

Fearless Jean

Once upon a time, there was a small boy who lived with his mother in a small house at the edge of the forest.

From his infancy, he showed himself to be bold, and when he came of age, he was given the name Fearless Jean, because he was the habit of saying that nothing could scare him: he was not afraid of any living thing, because he felt strong enough to have the heads of even the most robust men, and he was hardly moved by elves, ghosts, and the surprising things that one sees at night.

Many times, his neighbors tried to put him to the test, but while they feared gruesome apparitions, he, without letting himself worry, walked straight through the bad spirit, which hastened to leave.

One evening, he left alone to look for remedies and a bottle of wine in town, and then to take care of his sick mother. Many boys his age wanted to see if he really deserved his name: one of them lay down, far from the houses, close to a stile that Jean had to pass over on the way back to his house, because that was the shortest path, and there was no point in using another trail.

The boy was draped in a white cloth, and the other boys placed three candles on both sides of him, as one does for dead people who are ready for burial.

In seeing this apparition that nobody in the land would have dared to look at straight on, Jean kept walking; and climbing over the stile, he yelled, "If you are trying to scare me, you've failed. Get up and tell me your name. If you don't, I will give you a pretty thumping with my clubbed stick."

"Don't hit me, Jean," said the pretend corpse, stripping off the white sheet and afraid for his shoulders. "Don't hit me! I am your neighbor Pélo, and I was wrong to want to play a trick on you."

Despite this bravery, Jean stayed put in his country as a laborer, though he was taken with a desire to go find adventure, thinking that he would have ample opportunity to prove his bravery and maybe to make his fortune.

"I want to travel, Mother," he said one day; "I feel like this place isn't where I am meant to be."

"You are a fool: stay with me; you will be at peace and nobody will thwart you. Don't you know that the rolling stone gathers no moss?"

"I have resolved to travel the world: to this day, no man has been able to boast of having seen me tremble, and I don't think anything will ever cause me fear."

"Fine! Since you've decided to leave your father's house, I'm going to give you some advice that it would be wise of you to follow: never travel except

between sunrise and sunset, and don't worry about stopping when day takes place at night."

Jean kissed his mother, who cried watching him leave, and he brought a donkey to carry his luggage.

He walked all day. When night fell, he spread out at the bottom of a sinkhole on a pile of dead leaves, and didn't get up until he heard the birds chirping on the branches above his head.

At the end of the second day while he was looking for a place to rest, he perceived, in the last rays of sunlight dispersed behind the trees, a small chapel; it wasn't far away, but when he arrived, night had fallen. He attached his donkey to a tree and entered the chapel.

It was run down, the windows didn't have panes, and the door didn't close all the way; but Jean wasn't difficult, and he thought that he would sleep better there than in a sinkhole or under the trees.

On the large beam that crossed the small building to the wooden arch, three men were hanged, their feet hanging low to the ground, and because of the darkness, Jean did not see them. He went to lie down on a stone slab, made his satchel into a pillow, placed his clubbed stick within reach of his hand, and prepared to go to sleep.

But at the moment when he began to close his eyes, the wind that blew through the windows without panes swung the hanging men into each other so noisily that it would have woken the heaviest of sleepers. Jean got up and said, "I'd like you to calm down."

And with a swing of his clubbed stick, he caused one of the hanged men to fall to the ground.

He didn't hear anything more and was about to go to sleep when another wind came and blew the two remaining hanging men against one another. Jean hit them again with enough force that another of the hanged men rolled onto the chapel floor.

He went to lie down for the third time, thinking that finally, he would be able to rest peacefully; but the wind blew again, and the last hanging man hit the footwall.

"What, you ne'er-do-well," Jean yelled angrily, "You are all alone now, and you still can't be still! I'm going to get up and do to you what I did to your friends."

"Don't hit me!" said the hanging man, who, through heaven's permission, recovered the ability to speak, "Listen to me if you have a little bit of charity. All three of us were hung by the executioner for having stolen the treasures of the church: they are hidden under a tombstone that is at the base of the chapel next to the holy water stoup. If you have enough courage to take them back to the priest, we can at least hope to have the loving kindness of God."

"Okay," said Jean, "Stay calm: from tomorrow, I will do what you want, and this, again, will be a time when I am not afraid." He slept peaceably, and day broke, he lifted up the stone that covered the stolen treasure and went to bring it to the priest, to whom he recounted his adventure point by point.

The priest rejoiced greatly in recovering the treasure that he thought was lost; and he promised to say masses for the eternal rest of the hanging men's souls. He thanked Fearless Jean and wanted to offer him compensation. Jean refused the silver that the priest proposed, but he begged the priest to give him his stole instead: "With it," Jean thought, "and with my clubbed stick, I can travel the world without fearing demons or people."

"I cannot give you my stole," said the priest; "It's a sacred object, not something to play with."

"I wouldn't want to mock this sacred thing; I'd want it to fight against demons and to destroy spells."

These words convinced the priest to give his stole to Fearless Jean, who folded it carefully and continued on his journey.

Jean walked all day again, and, near nightfall, he saw a castle at the end of a long road that looked like one of the most beautiful castles; turning toward it, he arrived in front of a smaller house that wasn't far from the main habitation. He asked the people who were at the door if the inhabitants of the castle would let him stay there.

"It is a very beautiful house," they responded, "but nobody can stay there at night because of the spirits: all of those who have tried to sleep there have disappeared or were found dead the next day."

"With your permission," said Jean, addressing the man he assumed was the master, "I am going to see if I can sleep there tonight. I do not know the meaning of fear, and I don't think I will learn tonight. But lend me one of the big swords I see crossed on the wall, so that I can defend myself if I am attacked."

