

Stribor's Forest

Stribor's Forest

I

ONE day a young man went into Stribor's Forest and did not know that the Forest was enchanted and that all manner of magic abode there. Some of its magic was good and some was bad—to each one according to his deserts.

Now this Forest was to remain enchanted until it should be entered by someone who preferred his sorrows to all the joys of this world.

The young man set to and cut wood, and presently sat down on a stump to rest, for it was a fine winter's day. And out of the stump slipped a snake, and began to fawn upon him. Now this wasn't a real snake, but a human being transformed into a snake for its sins, and it could only be set free by one who was willing to wed it. The snake sparkled like silver in the sun as it looked up into the young man's eyes.

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

“Dear me, what a pretty snake! I should rather like to take it home,” said the young man in fun.

“Here’s the silly fool who is going to help me out of my trouble,” thought the sinful soul within the snake. So she made haste and turned herself at once out of a snake into a most beautiful woman standing there before the young man. Her sleeves were white and embroidered like butterflies’ wings, and her feet were tiny like a countess’s. But because her thoughts had been evil, the tongue in her mouth remained a serpent’s tongue.

“Here I am! Take me home and marry me!” said the snake-woman to the youth.

Now if this youth had only had presence of mind and remembered quickly to brandish his hatchet at her and call out: “I certainly never thought of wedding a piece of forest magic,” why, then the woman would at once have turned again into a snake, wriggled back into the stump, and no harm done to anybody.

But he was one of your good-natured, timid and shy youths; moreover, he was ashamed to say

Stribor's Forest

“No” to her, when she had transformed herself all on his account. Besides, he liked her because she was pretty, and he couldn't know in his innocence what had remained inside her mouth.

So he took the Woman by the hand and led her home. Now that youth lived with his old Mother, and he cherished his Mother as though she were the image of a saint.

“This is your daughter-in-law,” said the youth, as he entered the house with the Woman.

“The Lord be thanked, my son,” replied his Mother, and looked at the pretty girl. But the Mother was old and wise, and knew at once what was inside her daughter-in-law's mouth.

The daughter-in-law went out to change her dress, and the Mother said to her son :

“You have chosen a very pretty bride, my boy ; only beware, lest she be a snake.”

The youth was dumbfounded with astonishment. How could his Mother know that the other had been a snake ? And his heart grew angry within him as he thought : “ Surely my Mother is a witch.” And from that moment he hated his Mother.

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

So the three began to live together, but badly and discordantly. The daughter-in-law was ill-tempered, spiteful, greedy and proud.

Now there was a mountain peak there as high as the clouds, and one day the daughter-in-law bade the old Mother go up and fetch her snow from the summit for her to wash in.

“There is no path up there,” said the Mother.

“Take the goat and let her guide you. Where she can go up, there you can tumble down,” said the daughter-in-law.

The son was there at the time, but he only laughed at the words, simply to please his wife.

This so grieved the Mother that she set out at once for the peak to fetch the snow, because she was tired of life. As she went her way she thought to ask God to help her; but she changed her mind and said: “For then God would know that my son is undutiful.”

But God gave her help all the same, so that she safely brought the snow back to her daughter-in-law from the cloud-capped peak.

Next day the daughter-in-law gave her a fresh order :

Stribor's Forest

“Go out on to the frozen lake. In the middle of the lake there is a hole. Catch me a carp there for dinner.”

“The ice will give way under me, and I shall perish in the lake,” replied the old Mother.

“The carp will be pleased if you go down with him,” said the daughter-in-law.

And again the son laughed, and the Mother was so grieved that she went out at once to the lake. The ice cracked under the old woman, and she wept so that the tears froze on her face. But yet she would not pray to God for help; she would keep it from God that her son was sinful.

“It is better that I should perish,” thought the Mother as she walked over the ice.

But her time had not yet come. And therefore a gull flew over her head, bearing a fish in its beak. The fish wriggled out of the gull's beak and fell right at the feet of the old woman. The Mother picked up the fish and brought it safely to her daughter-in-law.

On the third day the Mother sat by the fire, and took up her son's shirt to mend it. When her

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

daughter-in-law saw that, she flew at her, snatched the shirt out of her hands, and screamed :

“ Stop that, you blind old fool ! That is none of your business.”

