

Florin Bican

Prince White-a-Moor and the Bear's Lettuce Garden

“A gardening bear growing lettuce?” snorted Rowan-Horse

“That was no regular bear,” retorted Hickory-Horse. “Not any more than the lettuces he grew were regular lettuces.”

“What *were* they, then?” marvelled Querkus-Horse

“*That* I don't know,” shrugged Hickory-Horse. “They were green, alright, and looked pretty much like heads of lettuce when they stayed put. Only they didn't stay put for very long. Though they grew out of the earth, they'd kangaroo about, fluttering their leaves wildly and screeching like weasels.”

“Then they were animal,” reasoned Aspen-Horse.

“Mineral, vegetable or animal,” continued Hickory-Horse, “my master, Prince White-a-Moor, was supposed to bring a sackful of them to the hairless weirdo that had enslaved him. After getting the better of the bear guarding them, of course...”

“Who was no regular bear, you say...” broke in Ashley-Horse.

“He *was* bearlike, I'll give you that... At least he started like a bear.”

“Oo, and what did he end up like?” asked Querkus-Horse.

“Like a crocodile.”

“How could your master get the better of such a thing?” wondered Aspen-Horse.

“He couldn't. That's why, on the way to the bear's lettuce garden, I stopped at Fairy Friday's Isle and asked for her counsel. Her tricks never fail and she has quite a bagful of them.”

“Aye!” neighed the horses in appreciation.”

“Well,” Hickory-Horse went on, “she counselled Prince White-a-Moor at length. When he came out of her hut, he gave me a mighty scare. The lad was dressed in a bulky bearskin adorned with coloured ribbons and sparkling trinkets. He was practicing bird calls on a penny whistle and his nose was clamped shut with a clothespin.”

“He'd gone mad!” observed Querkus-Horse.

“Nay, but there was method in his madness,” Hickory-Horse defended his master. “As he came closer, I sensed that the accursed bearskin gave off a mighty reek of mothballs. I wished I had a clothespin to clamp my nose shut...”

“Some super-potent bear repellent, no doubt,” Rowan-Horse guessed.

“I didn’t know that at the time,” Hickory-Horse shook his mane. “But the bearskin did repel *me*, that’s for sure. The thing must have been kept in mothballs for ages. It was reeking of them so mightily that I started sneezing the moment I sniffed it.”

“You allergic, or what?” asked Querkus-Horse.

“Guess so,” shrugged Hickory-Horse forlornly. Yet the reek seemed to work marvels on my cruising speed. I ferried Prince White-a-Moor to the bear’s lettuce garden in next to no time. During the short ride, however, he put me wise to the plot of the plan. Soon enough I was to see – once again – Fairy Friday’s genius at work.”

“I just can’t see how helping someone go cuckoo is a stroke of genius,” complained Rowan-Horse.

“Just you wait,” said Hickory-Horse. “The moment he saw us, the bear made for us like a hurricane, scattering lettuces right and left in his wake and blaring like a brass band gone bonkers. He propelled himself with his crocodile tail and, before we knew it, he was much too close for comfort. Prince White-a-Moor, however, was unfazed. He hopped off the saddle and started shaking the ribbons on his bearskin like a circus dancer, as he played the weirdest bird calls on his whistle. The bear seemed to be melting. His crocodile tale went all limp and his blaring turned to a pathetic attempt to answer my master’s bird calls. Then Prince White-a-Moor approached him boldly. As soon as the bear caught a good whiff of the mothballs, he started moaning with delight. He inhaled deeply and the next moment he collapsed in a heap on top of a clump of lettuces. My master threw the bearskin on top of him, hurriedly got a gunny sack out of my saddle bag and started cramming it with screeching lettuces. Then off we went with the loot, glad to leave the stinking bearskin behind. Though it took days till the stench finally went off my rider...”

The horses had been listening in perfect silence, nodding occasionally. The silence persisted long after Hickory-Horse’s tale was over.

No one had noticed that, in the meantime, Half-a-Horse’s buried half had grown out of the earth by another handspan or two.

[adapted excerpt from Florin Bican, “And That’s How the Story Goes: Adventures of Fairy-Tale Horses Recounted by Themselves” (*Și v-am spus povestea așa: aventurile cailor năzdrăvani rememorate de ei înșiși*, Editura Arthur, București, 2014)]