Jean entered the castle, and after having gone around many of the rooms without seeing anyone, he arrived at a kitchen where there was a table covered in breads, bowls, plates, and dishes of food. The mantle of the chimney was old fashioned, and a dozen people easily could have warmed themselves there; on the fire, he saw a pot boiling and a meat casserole.

He took a piece of bread and started tearing it into pocket slices that he put in a bowl; at the moment when he lifted the lid of the pot to dip out the soup, he heard a rude voice that said, "Dip four soups."

"If that's what I want," responded Jean emotionlessly, "Talk more politely."

"Fine! Would you please prepare four bowls?"

"Sure, but on the condition that you come out and eat them here to keep me company."

Then, Jean heard a loud metallic sound that resounded in the chimney, and he saw many hanging bunches of chains.

"Have you jolly well finished your racket?" yelled Jean; "Drop all the chains so you can show me the ends. You're not going to scare me with those."

The chains descended onto the fire with a big fracas, and almost immediately, three demons appeared from out of the chimney. They were dressed like gentlemen, but their long tails poked through their clothes.

"The supper isn't well-cooked yet," said one of them, discovering the casserole. "If you want, we can play cards until everything is ready."

The demons sat down at the table, and the youngest dropped one of his playing cards on the ground.

"Pick up my card," he said to Jean.

"You could talk better and pick it up yourself: do you take me for your servant?"

As the young demon leaned down to pick up the card, Fearless Jean passed the priest's stole around the demon's throat, and, seeing this, the other demons fled, leaving their friend to fend for himself.

The little demon moved forcefully, as if he were in a basin of holy water, and he begged Jean to take away the stole, which burned him like a hot iron.

"Ah!" Jean responded, "You're stuck, you who thought you would have the others on your side, but before I let you go, tell me why you wanted me to pick up your card."

"To push you into the pit that's under the table."

"That a shame, but I am not resentful, and I consent to rid you of the stole, on the condition that you sign a contract with your blood, through which you will give me the castle and everything inside of it. You should concern yourself with never returning, not you nor any of your kin."

The young demon made a small incision on his arm, and wasted no time getting Jean a ruled parchment. When it was time to take off the stole, the demon jumped like a chicken escaping its coop; he was so happy to be going that he indicated a hidden stash to the young man where there stood a barrel full of gold pieces.

Jean slept very peacefully for the rest of the night; the man who owned the haunted castle compensated Fearless Jean magnificently for his efforts; he wanted Jean to mind the castle with him, but, after having stayed a few days for leisure, the boy tired of that idle life, and he returned to his travels.

One day, he entered a town where all of the inhabitants were dressed in black and looked sad.

"Why," he asked, "is everyone wearing clothes meant for mourning?"

"It's very obvious that you're not from around here, because otherwise, you would know that tomorrow, the seven-headed Beast will come to eat the daughter of the king. If someone can kill the monster and save the princess, he will become her husband; but even though she is as beautiful as a summer day, nobody has yet come forward to defend her, so the Beast will blow an all-consuming fire.

"I am looking for adventure," said Jean, "because I still don't know the meaning of fear."

He was brought before the king who, upon seeing this courageous man, regained hope. He ordered that Jean be well taken care of, and promised that if he succeeded, he would give Jean his daughter's hand in marriage.

The next day, Jean rode to the place where the princess was waiting and crying, thinking about her death.

Soon, Jean saw the monster, who arrived breathing fire from all seven of its horned heads: with one hand, Jean took his stole, and with the other, he drew his sword, and bravely advanced until he met the Beast. The fire stopped burning because of the blessed stole, and at the moment when the seven heads reached out to eat him, he severed four heads with one swish of his sword, then, without stopping, he gave a second blow with such confidence that the three others fell to the ground beside the Beast's body.

The Beast didn't take long to die; when it was completely dead, Jean cut out its seven tongues, which he put in a handkerchief marked with his name. The daughter of the king returned to town, where everyone rejoiced in seeing that she hadn't been devoured by the seven-headed Beast.

Since night fell while Jean was on his way back to the town, he did not forget his mother's advice, and he slept right where he was when nightfall surprised him. Tired from the evening's work, he slept until well after dawn, when a swallow flew down and hit him with the tip of its wing. He awoke briskly, shaking a little, and, watching the bird flee, he yelled, "Ah! I didn't know until now if Fear had feathers or fur, but I see now that it has feathers!"

This was the only time in his life when he had sensed the beginnings of fear, and also, he had been sleeping during half of the event.

He took the path to town and, upon entering the king's palace, which was in full celebration, he learned that another man was to marry the princess who he had saved, and who was now seated beside the king. This other man claimed that

passing through the Beast's domain, he had cut off its seven heads and brought them, that it was he who had killed the monster.

"Wait!" cried Jean, "This man is an imposter: there aren't tongue-less beasts; look and see if the tongues are still in the Beast's mouths." It indeed appeared that they had been cut out, and Jean showed the monogrammed handkerchief where he kept the seven bloody tongues. The king, irritated with the man who had tricked him, ordered that he be torn limb from limb by four horses. He kissed Fearless Jean, and had him dressed in handsome garments that gave him the appearance of a prince.

Jean married the king's daughter, and they had the most beautiful wedding that anyone had heard of in the land: little pigs ran in the streets, all boiled and roasted with forks in their backs, cutting off whatever people wanted, and I, who was at the feast, got kicked out; they watched me go into the night.

Told by Jean Bouchery from Dourdain (Ile-et-Vilaine).
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Translated by Marjorie Stump.