And she would not let the Mother mend her son's shirt.

Then the old woman's heart was altogether saddened, so that she went outside, sat in that bitter cold on the bench before the house, and cried to God :

“ Oh God, help me ! ”

At that moment she saw a poor girl coming towards her. The girl's bodice was all torn and her shoulder blue with the cold, because the sleeve had given way. But still the girl smiled, for she was bright and sweet-tempered. Under her arm she carried a bundle of kindling-wood.

“ Will you buy wood for kindling, Mother ? ” asked the girl.

“ I have no money, my dear ; but if you like I will mend your sleeve,” sadly returned the old Mother, who was still holding the needle and thread with which she had wanted to mend her son's shirt.

Stribor's Forest

So the old Mother mended the girl's sleeve, and the girl gave her a bundle of kindling-wood, thanked her kindly, and went on happy because her shoulder was no longer cold.

II

That evening the daughter-in-law said to the Mother :

“ We are going out to supper with godmother. Mind you have hot water for me when I come back.”

The daughter-in-law was greedy and always on the look-out to get invited for a meal.

So the others went out, and the old woman was left alone. She took out the kindling-wood which the poor girl had given her, lit the fire on the hearth, and went into the shed for wood.

As she was in the shed fetching the wood, she suddenly heard something in the kitchen a-bustling and a-rustling—“ hist, hist !”

“ Whoever is that ?” called the old Mother from the shed.

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

“Brownies! Brownies!” came the answer from the kitchen in voices so tiny, for all the world like sparrows chirping under the roof.

The old woman wondered what on earth was going on there in the dark, and went into the kitchen. And when she got there the kindling-chips just flared up on the hearth, and round the flame there were Brownies dancing in a ring—all tiny little men no bigger than half an ell. They wore little fur coats; their caps and shoes were red as flames; their beards were grey as ashes, and their eyes sparkled like live coal.

More and more of them danced out of the flames, one for each chip. And as they appeared they laughed and chirped, turned somersaults on the hearth, twittered with glee, and then took hands and danced in a ring.

And how they danced! Round the hearth, in the ashes, under the cupboard, on the table, in the jug, on the chair! Round and round! Faster and faster! They chirped and they chattered, chased and romped all over the place. They scattered the salt; they spilt the barm; they upset the flour—



Croatian Tales of Long Ago

all for sheer fun. The fire on the hearth blazed and shone, crackled and glowed; and the old woman gazed and gazed. She never regretted the salt nor the barm, but was glad of the jolly little folk whom God had sent to comfort her.

It seemed to the old woman as though she were growing young again. She laughed like a dove; she tripped like a girl; she took hands with the Brownies and danced. But all the time there was the load on her heart, and that was so heavy that the dance stopped at once.

“Little brothers,” said the Mother to the Brownies, “can you not help me to get a sight of my daughter-in-law’s tongue, so that when I can show my son what I have seen with my own eyes he will perhaps come to his senses?”

And the old woman told the Brownies all that had happened. The Brownies sat round the edge of the hearth, their little feet thrust under the grate, each wee mannikin beside his neighbour, and listened to the old woman, all wagging their heads in wonder. And as they wagged their heads, their red caps caught the glow of the fire, and you’d

Stribor's Forest

have thought there was nothing there but the fire burning on the hearth.

When the old woman had finished her story, one of the Brownies called out, and his name was Wee Tintilinkie :

“ I will help you ! I will go to the sunshiny land and bring you magpies' eggs. We will put them under the sitting hen, and when the magpies are hatched your daughter-in-law will betray herself. She will crave for little magpies like any ordinary forest snake, and so put out her tongue.”

All the Brownies twittered with joy because Wee Tintilinkie had thought of something so clever. They were still at the height of their glee when in came the daughter-in-law from supper with a cake for herself.

She flew to the door in a rage to see who was chattering in the kitchen. But just as she opened the door, the door went bang ! the flame leapt, up jumped the Brownies, gave one stamp all round the hearth with their tiny feet, rose up above the flames, flew up to the roof,—the boards in the roof creaked a bit, and the Brownies were gone !

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

Only Wee Tintilinkie did not run away, but hid among the ashes.

