

Tom Tit Tot

Flora Annie Steel

Once upon a time there was a woman and she baked five pies. But when they came out of the oven they were over-baked, and the crust was far too hard to eat. So she said to her daughter:

“Daughter,” says she, “put them pies on to the shelf and leave ’em there awhile. Surely they’ll come again in time.”

By that, you know, she meant that they would become softer; but her daughter said to herself, “If Mother says the pies will come again, why shouldn’t I eat these now?” So, having good, young teeth, she set to work and ate the lot, first and last.

Now when supper-time came the woman said to her daughter, “Go you and get one of the pies. They are sure to have come again by now.”

Then the girl went and looked, but of course there was nothing but the empty dishes.

So back she came and said, “No, Mother, they ain’t come again.”

“Not one o’ them?” asked the mother, taken aback like.

“Not one o’ them,” says the daughter, quite confident.

“Well,” says the mother, “come again, or not come again, I will have one of them pies for my supper.”

“But you can’t,” says the daughter. “How can you if they ain’t come? And they ain’t, as sure’s sure.”

“But I can,” says the mother, getting angry. “Go you at once, child, and bring me the best on them. My teeth must just tackle it.”

“Best or worst is all one,” answered the daughter, quite sulky, “for I’ve ate the lot, so you can’t have one till it comes again—so there!”

Well, the mother she bounced up to see; but half an eye told her there was nothing save the empty dishes; so she was dished up herself and done for.

So, having no supper, she sate her down on the doorstep, and, bringing out her distaff, began to

spin. And as she span she sang:

“My daughter ha’ ate five pies to-day,

My daughter ha’ ate five pies to-day,

My daughter ha’ ate five pies to-day,”

for, see you, she was quite flabbergasted and fair astonished.

Now the King of that country happened to be coming down the street, and he heard the song going on and on, but could not quite make out the words. So he stopped his horse, and asked:

“What is that you are singing, my good woman?”

Now the mother, though horrified at her daughter’s appetite, did not want other folk, leastwise the King, to know about it, so she sang instead:

“My daughter ha’ spun five skeins to-day,

My daughter ha’ spun five skeins to-day,

My daughter ha’ spun five skeins to-day.”

“Five skeins!” cried the King. “By my garter and my crown, I never heard tell of any one who could do that! Look you here, I have been searching for a maiden to wife, and your daughter who can spin five skeins a day is the very one for me. Only, mind you, though for eleven months of the year she shall be Queen indeed, and have all she likes to eat, all the gowns she likes to get, all the company she likes to keep, and everything her heart desires, in the twelfth month she must set to work and spin five skeins a day, and if she does not she must die. Come! is it a bargain?”

So the mother agreed. She thought what a grand marriage it was for her daughter. And as for the five skeins? Time enough to bother about them when the year came round. There was many a slip between cup and lip, and, likely as not, the King would have forgotten all about it by then.

Anyhow, her daughter would be Queen for eleven months. So they were married, and for eleven months the bride was happy as happy could be. She had everything she liked to eat, and all the gowns she liked to get, all the company she cared to keep, and everything her heart desired. And her husband the King was kind as kind could be. But in the tenth month

she began to think of those five skeins and wonder if the King remembered. And in the eleventh month she began to dream about them as well. But ne'er a word did the King, her husband, say about them; so she hoped he had forgotten.

But on the very last day of the eleventh month, the King, her husband, led her into a room she had never set eyes on before. It had one window, and there was nothing in it but a stool and a spinning-wheel.

"Now, my dear," he said quite kind like, "you will be shut in here to-morrow morning with some victuals and some flax, and if by evening you have not spun five skeins, your head will come off."

Well she was fair frightened, for she had always been such a gatless thoughtless girl that she had never learnt to spin at all. So what she was to do on the morrow she could not tell; for, see you, she had no one to help her; for, of course, now she was Queen, her mother didn't live nigh her. So she just locked the door of her room, sat down on a stool, and cried and cried and cried until her pretty eyes were all red.

Now as she sate sobbing and crying she heard a queer little noise at the bottom of the door. At first she thought it was a mouse. Then she thought it must be something knocking.

