



# Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

## Marianna

*From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston*



Once upon a time a wicked nobleman rose in rebellion against his rightful king, and taking the royal forces by surprise, defeated them and seized the kingdom. The dethroned King, who had been severely wounded in battle, was cast in prison, where he soon died; but his widow, the Queen, managed to escape from the palace before the usurper could lay hands upon her.

Into the dark forest which lay behind the palace ran the Queen, holding her baby daughter in her arms. It was winter time, and a heavy snow had hidden the foot-paths and the roads. Presently the Queen realized that she was lost. All afternoon, however, she trudged bravely on through the silence and the cold, her heart sinking as mile after mile revealed no sign of a house or a shelter.

But late in the afternoon, when the red shield of the sun could scarcely be seen through the tangle of the wild wood-branches, she perceived a light coming from a little grove of cedars by the shore of a frozen lake. The Queen made her way toward this light, and discovered a little thatched hut in the silent wood; it was the house of one of the dwarfs of the forest. The dwarf took pity on the Queen, but his efforts were vain, for the poor woman was so weak and exhausted that she died without telling the dwarf anything about herself or the child she carried.

So the little dwarf, who was a good, kind old fellow, brought the little girl up as if she were his own child. His brother, the dwarf of the mountain, made her the prettiest red-leather shoes, and his cousins, the dwarfs of the pines, made the little girl dresses from cloth woven on fairy looms.

Now, on the night her mother brought her to the hut, the little girl was wearing a golden heart-shaped locket, with a crown and the letter M upon it in diamonds. So the dwarf called the little girl Marianna.

Seventeen years passed, and Marianna grew to be quite the loveliest lass in all the world. Her hair was as black as the raven's wing, her eyes were as blue as the midsummer sea, and her skin was fair as the petal of a rose. One spring morning a little yellow bird flew into the cedar grove, and gave the dwarf a letter which it held in its beak.

The dwarf read the letter, and said to Marianna, "Little Marianna, the Emperor of the Elves has bidden me come to the great assembly of the dwarfs which is to be held next year on the Golden Mountain. Alas, what are we to do? I can not take you with me, dear child, for it is forbidden on pain of death to bring mortals to the assembly, nor can I leave you here in this lonely wood."

To this Marianna replied, "Do not fear, dear father. Give me but yon crystal flask of the water of healing, and I shall go forth into the world until it is time for you to return again. Perhaps I shall discover somebody who can tell me the meaning of this locket, or the history of my dear mother."

So the dwarf took his knotted staff, and went away over hill, over dale to the Golden Mountain.

Then Marianna took the crystal flask of the water of healing, and walked boldly out of the wood into the wide, wide world. It was the middle of the spring, the ice and snow had all disappeared; the trees were putting forth their leaves, and there were clusters of primroses by the roadside. In the swaying, rustling heart of a great elm tree, a little thrush was singing. Through cities and towns went lovely Marianna, bringing good cheer to the helpless and the sick, and curing all who came to her, rich and poor, with the wonderful water of healing. But never did she find anybody who could tell her about the gold heart with the diamond crown.

Now it came to pass that, as Marianna was one day walking through a village in the heart of the Adamant Mountains, a ragged old woman besought her with tears to come to a hamlet which stood at the head of a high and dangerous path. Touched by the old woman's supplication, Marianna followed her to the hamlet, and found in a wretched hut, lying on a wretched bed, a beautiful young peasant girl dying of a fever. So Marianna touched the girl with the water of healing, and in an instant she became well and strong.

"Dear lady," said the peasant girl, pressing Marianna's hand to her lips, "how sweet and kind thou art! Great is the debt I owe thee."

And as the girl poured out her thanks, Marianna heard a faint "chirp, chirp," and looking down, beheld a little yellow bird crouching on the hearthstone. Every now and then he hid his head under his wings and cried unhappily. It was the yellow bird which had brought the message from the Emperor of the Elves.

"Poor little bird," said Marianna, bending down and taking him up in her hands, "why criest thou so mournfully? Who hath done thee harm?"

But the bird uttered only a forlorn little cry, and hid his head again under his wings.

"I found him on the rocks at the mountaintop yesterday," said the mother. "Someone has wounded him. His wing is broken."

And she put the bird on the floor of the house and bade Marianna watch how he fluttered trailing a wing in the dust. Again Marianna stooped, and picking up the bird, touched the wounded wing with the water of healing. Scarcely had she done so, when the yellow bird burst into a joyous and golden song, and flying to the window, beat madly against the panes. Then the peasant girl threw open the casement, and the yellow bird flew out into the streaming sun.