When the flame leapt so unexpectedly and the door banged to, the daughter-in-law got a start, so that for sheer fright she plumped on the floor like a sack. The cake broke in her hand; her hair came down, combs and all; her eyes goggled, and she called out angrily :

“ What was that, you old wretch ? ”

“ The wind blew up the flame when the door opened,” said the Mother, and kept her wits about her.

“ And what is that among the ashes ? ” said the daughter-in-law again. For from the ashes peeped the red heel of Wee Tintilinkie’s shoe.

“ That is a live ember,” said the Mother.

However, the daughter-in-law would not believe her, but, all dishevelled as she was, she got up and went over to see close to what was on the hearth. As she bent down with her face over the ashes Wee Tintilinkie quickly let out with his foot, so that his heel caught the daughter-in-law on the nose. The Woman screamed as if she were drowning in the

Stribor's Forest

sea ; her face was all over soot, and her tumbled hair all smothered with ashes.

“ What was that, you miserable old woman ? ” hissed the daughter-in-law.

“ A chestnut bursting in the fire, ” answered the Mother ; and Wee Tintilinkie in the ashes almost split with laughter.

While the daughter-in-law went out to wash, the Mother showed Wee Tintilinkie where the daughter-in-law had set the hen, so as to have little chickens for Christmas. That very night Wee Tintilinkie fetched magpies' eggs and put them under the hen instead of hens' eggs.

III

The daughter-in-law bade the Mother take good care of the hen and to tell her at once whenever the chickens were hatched. Because the daughter-in-law intended to invite the whole village to come and see that she had chickens at Christmas, when nobody else had any.

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

In due time the magpies were hatched. The Mother told her daughter-in-law that the chickens had come out, and the daughter-in-law invited the village. Gossips and neighbours came along, both great and small, and the old woman's son was there too. The Wife told her mother-in-law to fetch the nest and bring it into the passage.

The Mother brought in the nest, lifted off the hen, and behold, there was something chirping in the nest. The naked magpies scrambled out, and hop, hop, hopped all over the passage.

When the Snake-Woman so unexpectedly caught sight of *magpies*, she betrayed herself. Her serpent's nature craved its prey; she darted down the passage after the little magpies and shot out her thin quivering tongue at them as she used to do in the Forest.

Gossips and neighbours screamed and crossed themselves, and took their children home, because they realised that the woman was indeed a snake from the Forest.

But the Mother went up to her son full of joy.

“Take her back to where you brought her from, my son. Now you have seen with your own eyes



Stribor's Forest

what it is you are cherishing in your house ;” and the Mother tried to embrace her son.

But the son was utterly infatuated, so that he only hardened himself the more against the village, and against his Mother, and against the evidence of his own eyes. He would not turn away the Snake-Woman, but cried out upon his Mother :

“ Where did you get young magpies at this time of year, you old witch ? Be off with you out of my house ! ”

Eh, but the poor Mother saw that there was no help for it. She wept and cried, and only begged her son not to turn her out of the house in broad daylight for all the village to see what manner of son she had reared.

So the son allowed his Mother to stay in the house until nightfall.

When evening came, the old Mother put some bread into her bag, and a few of those kindling-chips which the poor girl had given her, and then she went weeping and sobbing out of her son's house.

But as the Mother crossed the threshold, the fire went out on the hearth, and the crucifix fell

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

from the wall. Son and daughter-in-law were left alone in the darkened cottage. And now the son felt that he had sinned greatly against his Mother, and he repented bitterly. But he did not dare to speak of it to his wife, because he was afraid. So he just said :

“ Let’s follow Mother and see her die of cold.”

Up jumped the wicked daughter-in-law, overjoyed, and fetched their fur coats, and they dressed and followed the old woman from afar.

The poor Mother went sadly over the snow, by night, over the fields. She came to a wide stubble-field, and there she was so overcome by the cold that she could go no farther. So she took the kindling-wood out of her bag, scraped the snow aside, and lit a fire to warm herself by.

But lo ! no sooner had the chips caught fire than the Brownies came out of them, just the same as on the household hearth !

They skipped out of the fire and all round in the snow, and the sparks flew about them in all directions into the night.

The poor old woman was so glad she could

Sribor's Forest

almost have cried for joy because they had not forsaken her on her way. And the Brownies crowded round her, laughed and whistled.

