

THE TALE OF THE JUNIPER TREE



It *happened long, long ago*, more than two thousand years gone by. There was a rich man who had a beautiful and God-fearing wife, and they loved each other very much. But they had no children, much as they badly wanted them. And the woman prayed so hard day and night, but still she had no children, not a one.

Now in the yard, in front of their house, stood a juniper tree. One day in winter the woman stood beneath it, peeling herself an apple, and as she peeled she cut her finger, and the blood dripped into the snow. “Oh,” said the woman with a deep sigh when she saw the blood in the snow, and suddenly felt overwhelmed with sadness, “if only I had a child as red as blood and as white as snow.” Having let these words spill from her lips, she felt a great happiness, and she was certain it would come to pass.

So she went back into the house, and after a month went by the snow melted. After two months, everything was green. After three months, flowers

blossomed from the ground. After four months, all the trees in the forest grew heavy with leaves, and the green branches were all entwined with one another. And the little birds twittered so that the entire forest resounded with their song, and the blossoms fell from the trees. Then a fifth month had gone by, and she stood again beneath the juniper tree; it smelled so sweet her heart nearly burst for joy, and she fell to her knees and was beside herself with emotion. And after the sixth month had lapsed, the fruit hung thick and plump, and she fell still. At the end of the seventh month, she picked all the juniper berries and gobbled them down so greedily it made her sick and solemn. The eighth month passed, and she called her husband to her. Weeping, she said to him, "If I die, bury me under the juniper tree." Then she felt greatly relieved and happy, and at the end of the ninth month she bore a child as white as snow and as red as blood, and when she set eyes on the child she was so glad that she died.

Her husband buried her beneath the juniper tree, and he cried and cried inconsolably. In time he felt a little better, and although he still shed tears at least his grief was bearable. And not long after that he took another wife.

With the second wife he had a daughter, but the child he'd had with his first wife was a little son, and he was as red as blood and as white as snow. When the woman looked at her daughter she loved her a lot, but then she looked at the little lad and it gnawed at her heart to see him, as if he would forever stand in the way, and she couldn't stop thinking how to keep the inheritance all for her daughter. And the Evil One wouldn't let up, so that she was altogether filled with hatred for the little lad. She kept shoving him around from one place to another, and slapped him here and whacked him there, so that the poor little fellow was frightened all the time. As soon as he came home from school he could find no place of refuge from her wrath.

Once when the woman went up to her room, her little daughter came bounding up the stairs after her and said, "Mother, give me an apple."

“Yes, my child,” said the woman, and took a luscious-looking apple from the chest and gave it to her. The chest had a great big heavy lid with a large sharp iron lock.

“Mother,” said the little girl, “will my brother not get one too?”

The woman winced, but she said, “Yes, when he comes home from school.” And when, peering out the window, she saw him coming, it was as if the Evil One grabbed hold of her, and she reached out and took back the apple from her daughter and said, “You shan’t have one before your brother.” Then she flung the apple back into the chest and locked it. Whereupon the little lad walked through the door, and the Evil One made her speak sweetly to him. “My son,” she said, “would you like to have an apple?” And she gave him such a nasty look.

“Mother,” said the little fellow, “how cross you look! Yes, give me an apple.”

She felt as if she had to convince him. “Come with me,” she said, lifting the lid, “and pick out an apple.” And when the little boy bent over, the Evil One beckoned, and blam! She slammed the lid so that his head was chopped off and landed among the red apples. Riddled with fear at what she’d done, she thought to herself, I’ve got to find a way to get out of this! Then she went up to her room, opened her chest of drawers, and pulled a white scarf out of the top drawer, set the boy’s head back on his neck, wrapped the scarf around it so that nobody could see that it was severed, propped him up on a stool in front of the door, and put the apple in his hand.

Not long after that Marlenikin came over to her mother in the kitchen, who was standing by the fire, stirring and stirring a pot of hot water. “Mother,” said Marlenikin, “my brother is seated by the door all white in the face with an apple in his hand. I asked him to give me the apple but he made no reply. The sight of him gives me the creeps.”

“Go back to him,” said the mother, “and if he still says nothing, give him a cuff on the ear.”

So Marlenikin went and said, “Brother, give me the apple.” But when he made no reply, she boxed his ear, whereupon his head fell off. Then she panicked and started crying and screaming. And she ran to her mother and said, “Oh, Mother, I knocked my brother’s head off,” and kept crying and crying and would not stop crying.

“Marlenikin,” said the mother, “what have you done! Better be quiet now, if you don’t want anyone to know. No point crying over spilt milk. We’ll boil him up and make a stew.” Then the mother took the little boy and hacked him into pieces, put the pieces in the pot, and prepared a stew. But Marlenikin stood beside her and kept crying and crying, and her tears fell in the pot, so it needed no salt.

