

“Margarette”

By Dave McClain

In a magical world, a little girl strives to prove herself worthy of receiving the help that her family so desperately needs.

Back in the age when the earth was filled with magical creatures, there was a little girl from a far off land who worked in a farmer's fields with her family. The farmer was a disagreeable sort. Some say evil. He worked people to their limit, rewarded them little and treated them harshly.

One day when the girl was picking the fruit of the vine, she heard a small, sweet voice.

"Good morning," said the voice.

"Who is there?" the girl asked, as her eyes searched the vine.

"Here am I. Standing on this juicy piece of fruit, just below your gaze."

The girl looked down and saw a ladybug looking back at her.

"You can talk?" said the girl.

"Of course. Many creatures of the field and forest can."

"I've never heard you speak before."

"That's because you weren't listening. The quietest voices speak the loudest, if you let them."

"Well, what do you want?" said the girl, looking around to see if the farmer was watching. "I've work to do and the sun continues to move across the sky even as we speak."

"Where is your dear mother today?"

"She's in our cabin. Yesterday, the farmer... beat her... for not picking enough fruit."

"But I have seen your mother work many a long day. Her bag usually contains the most fruit of all the workers, often more than your father!"

"Yesterday, I fell ill in the heat of the day. I had to rest under the shade of the vine. At the end of the day, she put some of her fruit in my bag."

The girl bowed her head and began to cry.

"Look bright, my child. The fairy Margarete has seen your pain and has sent me to your aid."

"How can one so small help with troubles so great?" the little girl sniffed.

"One step at a time, my child. Do the things that are right, avoid the things that are wrong and you shall be rewarded – you and your family."

"What must I do?"

"You must dig a hole."

“I am able. I dig many holes during the planting.”

“This is a very special hole. Deep in the woods.”

“I cannot abandon the farmer’s vines. I would be beaten and my mother would be beaten too.”

“The farmer is drunk with wine. He shall sleep until the sun passes the middle of the sky.”

“But when the sun has set and my bag is light, surely then I shall receive a beating.”

“If you complete your task, you need not concern yourself with the farmer ever again.”

The girl hesitated as images of her family flooded her mind.

“Or, you may continue picking this fruit and your life will never change for the better.”

“What is the first step?” asked the girl, still unsure.

“Do you see that shovel in the ground at the end of the row of vines?”

“Yes.”

“Take it. You will need it in the woods.”

“No. I will not. That is the gardener’s shovel. It does not belong to me.”

“Very well. Make your way into the woods and when you reach the right spot, you can dig with your hands.”

The little girl looked at the shovel and she looked back at her small hands.

“Make haste! You haven’t much time!” the ladybug said, suddenly speaking harshly.

The girl began running toward the woods. She ran past the shovel and looked at it, but she kept on running. When she reached the trees, she stopped and peered into the woods, which were much darker than she remembered.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The girl heard a sound nearby.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

She looked toward the noise and saw a beaver slapping his tail on the ground and staring at her.

“Why does a little girl like yourself want to enter my woods?” demanded the beaver.

“You talk too?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t trust a beaver who didn’t talk! Most of us talk. You just have to listen. Now what do you want in my woods?”

“Please excuse me, Mr. Beaver. The ladybug sent me.”

“Ladybug? Ladybug? Which ladybug? Some of those ladybugs are pretty flighty, you know.”

“Well, I didn’t catch her name, but she said that Margarete asked her to help me.”

“Margarete? Well, Margarete is queen around here! What is your task?”

“I’m supposed to go deep into these woods and dig a hole.”

“Well, that seems like an odd thing for a little girl to do. But if Margarete requests it, it shall be done. Where are you to dig this hole?”

“I don’t know exactly. All I was told was to take one step at a time.”

“Well, then, you better start stepping. But if you find the right spot and dig this hole, how will you find your way back?”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I have an idea. As you’re walking through the woods, just tear off branches and make Xs with them right in the middle of your path.”

“Tear off branches?”

“Yes, rip ‘em down. Just RRRRIP ‘em down. It helps you and it helps me. After you’re out of the woods, I’ll pick up the branches and use them in my dam.”

“I can’t just rip down scores of branches. Beavers cut down trees, but that’s not something people do. I’m sorry. I can’t do it. There must be a better way.”

“Indeed there is, my dear!” came a squeaky voice from above.

The girl looked up and saw a great many birds sitting on tree branches. Their leader spoke right to her.

“Don’t listen to him. You don’t need to harm these trees to get to where you’re going and back. Margarete sent us. We’ll lead you.”

“Oh, thank you!” said the little girl.

