

The Little Starry Bird

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“Once upon a time an old man, a storyteller, made his way through a market square.

“Fish! Fresh fish!” called the fishmonger.

“Cherries and strawberries!” called the fruit picker.

“Cheese! Old cheese!” called the cheese seller.

People flocked to their stalls, haggling and shoving and bargaining as if their life depended on it.

“Story! A penny for a story!” called the storyteller. “A penny for a story!”

But no one listened. No one paid the penny. Who had time for a crippled old man and his stories!

At last he sat on a stone stairway to rest his legs. He was hungry and weary. He hadn't had food for three days.

“A story for a penny!” he croaked weakly. “A story for a penny!” Still no one stopped or heard him calling.

Then it was that a small white bird with a bright red breast landed on his shoulder and began to sing.

“Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!” the bird sang sweetly. “Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!”

A child stopped and looked. His mother pulled his hand but the child refused to move. Then came another, and another, all dragging their fathers or mothers.

“Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!” sang the bird. “Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!”

The rich children came with their nannies, and poor children came by themselves or with each other. Soon the steps were filled. They sat and listened to the wonderful bird singing, “Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!”

When a crowd had gathered the bird stopped singing and looked at the old man with a starry eye.

“A story for a penny!” smiled the storyteller, holding out his hat. “A story for a penny!”

“Tell your tale old man!” cried the children. “Tell your tale – we will shower you with pennies!”

The old man nodded knowingly. He had heard that said before and had gone home empty-handed. Still, he was too tired to move and the little bird had brought a crowd. So he gazed for a moment at this mysterious bird sitting on his shoulder with its white-white feathers and red-red breast and told this tale.

“Children, dear children!” he began. “There was once a bird, a heavenly bird who lived high amongst the stars and all the spaces filled with light. He flew between the stars, singing to the star angels and bringing songs of joy.

“O, children! Dear children,” cried the story-teller, speaking as if he saw the whole thing before his eyes, “the starry bird was huge! Far, far bigger than everything your eyes can behold from the tallest mountain. His wings spread further than the widest sky, and all the stars were just the twinkles in one of his eyes. And he sang! Oh, how he sang! His song was so wide, his melodies so deep, that whole worlds sprang into being when he opened his beak and trilled.

“Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!” sang the little bird on the storyteller’s shoulder. “Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!”

The old man looked at him and smiled. Then he continued.

“As he wandered from star to star, and galaxy to galaxy, the starry bird saw many wonders: rocky, barren worlds, icy cold and frozen planets, or fiery balls of gas and dust whizzing through space. But one day he saw something new, something special. A planet with green land, blue seas, white clouds, golden deserts and caps of white ice and snow.

‘That is a beautiful place!’ cried the starry bird. ‘I’ve never seen one like this before! I shall stop to take a better look.’

Round and round the starry bird flew, shrinking and shrinking until he was small enough to land on the sun. O, children! Dear children, he was so beautiful when he landed on the sun, with blazing golden eyes and wings of purest fire! And his song was filled with light and warmth, just like the light and warmth of the sun itself. People heard it on the earth and looked up to the sky and were amazed.

‘Where is that song coming from?’ they asked. ‘The light is filled with song!’

“Now children,” said the storyteller, “in those times birds did not sing. They were silent and had no voice. But when the starry bird sang his songs from the sun the birds flying through the air and sitting in the trees heard him. They listened and listened, and that night they dreamed that a piece of the starry bird’s song came into their heart, and when the sun rose the next morning all the birds of the earth raised their heads, opened their beaks and filled the air with song.

‘I must come closer to this beautiful place,’ said the starry bird to himself – but he was far too big and bright to fly near the earth. He would have burnt it up! So he spread his wings, and shrinking ever smaller, he flew to the moon.

“Children! Children! The starry bird shed his golden light! He lost his fiery eyes, but he changed to shining silver and perched on the moon. Oh, he was so lovely when he landed on the moon, all silvery bright, with silver wings and silver beak and silver glinting in his eyes.