So she upped and opened the door and what did she see? Why! a small, little, black Thing with a long tail that whisked round and round ever so fast.

"What are you crying for?" said that Thing, making a bow, and twirling its tail so fast that she could scarcely see it.

"What's that to you?" said she, shrinking a bit, for that Thing was very queer like.

"Don't look at my tail if you're frightened," says That, smirking. "Look at my toes. Ain't they beautiful?"

And sure enough That had on buckled shoes with high heels and big bows, ever so smart.

So she kind of forgot about the tail, and wasn't so frightened, and when That asked her again why she was crying, she upped and said, "It won't do no good if I do."

"You don't know that," says That, twirling its tail faster and faster, and sticking out its toes. "Come, tell me, there's a good girl."

"Well," says she, "it can't do any harm if it doesn't do good." So she dried her pretty eyes and told That all about the pies, and the skeins, and everything from first to last.

And then that little, black Thing nearly burst with laughing. “If that is all, it’s easy mended!” it says. “I’ll come to your window every morning, take the flax, and bring it back spun into five skeins at night. Come! shall it be a bargain?”

Now she, for all she was so gatless and thoughtless, said, cautious like:

“But what is your pay?”

Then That twirled its tail so fast you couldn’t see it, and stuck out its beautiful toes, and smirked and looked out of the corners of its eyes. “I will give you three guesses every night to guess my name, and if you haven’t guessed it before the month is up, why”—and That twirled its tail faster and stuck out its toes further, and smirked and sed more than ever —“you shall be mine, my beauty.”

Three guesses every night for a whole month! She felt sure she would be able for so much; and there was no other way out of the business, so she just said, “Yes! I agree!”

And lor! how That twirled its tail, and bowed, and smirked, and stuck out its beautiful toes.

Well, the very next day her husband led her to the strange room again, and there was the day’s food, and a spinning-wheel and a great bundle of flax.

“There you are, my dear,” says he as polite as polite. “And remember! if there are not five whole skeins to-night, I fear your head will come off!”

At that she began to tremble, and after he had gone away and locked the door, she was just thinking of a good cry, when she heard a queer knocking at the window. She upped at once and opened it, and sure enough there was the small, little, black Thing sitting on the window-ledge, dangling its beautiful toes and twirling its tail so that you could scarcely see it.

“Good-morning, my beauty,” says That. “Come! hand over the flax, sharp, there’s a good girl.”

So she gave That the flax and shut the window and, you may be sure, ate her victuals, for, as you know, she had a good appetite, and the King, her husband, had promised to give her everything she liked to eat. So she ate to her heart’s content, and when evening came and she heard that queer knocking at the window again, she upped and opened it, and there was the small, little, black Thing with five spun skeins on his arm!

And it twirled its tail faster than ever, and stuck out its beautiful toes, and bowed and smirked and gave her the five skeins.

Then That said, “And now, my beauty, what is That’s name?”

And she answered quite easy like:

“That is Bill.”

“No, it ain’t,” says That, and twirled its tail.

“Then That is Ned,” says she.

“No, it ain’t,” says That, and twirled its tail faster.

“Well,” says she a bit more thoughtful, “That is Mark.”

“No, it ain’t,” says That, and laughs and laughs and laughs, and twirls its tail so as you couldn’t see it, as away it flew.

Well, when the King, her husband, came in, he was fine and pleased to see the five skeins all ready for him, for he was fond of his pretty wife.

“I shall not have to order your head off, my dear,” says he. “And I hope all the other days will pass as happily.” Then he said good-night and locked the door and left her.

But next morning they brought her fresh flax and even more delicious foods. And the small, little, black Thing came knocking at the window and stuck out its beautiful toes and twirled its tail faster and faster, and took away the bundle of flax and brought it back all spun into five skeins by evening.

Then That made her guess three times what That’s name was; but she could not guess right, and That laughed and laughed and laughed as it flew away.