“Oh, dear Brownies,” said the Mother, “I don't want to be amused just now; help me in my sore distress!”

Then she told the Brownies how her silly son had grown still more bitter against her since even he and all the village had come to know that his wife truly had a serpent's tongue:

“He has turned me away; help me if you can.”

For a while the Brownies were silent, for a while their little shoes tapped the snow, and they did not know what to advise.

At last Wee Tintilinkie said:

“Let's go to Sribor, our master. He always knows what to do.”

And at once Wee Tintilinkie shinned up a hawthorn-tree; he whistled on his fingers, and out of the dark and over the stubble-field there came trotting towards them a stag and twelve squirrels!

They set the old Mother on the stag, and the

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

Brownies got on the twelve squirrels, and off they went to Stribor's Forest.

Away and into the night they rode. The stag had mighty antlers with many points, and at the end of each point there burned a little star. The stag gave light on the way, and at his heels sped the twelve squirrels, each squirrel with eyes that shone like two diamonds. They sped and they fled, and far behind them toiled the daughter-in-law and her husband, quite out of breath.

So they came to Stribor's Forest, and the stag carried the old woman through the forest.

Even in the dark the daughter-in-law knew that this was Stribor's Forest, where she had once before been enchanted for her sins. But she was so full of spite that she could not think of her new sins nor feel fear because of them, but triumphed all the more to herself and said: "Surely the simple old woman will perish in this Forest amid all the magic!" and she ran still faster after the stag.

But the stag carried the Mother before Stribor. Now Stribor was lord of that Forest. He dwelt in the heart of the Forest, in an oak so huge that there

Stribor's Forest



Croatian Tales of Long Ago

was room in it for seven golden castles, and a village all fenced about with silver. In front of the finest of the castles sat Stribor himself on a throne, arrayed in a cloak of scarlet.

“Help this old woman, who is being destroyed by her serpent daughter-in-law,” said the Brownies to Stribor, after both they and the Mother had bowed low before him. And they told him the whole story. But the son and daughter-in-law crept up to the oak, and looked and listened through a wormhole to see what would happen.

When the Brownies had finished, Stribor said to the old woman :

“Fear nothing, Mother ! Leave your daughter-in-law. Let her continue in her wickedness until it shall bring her again to the state from which she freed herself too soon. As for yourself, I can easily help you. Look at yonder village, fenced about with silver.”

The Mother looked, and lo ! it was her own native village, where she had lived when she was young, and in the village there was holiday and merry-making. Bells were ringing, fiddles playing, flags waving, and songs resounding.

Stribor's Forest

“Cross the fence, clap your hands, and you will at once regain your youth. You will remain in your village to be young and blithe once more as you were fifty years ago,” said Stribor.

At that the old woman was glad as never before in her life. She ran to the fence ; already her hand was on the silver gate, when she suddenly bethought herself of something, and asked Stribor :

“And what will become of my son ?”

“Don't talk foolishness, old woman !” replied Stribor. “How would you know about your son ? He will remain in this present time, and you will go back to your youth. You will know nothing about any son !”

When the old woman heard that, she considered sadly. And then she turned slowly away from the gate, went back to Stribor, bowed low before him, and said :

“I thank you, kind lord, for all the favour you would show me. But I would rather abide in my misery and know that I have a son than that you should give me all the riches and happiness in the world and I forget my son.”

As the Mother said this, the whole Forest rang

Croatian Tales of Long Ago

again. There was an end to the magic in Stribor's Forest, because the Mother preferred her sorrows to all the joys of this world.

The entire Forest quaked, the earth fell in, and the huge oak, with its castles and its silver-fenced village, sank underground. Stribor and the Brownies vanished, the daughter-in-law gave a shriek, turned into a snake, wriggled away down a hole, and Mother and Son were left alone side by side in the middle of the Forest.

The son fell on his knees before his mother, kissed the hem of her garment and her sleeve, and then he lifted her up in his arms and carried her back to their home, which they happily reached by daybreak.

The son prayed God and his Mother to forgive him. God forgave him, and his Mother had never been angry with him.

Later on the young man married that poor but sweet girl who had brought the Brownies to their house. They are all three living happily together to this day, and Wee Tintlinkie loves to visit their hearth of a winter's evening.