at its roots - what did he see - money! A whole pot of gold coins. Somebody had obviously buried them. The old man was wild with joy. He seized the money, looked around and rushed to­wards his hut. All through the night he counted the gold coins in the moonlight, and on the following day he went straight to the market, bought two oxen and a bushel of wheat, and still had plenty of money. He went home, hitched the oxen to the old pear-wood plough, left behind by his grandfather, and sowed the wheat on the field.

The second year set in. The summer passed. It had breathed its hot breath on the earth. Granddad’s wheat grew yellow, but the apple-tree did not redden, for that year it had not born a single apple. The old man looked at the tall wheat stalks and felt happy, and when the stalks were quite ripe, decided to reap them.

One evening he honed his sickle, prepared his reaper’s glove and went to sleep in the cabin. He was going to reap the wheat on the following day.

The night came. A star fell right into the ripe wheat. The field took fire and was burned down to the last stalk. In the morning the old man got up and picked up the sickle. When he went out he was dumbfounded: the golden wheat was gone. There was nothing hut a patch of black earth in front of him.

The old man sat down on a stone under the barren apple-tree and began to cry. Suddenly he heard some­thing laugh behind him. He turned around and saw the same little bear.

And the story is ended here.

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