



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Bird Boy

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



ate one autumn night a young queen stood by her window, gazing upon the silent and deserted meadows gleaming in the moonlight. Suddenly, far, far up in the sky, she heard the weird cry of birds flying southward, and lifting her eyes, the Queen beheld bird after bird fly across the golden shield of the moon.

“Oh, lovely, happy birds,” said she; “would that I might have a son with wings!”

Now it came to pass that before the harvest moon rose again over the land, the Queen became the mother of a little boy who was born with wings on his shoulders. But instead of being pleased with so strange and wonderful a little son, the King (who was very superstitious and under the domination of wicked chamberlain named Malefico) took it into his head that his wife was a sorceress, and gave orders that she should be imprisoned in a lonely tower and the child destroyed. So the Queen and her baby were taken to an old and gloomy tower on a great rock overlooking the northern sea; and after they had been there a day or two, the chief jailer came to the Queen’s room to take the child and kill him.

The Queen, when she heard this terrible order, uttered a gasping scream, and seizing her little son from out his cradle, pressed him close to her breast. But although she fought for her baby with all her might, the rude strength of the jailers prevailed, and the child was torn from its mother’s arms. Then, before anyone could prevent her, the poor Queen beat open the rotted fastening of an old casement window, sprang upon the ledge, and giving one last look of love and tenderness to her unhappy child, leaped down into the sea surging and pounding over the rocks hundreds of feet below. She certainly would have been dashed to pieces, had not a good spirit of the ocean taken pity on her, and changed her into a great gray bird. Crying mournfully, the bird circled the old tower thrice, and disappeared over the white-capped waters.

In spite of his roughness, however, the jailer was neither a brutal nor a wicked man, and he did not relish the cruel task which the King had given him. So, instead of killing the bird-boy, he carried him many leagues back into the dark forest which bordered the sea, and gave him to a family of charcoal-burners. With these rough, good people the bird-boy lived till he was five years old. And every year, on the boy’s birthday, a great gray bird came flying over the forest from the distant ocean, circled thrice the charcoal-burners’ hut, and disappeared again, crying mournfully.

One midsummer day, with a great deal of merry hallooing and blowing of sweet-voiced horns, the King of the country, accompanied by his young wife, came hunting through the wood. There was a pretty spring near the door of the hut, and the party came to a halt at its edge. Out ran the winged boy and his two little foster-brothers, to see the wonderful sight. And a wonderful sight it was, indeed, to see the horses tossing their jeweled bridles, the hooded falcons riding on the saddlebow, clutching the leather with their curving claws, the merry young pages in their dark suits, and all the gay company in rich attire.

“Why, see,” said the young Queen to her husband, “yon little boy hath wings. Really, dear, I must have him for my page. Would n’t it be wonderful to have a winged page? Besides, he will be a playmate for Rosabella.”

So the King gave the charcoal-burner and his wife fifty pieces of bright gold, which pleased them very much, and the charcoal-burner himself lifted the bird-boy up in his arms, and placed him on the King's saddle. Then the bird-boy waved good-bye to his two little ragged foster-brothers, who were howling as if their hearts would break, and rode away with the King. In a few hours the company came to a splendid castle of shining white stone, standing in beautiful green gardens running down to the sea. Once at home, the Queen commanded that the little winged boy be washed and tidied, and his charcoal-burner's rags replaced with a pretty black velvet suit. You may be sure that, when the bird-boy was washed and dressed, there was no handsomer, more winning little boy in all the world.

So the bird-boy became the best beloved playmate of the Queen's only child, her darling Rosabella. Now, if the bird-boy was the prettiest little boy in all the world, Rosabella was the prettiest little girl. Moreover, she had a sweet disposition, which is a gift even more precious than the gift of beauty. It was a lovely picture to see the children building toy castles on the floor of the nursery in the castle tower, the sun streaming on the black-brown hair and silver white wings of the little boy, and on the golden curls of Rosabella.

Twelve years passed. The bird-boy grew into a handsome lad; Rosabella into the loveliest of princesses. Twice had the bird-boy saved Rosabella's life. He had saved her the first time by swooping down and catching her in his wings just as she was about to tread on a wicked yellow viper; he had saved her in the same way when she had fallen over a cliff at the edge of the sea.

Every year, on the bird-boy's birthday, a great gray bird would fly in from over the sea, circle the castle thrice, and disappear, crying mournfully.