There the starry bird sang a silver song. He sang and he sang and the birds and the people of the earth heard him again and were amazed.

'This is a beautiful song!' they cried aloud. 'It sounds like silver bells at night!'

And the night birds heard his song too and took up his songs and sang when the sun sank beneath the earth and the silvery moon rose in the sky.

The starry bird looked down on the earth from the moon. It seemed to him to be even more beautiful than before. Now he saw mountains and lakes and sandy beaches. He even saw the waves upon the sea.

'I will fly to the earth itself,' said the starry bird. 'I will become an earth bird and live on this planet too.'

"O, dear children," said the storyteller, stretching his arms wide, "the starry bird stretched his silver wings and leapt from the moon on a full moon night. Down and down on silvery moonbeams he glided, becoming smaller and smaller, and came to the earth as the sun was rising.

The earth birds sent up their morning chorus just as the starry bird soared into the morning-blue sky. Round and round he flew until he spied a nest. In the nest there sat a mother, and inside the mother there grew an egg. The mother bird was singing her morning song, and the starry bird flew in on the wings of her song and slipped into her egg.

"Oh, children! Dear children," cried the storyteller, "the starry bird flew into the egg and found a golden yoke, as golden as the starry sun, floating in the center. Into the yoke the starry bird flew, growing smaller and smaller and smaller until at last he became as small as small can be. Warm inside his mother the starry bird went to sleep, and waited patiently.

"Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!" sang the little white bird on the storyteller's shoulder. "Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!" and he puffed out his tiny red chest, as proud as proud can be.

"By and by," continued the old man, "the egg was laid. It was blue. As blue as the sky and speckled with sparkles like stars on high. And the mother sat and sat until the egg was hatched. Out came a gawky fledgling with goosey-bump skin and pinfeathers! He was not pretty at all!"

"Tra-la-la!" sang the little bird, hopping onto the storyteller's head. "Tra-la-la! Tra-lee!"

"But the mother and father fed him bugs and worms, and worms and bugs until his feathers grew. They grew and they grew as white as snow, all over his body from head to toe. Off the little bird flew to see the world. He flew here, he flew there, watching and listening everywhere. And children, dear children, if you are good, if you are very, very,

very good, this little bird will come and put a sparkle in your eye and help you to make some mischief. And if you are bad, dear children, he will come and sing a song to ease the pain that makes you bad."

"Tra-la-la!" sang the lily-white bird, hopping onto his other shoulder. "Tra-la-la! Tra-la! Tra-lee!"

"And that," said the storyteller, spreading his hands, "is the end of my tale."

"But what about his red breast?" cried the children. "How did he get his red breast?"

"Ah," said the old man, "that is a tale with both sorrow and joy," and he folded his hands across his heart.

"Tell us! Tell us!" cried the children. "We have known sorrows and joys too!"

The old storyteller nodded with understanding. He also had known the pain and joy of life.

"One day," he continued, "the lily-white bird found a beautiful soul upon a cross. The bird recognized him at once, and cried, 'My heart! My heart! What are you doing here?'

"There was no reply. The man was dead. But a single drop of bright red blood fell from his brow and landed on the little bird's chest. In an instant he knew all the sorrows of the world, but also how to carry them.

"Off through the world the little bird went with his white-white feathers and his red-red breast, singing about the fullness that lay in his heart. And children, dear children, some listened and were glad. But others did not listen and never found out.

"And that, for sure," said the storyteller, "is the end of the story."

"Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!" sang the snowy-white bird, flying into the air and landing in a tree. "Tra-la-la! Tra-la! Tra-lee!"

"A penny for the story," called the storyteller, holding out his cap. "A penny for the story!"

Some children ran away, and some parents dragged their children into the market, but one child put a penny in the old man's cap.

"Tra-la-la!" called the little bird, fluttering down and landing on the storyteller's hand. He peeked into the cap.

The storyteller looked inside too, and the cap was filled with gold!

"Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!" sang the lily-white bird, fluttering away. "Tra-la-la! Tra-la! Tra-lee!"