Then the father came home, sat himself down at the table, and said, “Where is my son?”

The mother served him up a great big helping of stew, and Marlenikin wouldn’t stop crying.

The father asked again, “Where is my son?”

“Oh,” said the woman, “he took a trip to visit his mother’s great-uncle. He’ll stay there for a while.”

“What in heaven’s name is he doing there? He didn’t even say goodbye to me?”

“Oh, well, he wanted to go so badly, and asked if he could stay six weeks. I’m sure they’ll take good care of him there.”

The man replied, “I’m so sad, it isn’t right that he should have left without saying goodbye.” Whereupon he started eating, and said, “Marlenikin, why are you crying? Your brother will be back soon.” Then he said, “Woman, this stew tastes so good, give me more!” And the more he ate, the more he wanted, and he said, “Give me more, the two of you shall have none. It seems to me as

if it were all mine.” And he ate and ate, and dropped all the bones under the table, until he had gobbled it all up.

Then Marlenikin went to her chest of drawers, drew her best silken scarf from the bottom drawer, and gathered all the bones little and big from under the table, bound them in her silken scarf, and hauled them out the door, where she wept bloody tears. She laid the bones out in the green grass under the juniper tree, and once she had done so she felt a whole lot better and didn’t cry anymore.

After that the juniper tree started to sway, and the branches spread farther and farther apart and then came back together again, as if in a burst of joy someone were clapping his hands. And it was as if a mist rose from the tree, and in the midst of the mist a fire burned, and a beautiful bird flew out of the fire. It sang so sweetly and flew high up in the air, and once it was gone the juniper tree was again as before, and the cloth with the bones was gone. But Marlenikin felt so giddy and glad-hearted, as if her brother were still alive. Then she went cheerfully back into the house, sat down at the table, and ate.

But the bird flew away, landed on the roof of a goldsmith’s house, and started singing:

“My mother, she smote me,
My father, he ate me,
My sister, sweet Marlenikin,
Gathered all my little bonikins,
Bound them in a silken scarf,
And lay them under the juniper tree.
Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

The goldsmith, who sat at his workbench fashioning a golden chain, heard the bird perched on his rooftop singing. The song sounded so sweet to him that he got up to have a look, and as he crossed his doorstep he lost a slipper.



But he strode out into the middle of the street with only one slipper and one sock on, draped in his leather apron and with the golden chain in one hand and his tongs in the other. And the sun shone brightly on that street. He stepped forward, then stood still and said to the bird, “Your song is so sweet, will you sing it again?”

“No,” said the bird, “I won’t sing it a second time for nothing. Give me the golden chain and I’ll do as you ask.”

“Here,” said the goldsmith, “take the golden chain, and sing it again.”

Then the bird swooped down and snatched the golden chain with its right claw, landed in front of the goldsmith, and sang:

“My mother, she smote me,
My father, he ate me,
My sister, sweet Marlenikin,
Gathered all my little bonikins,
Bound them in a silken scarf,
And lay them under the juniper tree.
Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

Then the bird flew to a shoemaker, landed on his rooftop, and sang:

“My mother, she smote me,
My father, he ate me,
My sister, sweet Marlenikin,
Gathered all my little bonikins,
Bound them in a silken scarf,
And lay them under the juniper tree.
Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

Entranced by the song, the shoemaker ran out the door in his shirtsleeves, peered up at his roof, and held his hand in front of his eyes to keep from being blinded by the sun. “Bird,” said he, “you sure can sing.” Then he called to his

wife through the open door: “Honey, why don’t you come out and get a load of this bird here, boy can it ever sing!” Then he called to his daughter and her children, to the journeymen, the apprentice, and the maid, and they all came out into the street to have a look at the bird; they saw how beautiful it was with its red-and-green plumage, and around its neck it wore a golden chain, and its eyes twinkled like stars. “Bird,” said the shoemaker, “sing me that ditty again.”

“No,” said the bird, “I won’t sing it a second time for nothing, you’ve got to give me something.”

“Honey,” said the man to his wife, “go to the shop and bring me the pair of red shoes on the top shelf.” So his wife went and fetched the shoes. “Here, bird,” said the man, “now sing me that ditty one more time.”

Then the bird swooped down, grabbed hold of the shoes with its left claw, and flew back up to the rooftop and sang:

“My mother, she smote me,
My father, he ate me,
My sister, sweet Marlenikin,
Gathered all my little bonikins,
Bound them in a silken scarf,
And lay them under the juniper tree.

Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

And once it had sung the song to the end, it flew away. With the golden chain in its right claw and the shoes in its left, it flew to a mill. And the mill went: “Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.” And in the mill sat twenty apprentices hammering and chiseling away at a millstone: “Slam-bam, slam-bam, slam-bam.” And the mill went: “Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.” The bird landed on a juniper tree that stood in front of the mill and sang:

“My mother, she smote me.”