“Yeah, thankssss a lot!” said the beaver through his big teeth, with the most sarcastic whistle he could muster.

The birds flew into the woods and the girl followed as fast as she could. Just as she thought that she could run no more, she saw the birds in the distance, circling around a grove of trees surrounding what looked like a clearing. She slowed to a walk. Just then, she heard a rustling in the woods, the sound of an animal running, and then a panicked male voice beside her.

“You’ve got to help me!” said the fox at her feet, looking up at her with pleading eyes.

“Help you do what?” asked the little girl, no longer surprised at meeting new creatures who could talk.

“My little boy! He’s fallen into a ravine! He can’t get out and we can’t reach him!”

The little girl looked up to the sky between the trees and saw that the sun had almost reached the center of the sky. Then she looked towards the clearing where the birds were circling faster.

“I’m very, very sorry, but I can’t right now. I have to...”

“Please! He’ll die! PLEASE!”

The little girl hesitated, but then she thought of all the times her mother had told her stories about other people and plants and animals and how she should be kind to all creatures no matter what.

The little girl ran away from him and the fox watched in astonishment. The girl reached the clearing and looked skyward, excitedly talking and pointing. After a moment, she ran back towards the fox, with the birds flying towards him as well.

“Where’s... the... ravine?” asked the girl between breaths.

“Oh! This way! This way!” exclaimed the fox. He ran towards the ravine, with the girl and the birds right behind him.

As everyone reached the edge of the ravine, they saw the baby fox pleading for help from below.

“We can handle this!” said the bird to the little girl. “But you have very little time left. Go to the clearing! Everything that you need is there! Hurry!”

The birds began to link their wings to lower their leader into the ravine toward the baby fox and the girl ran towards the clearing with all her might. As she ran, she looked up and saw that the sun was now directly overhead. When she reached the clearing, she saw a shovel stuck in the ground just outside of a circle of trees. She grabbed the shovel and ran into the center of the circle. She looked around, trying to decide where she should dig. Then she stopped, caught her breath, closed her eyes and stood there silently. She listened... and she heard the wind blowing through the trees, sounding almost like a whisper.

“X marks the spot,” she thought she heard.

“X marks the spot.” It was clearer that time.

The girl opened her eyes and saw a tree talking to her. “Are you ready to dig?”

“You talk too?!?”

“Indeed. All you had to do was listen. X marks the spot.”

The tree used its two largest branches to tear off two smaller ones. He bent over and placed the branches in the shape of an X on the forest floor.

“Now dig. Quickly!”

The little girl dug a hole right beneath the X and before long, she felt the shovel hit something hard. She looked up at the tree and he nodded. The girl dug out an old wooden box, but it collapsed in her hands. All she was left holding was a single piece of paper. The girl stared at the paper in confusion, the letters and words making no sense to her.

“Salutations and congratulations,” said an angelic voice just above the girl’s head.

The girl looked up and saw a beautiful woman in a flowing white robe floating on air. The trees all briefly bowed towards the fairy and then returned to the majesty of their upright position.

“I’m Margarett and I am very pleased to meet you.”

“I’m very happy to meet you too,” the girl replied as she bowed. “Thank you for helping me get here, but I’m afraid I don’t understand. What is this paper?”

“It’s a deed. It shows who owns all of this land. The farmer you work for stole it from his brother many years ago. When the farmer’s brother ran this farm, he treated all his employees with kindness and compassion. And his wife set up a school where all the little children on the farm could gain skills that would allow them to decide for themselves how they would live as adults. Get this piece of paper to the farmer’s brother, who has been living in poverty for lo these many years, and he’ll regain what is rightfully his – and give you and your family a much better life.”

“PUT THAT BACK!” shouted the farmer who had suddenly appeared in the clearing. “Put that deed back where you found it before I...”

“Before you what?” shouted a voice from the trees. “We’ve had enough of your threats!”

Just then, the girl’s parents emerged in the clearing right behind the farmer. The girl’s father was holding the rod that the farmer used to beat his workers.

“I’m going to give you more of a head start than you gave my wife!”

The farmer ran back into the woods, looking over his shoulder at his pursuers. He never saw the ravine, until he was looking at its steep walls as he fell to the river bed below.

The girl's father stopped running. "And so goes evil," he said quietly.

The little girl caught up to her parents, as the birds, the beaver, the ladybug and the fox with his son gathered round and Margarett appeared holding the deed. Everyone turned to look at her.

"You have been kind to man and to all the creatures of the forest and you completed your task," said Margarett as she handed the deed to the little girl. "Be sure this gets to whom it belongs."

"I will," said the girl. "Thank you so much! I surely will!"

And they all lived happily ever after.