"He is gone forever," said the peasant girl.

"Nay, he returns," said Marianna, gently, as the yellow bird flew back and perched in the sheltering bower of Marianna's arms. Then, accompanied by the peasant girl and the yellow bird, who flew singing before her, Marianna went down the dangerous path to the high road in the valley. When they reached the foot of the path, the peasant girl cried:-

"Farewell, dear Marianna; may it some day be mine to repay thee!"

Into the world again went Marianna, and with her went the yellow bird. Presently she came to the fairest land which she had ever seen, a land of rolling fields, little hills, and rivers bordered with pale willow trees. This pleasant land, unknown to Marianna, was part of her father's kingdom, and she was really its queen because her father had been the last rightful king.

Now while Marianna had been in the forest, the wicked nobleman who had stolen the kingdom from Marianna's father had died, leaving his brother Garabin in charge of the kingdom and of the interests of his little son, Prince Desire. This Garabin, however, taking advantage of the youth and helplessness of his nephew, had himself assumed the state and airs of king. For some time he had enjoyed undisturbed the possession of his stolen throne; but as Desire grew taller and stronger every year, Garabin began to fear the day when he would be compelled to resign in favor of his nephew.

When the Prince reached his twentieth year, Garabin would certainly have killed him openly had he dared; but, fearing the people, he resolved to use secret methods, and bribed a cruel magician to afflict poor Desire with a deadly and mysterious malady. Of this malady, Desire was slowly dying, for no medicine could cure him or even give him any relief from his constant pain. Every morning the cruel Garabin, in the hope of finding his nephew dead, would go to the sick room; and you may be sure that his wicked heart rejoiced when he found the Prince weaker and more feverish.

Garabin had just returned from a visit to the Prince, who was rapidly failing, when the Captain of the Castle Guard came to him with the news that the wonderful Marianna had arrived in the kingdom. The King gave orders that she be brought before him. So Marianna, walking between two halberdiers and followed across the courtyard by crowds of curious people, was led before the King. The little yellow bird sat on Marianna's shoulder, and never did maiden appear lovelier or more gentle.

Scarcely had Garabin set eyes on Marianna, when he caught sight of the golden locket which she wore about her neck. Had he not been very old and crafty, he would have started from his golden throne, for he knew that the little golden heart set with diamonds had been one of the crown jewels, and that therefore Marianna must be the missing Princess, and rightful queen of the kingdom.

What was he to do? If he refused to let Marianna help the Prince, the people might begin to suspect him, and start a revolution which would thrust him from his throne; if he allowed Marianna to cure the Prince, the Prince would certainly demand the kingdom on his twenty-first birthday. What was he to do with Marianna, whose right to the throne was superior even to his nephew's? Perplexed, and with fear in his heart, the King sought the cruel magician who had cast the spell on Desire.

The magician lived in a gloomy tower, and had an enchanted black dog that he fed with flaming coals. He listened to Garabin's story, stirring a great cauldron all the while, and said, "Do not fear. I will destroy both claimants to the throne at once."

Garabin rubbed his hands together with glee.

“To-night I shall cast a spell of sleep on Marianna, steal the crystal flask, empty it of the water of healing, and refill it with a liquid which will cause death within a night and a day. I shall then replace the flask before Marianna wakes. You will allow Marianna to visit the Prince; she will touch him with the deadly water, and the Prince will die. You can then try Marianna for having killed the Prince, and condemn her to be thrown from the precipice.”

So pleased was Garabin with this horrid plot, that he could have danced for joy. That very night, the magician filled Marianna’s flask with the poisonous water, and departed, thinking that nobody had noticed him. The yellow bird, however, had seen everything, and followed the magician to note where he hid the real water of healing.

The next morning Marianna was once more led before the King.

“Welcome, thrice welcome, lovely maiden,” said Garabin with the most dreadful hypocrisy. “I have long hoped that you would turn your footsteps hither, for my poor dear nephew, Prince Desire, only son of the late King, has been ill for some months of a malady no physician can cure. Perhaps you can cure him with the water of healing.”

Marianna replied that she would do her best to help the Prince; so the Court Chamberlain gave her his arm, and escorted her to the Prince’s sick room. The King and many courtiers followed after him.