Now when the bird-boy and Rosabella were in their seventeenth year, it came to pass that the King was summoned to war. His enemy was no other than the wicked chamberlain Malefico, who had succeeded to the kingdom of the bird-boy's father, when that Prince had died some years before. So the good King, who had been a real father to the bird-boy, put on his shining armor, kissed his dear wife and child good-bye, and rode off to the battlefield. The bird-boy begged and pleaded to be taken with him as his squire, but the King would not hear of it, and insisted that he remain in the castle to take care of the Queen and Rosabella. There was little cheer in the castle that unhappy evening. And all night long, the bird-boy thought he could hear the wings of a great bird beating fiercely against the window-panes.

A month passed, an unhappy month in which there were no tidings from the King. Then, one rainy morning, a messenger who had ridden so hard that his poor horse could scarcely stagger, rode to the castle gate bearing very evil news. A great battle had been fought, the army of Rosabella's father had been completely defeated, and the troops of the wicked Malefico were hurrying toward the castle as fast as they could come.

And so it was; for before the Queen had had time to summon the people and gather together a few belongings, the troops of the enemy burst in at the gate, and a dozen fierce soldiers surrounded the Queen, Rosabella, and the bird-boy, and dragged them to Malefico.

When Malefico saw the bird-boy, a look of surprise appeared on his face, for he had believed that the wonderful child was dead. Then he fell to thinking, and as he thought, wicked purposes swept over his cruel face just as the shadows of dark clouds sweep over a gloomy pool.

“If it were known that the winged child is alive,” he thought, “the people would thrust me from my place, and restore him to his father’s throne. Now that the bird-boy is in my hands, I will destroy him, and be sure of my power.”

So he smiled, and began to think of some manner in which he could bring the bird-boy to a shameful end. At last he hit upon a plan. He would declare that the bird-boy was not a human lad at all, but a witch-child; he would then accuse the good King of having protected a witch-child, and condemn them both to be stoned. So he threw the King and the Queen, Rosabella and the bird-boy, into an old dungeon-tower, and went through the mockery of having a trial. When it was over, he sent a soldier to tell the King and the bird-boy that they were to be punished the following day.

And now dawned the unhappy day. The bird-boy took Rosabella’s hand in his, and together they went to the barred window of the prison and looked out upon the world. The morning was fresh and fair; a pleasant southwest wind was blowing. The King and the bird-boy were to be led forth at noon. The clock marked a quarter to twelve.

“Dear Rosabella,” said the bird-boy sadly, “we have forgotten that to-day is the day on which the great gray bird comes from the ocean and circles the castle towers. If thou shouldst see the bird when I am gone, greet it in my name, as we did when we were happy children.”

“The bird may come,” said Rosabella amid her sobs.

“No, Rosabella,” said the bird-boy, “I shall never see the gray bird again. And even if it were to come, what could it do to save us from these cruel people?”

When the clock stood at five minutes to twelve, there was a confused noise below, and Malefico and the judges who shared with him the guilt of the unrighteous punishment took their places on a kind of platform which overlooked the place of execution.

“They will soon be coming to get us,” said the King to the bird-boy.

And sure enough, they heard the jangle of the jailer’s keys at the foot of the stair.

Suddenly the sunlight in the room faded swiftly into a strange gray gloom, and the bird-boy rushed to the window to see if a storm was at hand. A great shadowy cloud, advancing with inconceivable rapidity, already filled half the sky, and as the boy gazed into this cloud, he saw to his astonishment that it was not a cloud at all, but hundreds and hundreds of thousands of great gray birds, flapping their long wings. The shadow of the birds fell over the platform on which the cruel Malefico sat waiting for the King and the bird-boy to be brought forth, and then ceased moving even as a ship that has come into harbor.

Far ahead of the vast swarm flew one lonely bird, and suddenly this bird uttered a shrill and piercing cry. Immediately every bird let fall a great beach-stone which he held in his claws, and for a long minute, the sky rained stones, round, polished stones that fell like bolts of thunder. When the storm was over, and the cloud had begun to break into rifts and speckles of light and flapping gray wings, the wicked Malefico and his cruel nobles lay buried forever beneath mound upon mound of stones. The doom which Malefico had intended for another had overtaken him.

The King and the Queen, Rosabella and the bird-boy, rushed down the stairs and out into the sunlight. As they did so, the gray bird who had led the cloud, sank through the air and alighted at their feet. But scarcely had the bird's claws touched the ground, when there was a flash of flame, and the bird-boy's mother stood before them. She took her son in her arms, and told them all his history and her misfortunes, and how she had watched over him year after year and gathered the birds to save him.

Thus it came to pass that, when the troops of Malefico saw their former Queen and heard her story, they acclaimed the bird-boy as their rightful king, and carried him back in triumph into his own country. So the bird-boy became a king, married Rosabella, and lived happily ever after.

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