

The Straw Ox

Once upon a time there lived an old man and an old woman. The old man worked in a mill where he boiled tar into pitch. His wife sat at home spinning hanks of hemp. They were so poor that they had nothing. What they earned, they ate, and there was never anything to show for it.

One day the old woman begged her husband, "Dear husband, please make me an ox of straw and smear some tar over it."

"What are you talking about? What do you need a straw ox for?" asked the old man.

"Please make it for me. I already know what I want it for," answered the wife.

The old man saw that there was nothing to be gained by arguing, so he went out and made a straw ox and covered it with tar.

The night passed by. In the morning the old woman took some hemp and went off to pasture the straw ox. As for herself, she sat on a hillock and spun her yarn and sang,

"Graze, graze, little ox on the grass so green,

Whilst I spin some yarn.

Graze, graze, little ox on the grass so green,

Whilst I spin some yarn."

So she spun and spun, then after awhile she began to doze off. Suddenly, from the dark forest a bear appeared with his side all torn up as though from a big fight. He jumped at the ox and said, "Who are you?" And the ox said to him,

"I am a three-year-old ox

Made from straw

And smeared with tar."

“Seeing that you are made of straw and smeared with tar, give me some of your tar to mend my torn side.”

The ox said nothing—he kept quiet. So the bear struck him on the side and began to tear off some tar. He tore and tore until his very teeth sank into it and there was no means of getting away. He pulled and pulled the ox, goodness knows where!

When the old woman woke up the ox wasn't anywhere around. “Oh, what great misfortune! Where did my ox disappear? Maybe he has gone home.” So she quickly put her spindle on her shoulder and set off for home. Then she saw the bear stuck in the tarred ox, so she called to the old man, “Husband, dear husband, the ox has caught us a bear. Go and shoot him.” The old man came, tore the bear off and threw him into the cellar.

Well, on the next day, when it wasn't daylight or starlight yet, the old woman had already taken her spinning and scurried off to pasture her ox. She sat on a hillock spinning her yarn and while she did so, she repeated,

“Graze, graze, little ox on the grass so green,

Whilst I spin my yarn.

Graze, graze, little ox on the grass so green,

Whilst I spin my yarn.”

So she spun and spun, then after awhile she began to doze off. Suddenly, from the dark forest a grey wolf appeared with his side all torn up as though he had been in a big fight. “Who are you?” he said to the ox.

“I am a three-year-old ox

Made from straw

And smeared with tar.”

“Seeing that you are made of straw and smeared with tar, give me some of your tar to mend my side, which some fierce dogs tore.”

“Take some, then,” replied the ox.

The wolf quickly went to the ox’s side to get the tar. He tore and tore and even got his teeth stuck in it. He couldn’t get away: he was stuck fast to the ox!

When the old woman woke up, the ox was nowhere to be seen. She said to herself, “My ox has probably gone off home.” So she set off, too. As she went along she saw the wolf in the forest, pulling at the ox. She ran off and told the old man. He came and threw the wolf into the cellar.

The third day, the old woman again took the young ox to the pasture. She sat on the hillock spinning, and after awhile she fell asleep. Soon there came along a fox.

“Who are you?” he asked the ox.

“I am a three-year-old ox

Made from straw

And smeared with tar.”

“Give me some tar, old dear, to put on my side. Those horrible dogs almost skinned me alive!” said the fox.

“Take some, then.”

So the fox went to pull off some tar and his teeth got stuck in it and he could find no means of escape.

The old woman awoke, told her husband about the fox and he came and threw him into the cellar.

Later on they caught a little rabbit the same way, so there were four of them in the cellar. The old man sat on the trap door over the cellar and began to sharpen his knife. The bear heard him and said,

“Old man, tell me true,

Why do you sharpen your knife?

What are you going to do?”

And the old man replied,

“I sharpen my knife,

To skin your hide

To provide my wife

With a coat of fur.”

“Oh, do not slay me, old man. Give me my freedom, and I shall bring you lots of honey.”

“Well, take care. Remember to bring it, then.” And he let the bear go free.

After that he sat on the trap door and sharpened his knife again. The wolf heard him and said, “Old man, tell me true,

Why do you sharpen your knife?

What are you going to do?”

And the old man replied,

“I sharpen my knife,

To skin your hide

To provide my wife

With a cap of fur.”

“Oh, do not slay me. Give me my freedom and I shall bring you a whole flock of sheep.”

“Take care, then, to bring it,” replied the old man. And he let the wolf go free.

Then he sat once more on the trap door and sharpened his knife. The face of the fox thrust itself out and asked,

“Old man, tell me true,

Why do you sharpen your knife?

What are you going to do?”

And the old man replied,

“I sharpen my knife,

To skin your hide

To provide my wife

With a collar of fur.”

“Oh, do not slay me. Give me my freedom and I shall bring you some geese and chickens.”

“Well, take care. See that you do!” replied the old man. And the old man freed the fox.

There was only the rabbit left now, and he said,

“Old man, tell me true,

Why do you sharpen your knife?

What are you going to do?”

And the old man replied,

“I sharpen my knife,

To skin your hide

To provide my wife

With mitts and cap.”

“Oh, do not slay me, old man. I shall bring you some fine ribbons, earrings and beads if you give me my freedom!” So the old man let him go free.

Well, night passed and in the early morning when it was neither starlight nor daylight, someone came to the house and scratched at the door. “Der, der,” it sounded. The old woman heard it and said, “Husband, dear husband, something is scratching at the door. Go and see what it is.” So the old man went and he saw the bear bringing a whole hive of honey. The old man took the honey and then went back to bed.

Again there came a scratching at the door. “Der, der,” it sounded. When the old man went to answer it, there was the wolf, who had brought a whole flock of sheep to him.

Soon after came the fox, who brought chickens, geese and all kinds of fowl. Last of all came the rabbit, bringing ribbons, earrings and fine beads.

The old man and his wife were delighted with everything. They sold the sheep and bought some oxen. The old man went to work as a driver of oxen, and in time became rich. The straw ox, which they didn't need any longer, stood in the sun until he melted away.