Whereupon one apprentice stopped what he was doing.

“My father, he ate me.”

Two more stopped working and listened up.

“My sister, sweet Marlenikin.”

Four more stopped to listen.

“Gathered all my little bonikins,

Bound them in a silken scarf.”

Now only eight kept hammering.

“And lay them under . . .”

Now only five.

“ . . . The juniper tree.”

Now just one.

“Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

Then the last one also stopped what he was doing and heard the last words of the song. “Bird,” said he, “you sing so sweetly! I’d like to hear it all, sing it to me one more time.”

“No,” said the bird, “I won’t sing it a second time for nothing. If you give me the millstone I’ll sing it again.”

“If it belonged to me alone,” he said, “you could have it.”

“Okay,” the others agreed, “if the bird sings it again he can have it.”

Then the bird came flying down, and twenty millers heaved a beam and lifted up the stone, with an “Ally-oop, ally-oop, ally-oop!”

Whereupon the bird poked its head through the hole in the millstone, and wearing it like a collar, flew back up to the tree and sang:

“My mother, she smote me,

My father, he ate me,

My sister, sweet Marlenikin,

Gathered all my little bonikins,

Bound them in a silken scarf,

And lay them under the juniper tree.

Tweet, tweet, I'm a pretty birdie, look at me!"

And having sung it to the end, the bird flapped its wings, with the chain in its right claw, the shoes in its left, and the millstone around its neck, and flew off to the father's house.

There at the table sat the father, the mother, and Marlenikin, and the father said, "I feel so glad-hearted, so happy through and through."

"Not me," said the mother. "I feel a deep dread, as if a dark storm were headed our way."

But Marlenikin just sat there, crying her eyes out.

Then the bird came flying up and landed on the rooftop, and the father said, "I feel as good as gold, and the sun is shining so brightly outside. I've got a funny feeling I'm going to meet again someone near and dear to me."

"Not me," said the wife. "I'm so scared my teeth are rattling and my blood runs like fire through my veins." And she tore open her bodice to breathe a little better.

But Marlenikin sat crying in a corner, and holding a handkerchief to her eyes she soaked it through and through with her tears.

Then the bird landed on the juniper tree and sang:

"My mother, she smote me."

Whereupon the mother held her ears and eyes shut so as not to hear or see, but there was a terrible tempest storming in her ears and her eyes burned like they were struck with lightning.

"My father, he ate me."

"Oh, Mother," said the man, "there's a pretty bird singing so sweetly, and the sun-baked air's so warm. I swear it smells like cinnamon."

"My sister, sweet Marlenikin," sang the bird.

Whereupon the girl lay her head on her knees and wept like there was no tomorrow.

But the man said, "I've got to go out and see that bird up close."

"Don't go, I beg you," said the woman. "It feels like the whole house were on fire, every timber trembling."

But the man went out and peered at the bird.

"Gathered all my little bonikins,

Bound them in a silken scarf,

And lay them under the juniper tree.

Tweet, tweet, I'm a pretty birdie, look at me!"

Whereupon the bird dropped the golden chain and it fell around the man's neck, and it landed so lithely that it fit him just right. Then he went back inside and said, "Will you look at that, the pretty bird gave me a lovely golden chain, and it looks terrific on me."

But the woman was so frightened she fell down flat on the floor and her cap tumbled off her head.

Then the bird sang it again:

"My mother, she smote me."

"If only I were a thousand fathoms underground, so I wouldn't have to hear that infernal twitter!"

"My father, he ate me."

The woman collapsed like she was dead.

"My sister, sweet Marlenikin."

"Oh," said Marlenikin, "I too want to go out to see if the bird will give me something." So she went out.

"Gathered all my little bonikins,

Bound them in a silken scarf."

Then the bird tossed her the shoes.

“And lay them under the juniper tree.

Tweet, tweet, I’m a pretty birdie, look at me!”

Now she was happy as could be. She donned the new red shoes, dancing and jumping for joy. “Oh,” she said, “I was so sad when I went out and now I’m giddy with glee. That wonderful bird just gave me a pair of red shoes.”

“No,” cried the woman and leapt up with her hair standing on end, like it was on fire. “I feel like the world was about to go under, let me go out too and see if it makes me feel any better.”

And as she stepped out the door, blam! The bird dropped the millstone on her head so that she was crushed flat as a pancake. The father and Marlenikin heard the crash and went out to see what happened. A great column of smoke and shooting flames rose from the spot, and when the fire had burned itself out there stood the little brother, and he took his father and Marlenikin by the hand, and the three of them were so very happy, they went inside and sat down to eat.