Now every morning and evening the same thing happened, and every evening she had her three guesses; but she never guessed right. And every day the small, little, black Thing laughed louder and louder and smirked more and more, and looked at her quite malicious out of the corners of its eyes until she began to get frightened, and instead of eating all the fine foods left for her, spent the day in trying to think of names to say. But she never hit upon the right one.

So it came to the last day of the month but one, and when the small, little, black Thing

arrived in the evening with the five skeins of flax all ready spun, it could hardly say for smirking:

“Ain’t you got That’s name yet?”

So says she—for she had been reading her Bible:

“Is That Nicodemus?”

“No, it ain’t,” says That, and twirled its tail faster than you could see.

“Is That Samuel?” says she all of a flutter.

“No, it ain’t, my beauty,” chuckles That, looking malicious.

“Well—is That Methuselah?” says she, inclined to cry.

Then That just fixes her with eyes like a coal a-fire, and says, “No, it ain’t that neither, so there is only to-morrow night and then you’ll be mine, my beauty.”

And away the small, little, black Thing flew, its tail twirling and whisking so fast that you couldn’t see it.

Well, she felt so bad she couldn’t even cry; but she heard the King, her husband, coming to the door, so she made bold to be cheerful, and tried to smile when he said, “Well done, wife! Five skeins again! I shall not have to order your head off after all, my dear, of that I’m quite sure, so let us enjoy ourselves.” Then he bade the servants bring supper, and a stool for him to sit beside his Queen, and down they sat, lover-like, side by side.

But the poor Queen could eat nothing; she could not forget the small, little, black Thing. And the King hadn’t eaten but a mouthful or two when he began to laugh, and he laughed so long and so loud that at last the poor Queen, all lackadaisical as she was, said:

“Why do you laugh so?”

“At something I saw to-day, my love,” says the King. “I was out a-hunting, and by chance I came to a place I’d never been in before. It was in a wood, and there was an old chalk-pit there, and out of the chalk-pit there came a queer kind of a sort of a humming, bumbling noise. So I got off my hobby to see what made it, and went quite quiet to the edge of the pit and looked down. And what do you think I saw? The funniest, queerest, smallest, little, black Thing you ever set eyes upon. And it had a little spinning-wheel and it was spinning away for dear life, but the wheel didn’t go so fast as its tail, and that span round and round—

ho-ho-ha-ha!—you never saw the like. And its little feet had buckled shoes and bows on them, and they went up and down in a desperate hurry. And all the time that small, little, black Thing kept bumming and booming away at these words:

“Name me, name me not,

Who’ll guess it’s Tom-Tit-Tot.”

Well, when she heard these words the Queen nearly jumped out of her skin for joy; but she managed to say nothing, but ate her supper quite comfortably.

And she said no word when next morning the small, little, black Thing came for the flax, though it looked so gleeful and malicious that she could hardly help laughing, knowing she had got the better of it. And when night came and she heard that knocking against the window-panes, she put on a wry face, and opened the window slowly as if she was afraid. But that Thing was as bold as brass and came right inside, grinning from ear to ear. And oh, my goodness! how That’s tail was twirling and whisking!

“Well, my beauty,” says That, giving her the five skeins all ready spun, “what’s my name?”

Then she put down her lip, and says, tearful like, “Is—is—That—Solomon?”

“No, it ain’t,” laughs That, smirking out of the corner of That’s eye. And the small, little, black Thing came further into the room.

So she tried again—and this time she seemed hardly able to speak for fright.

“Well—is That—Zebedee?” she says.

“No, it ain’t,” cried the impet, full of glee. And it came quite close and stretched out its little black hands to her, and O-oh, its tail...!!!

“Take time, my beauty,” says That, sort of jeering like, and its small, little, black eyes seemed to eat her up. “Take time! Remember! next guess and you’re mine!” Well, she backed just a wee bit from it, for it was just horrible to look at; but then she laughed out and pointed her finger at it and said, says she:

“Name me, name me not,

Your name is

Tom

TIT

TOT.”

And you never heard such a shriek as that small, little, black Thing gave out. Its tail dropped down straight, its feet all crumpled up, and away That flew into the dark, and she never saw it no more.

And she lived happy ever after with her husband, the King.

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