Desire lay in a great old-fashioned bed, his face flushed with fever. So weak was the poor Prince, that he could scarcely lift his head to look at his visitors. A great pity swept over Marianna’s heart the instant she saw him; as for Desire, he fell madly in love with Marianna at first sight.

Now just as Marianna bent over the Prince to touch his forehead with the water of healing, the yellow bird screamed and cried as madly as if he were caught in a net. Marianna looked at the crystal flask. Nothing seemed changed; the water within seemed as pure and diamond-like as ever. She touched the Prince with the liquid. Alas, in a moment, so terrible was the magician’s poison that the Prince turned white as the driven snow, and fell back on the pillows insensible. The lookers-on, who had expected to see him spring up entirely cured, began to murmur, and Marianna herself, terrified at what had happened, let fall the flask, which broke into a thousand sparkling pieces.

Suddenly, Garabin cried at the top of his voice, “Seize the witch; she has killed the Prince!”

Presently there was a great confusion, rough hands seized Marianna, and somebody caught the yellow bird. The Prince remained insensible on the bed. At high noon, a trial was held, and since the doctors declared that the Prince was dying, Marianna was condemned to be thrown from the precipice. When somebody asked about the yellow bird, Garabin laughed, and gave orders that the cook should wring its neck, and toss it to the cat.

So Marianna was hurried to a dark prison-room and loaded with chains, and the yellow bird was taken to the castle kitchen, and given to the cook.

“Here, you wring its neck,” said the cook to one of her helpers, “while I go call the cat.”

By great good fortune, the cook’s helper was no other than the peasant girl whom Marianna had saved. This girl recognized the yellow bird, and instead of wringing its neck, let it fly out of the window. The yellow bird flew to the window of the magician’s room. The magician was in the chamber, stirring the giant cauldron. The bird flew to the window of Prince Desire’s room, and saw that he was still insensible.

An hour later the castle-bell began to toll, and a dismal procession was seen walking from the castle toward the frightful cliff from which condemned witches and sorcerers were thrown. First came a troop of soldiers, then Marianna, weighted down with chains, and last of all, a little group in which were Garabin, the magician, and some of Garabin’s favorites.

The bell kept on sadly tolling and tolling. It roused the Prince from his swoon, and with his last measure of strength, poor Desire dragged himself to the window. The procession was then passing directly underneath the window, and Desire’s eyes met the eyes of Marianna.

“Stop! Stop!” cried the poor Prince, wildly; “I forbid—”

An instant later he sank fainting to the floor. The procession went on.

Meanwhile the yellow bird had returned to the magician’s chamber. It was empty. With a joyous cry, the bird fluttered through the window-bars, and discovered the phial into which the magician had poured the water of healing. Clutching it in his claws, the bird flew once more to the Prince’s room. Desire still lay in a heap by the window, and over him the yellow bird poured the contents of the phial.

The Prince sprang up, strong as a lion, seized his sword, and rushed down to save Marianna. He arrived at the cliff just as the poor maiden was about to be pushed off into space, and standing by her side, dared anyone to lay hands upon her.

Garabin, seeing his precious plot miscarry, grew mad with rage.

“Seize them,” cried he, “and toss them both over the precipice!”

So the soldiers rushed at Marianna and the Prince, intending to carry out their wicked master’s orders. But even as they did so, there came a flash of flame and the little dwarf, Marianna’s foster-father, took his place beside the lovers.

“Cruel King!” cried the dwarf sternly, “and thou, wicked and perfidious magician, the hour of thy punishment is at hand.”

Immediately the sky grew black, the lightning crashed, and there arose a terrible, howling wind. Three giant gusts drove fiercely by, the first one blowing the King and the magician head-over-heels over the precipice, the second carrying away the soldiers, and the third the rascally favorites. When the sky cleared, only the dwarf, Marianna, and Desire were left of the company.

“Marianna,” said the little dwarf, “the Emperor of the Elves has told me all your history, and it is thanks to him that I have returned in time, with the storm at my heels. You, Marianna, are the rightful Queen of this country.”

“Dear Queen,” said the honest and gallant Desire, “let me be the first of your subjects to salute you.” And he knelt before her, and humbly kissed her hand.

“Nay, Prince,” said the young Queen, answering the adoring look in her lover’s eyes, “your father took the kingdom; if I were you, I should take the Queen.”

Which was a bit forward, of course, but nobody minded that very much in those fairy times.

So Desire and Marianna were married, and lived happily ever after. The yellow bird went to the wedding, and when the ceremony was over rose singing into the air, and flew joyously home to the land of the Elves.

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