



Little Thumb



by Charles Perrault

Once upon a time there was a fagot-maker and his wife, who had seven children, all boys. The eldest was but ten years old, and the youngest only seven.

They were very poor, and their seven children were a great source of trouble to them because not one of them was able to earn his bread. What gave them yet more uneasiness was that the youngest was very delicate, and scarce ever spoke a word, which made people take for stupidity that which was a sign of good sense. He was very little, and when born he was no bigger than one's thumb; hence he was called Little Thumb.

The poor child was the drudge of the household, and was always in the wrong. He was, however, the most bright and discreet of all the brothers; and if he spoke little, he heard and thought the more.

There came a very bad year, and the famine was so great that these poor people resolved to rid themselves of their children. One evening, when they were in bed, and the fagot-maker was sitting with his wife at the fire, he said to her, with his heart ready to burst with grief:--

"You see plainly that we no longer can give our children food, and I cannot bear to see them die of hunger before my eyes; I am resolved to lose them in the wood to-morrow, which may very easily be done, for, while they amuse themselves in tying up fagots, we have only to run away and leave them without their seeing us."

"Ah!" cried out his wife, "could you really take the children and lose them?"

In vain did her husband represent to her their great poverty; she would not consent to it. She was poor, but she was their mother.

However, having considered what a grief it would be to her to see them die of hunger, she consented, and went weeping to bed.

Little Thumb heard all they had said; for, hearing that they were talking business, he got up softly and slipped under his father's seat, so as to hear without being seen. He went to bed again, but did not sleep a wink all the rest of the night, thinking of what he had to do. He got up early in the morning, and went to the brookside, where he filled his pockets full of small white pebbles, and then returned home. They all went out, but Little Thumb never told his brothers a word of what he knew.

They went into a very thick forest, where they could not see one another at ten paces apart. The fagot-maker began to cut wood, and the children to gather up sticks to make fagots. Their father and mother, seeing them busy at their work, got away from them unbeknown and then all at once ran as fast as they could through a winding by-path.

When the children found they were alone, they began to cry with all their might. Little Thumb let them cry on, knowing very well how to get home again; for, as he came, he had dropped the little white pebbles he had in his pockets all along the way. Then he said to them, "Do not be afraid, my brothers,--father and mother have left us here, but I will lead you home again; only follow me."

They followed, and he brought them home by the very same way they had come into the forest. They dared not go in at first, but stood outside the door to listen to what their father and mother were saying.

The very moment the fagot-maker and his wife reached home the lord of the manor sent them ten crowns, which he had long owed them, and which they never hoped to see. This gave them new life, for the poor people were dying of hunger. The fagot-maker sent his wife to the butcher's at once. As it was a long while since they had eaten, she bought thrice as much meat as was needed for supper for two people. When they had eaten, the woman said:--

"Alas! where are our poor children now? They would make a good feast of what we have left here; it was you, William, who wished to lose them. I told you we should repent of it. What are they now doing in the forest? Alas! perhaps the wolves have already eaten them up; you are very inhuman thus to have lost your children."

The fagot-maker grew at last quite out of patience, for she repeated twenty times that he would repent of it, and that she was in the right. He threatened to beat her if she did not hold her tongue. The fagot-maker was, perhaps, more sorry than his wife, but she teased him so he could not endure it. She wept bitterly, saying:--

"Alas! where are my children now, my poor children?"

She said this once so very loud that the children, who were at the door, heard her and cried out all together:--

"Here we are! Here we are!"



Little Thumb



She ran immediately to let them in, and said as she embraced them:--

"How happy I am to see you again, my dear children; you are very tired and very hungry, and, my poor Peter, you are covered with mud. Come in and let me clean you."

Peter was her eldest son, whom she loved more than all the rest, because he was red haired, as she was herself.

They sat down to table, and ate with an appetite which pleased both father and mother, to whom they told how frightened they were in the forest, nearly all speaking at once. The good folk were delighted to see their children once more, and this joy continued while the ten crowns lasted. But when the money was all spent, they fell again into their former uneasiness, and resolved to lose their children again. And, that they might be the surer of doing it, they determined to take them much farther than before.

They could not talk of this so secretly but they were overheard by Little Thumb, who laid his plans to get out of the difficulty as he had done before; but, though he got up very early to go and pick up some little pebbles, he could not, for he found the house-door double-locked. He did not know what to do. Their father had given each of them a piece of bread for their breakfast. He reflected that he might make use of the bread instead of the pebbles, by throwing crumbs all along the way they should pass, and so he stuffed it in his pocket. Their father and mother led them into the thickest and most obscure part of the forest, and then, stealing away into a by-path, left them there. Little Thumb was not very much worried about it, for he thought he could easily find the way again by means of his bread, which he had scattered all along as he came; but he was very much surprised when he could not find a single crumb: the birds had come and eaten them all.

They were now in great trouble; for the more they wandered, the deeper they went into the forest. Night now fell, and there arose a high wind, which filled them with fear. They fancied they heard on every side the howling of wolves coming to devour them. They scarce dared to speak or turn their heads. Then it rained very hard, which wetted them to the skin. Their feet slipped at every step, and they fell into the mud, covering their hands with it so that they knew not what to do with them.

Little Thumb climbed up to the top of a tree, to see if he could discover anything. Looking on every side, he saw at last a glimmering light, like that of a candle, but a long way beyond the forest. He came down, and, when upon the ground, he could see it no more, which grieved him sadly. However, having walked for some time with his brothers toward that side on which he had seen the light, he discovered it again as he came out of the wood.

They arrived at last at the house where this candle was, not without many frights; for very often they lost sight of it, which happened every time they came into a hollow. They knocked at the door, and a good woman came and opened it.

She asked them what they wanted. Little Thumb told her they were poor children who were lost in the forest, and desired to lodge there for charity's sake. The woman, seeing them all so very pretty, began to weep and said to them: "Alas! poor babies, where do you come from? Do you know that this house belongs to a cruel Ogre who eats little children?"

"Alas! dear madam," answered Little Thumb (who, with his brothers, was trembling in every limb), "what shall we do? The wolves of the forest surely will devour us to-night if you refuse us shelter in your house; and so we would rather the gentleman should eat us. Perhaps he may take pity upon us if you will be pleased to ask him to do so."

The Ogre's wife, who believed she could hide them from her husband till morning, let them come in, and took them to warm themselves at a very good fire; for there was a whole sheep roasting for the Ogre's supper.

As they began to warm themselves they heard three or four great raps at the door; this was the Ogre, who was come home. His wife quickly hid them under the bed and went to open the door. The Ogre at once asked if supper was ready and the wine drawn, and then sat himself down to table. The sheep was as yet all raw, but he liked it the better for that. He sniffed about to the right and left, saying:--

"I smell fresh meat."

"What you smell," said his wife, "must be the calf which I have just now killed and flayed."

"I smell fresh meat, I tell you once more," replied the Ogre, looking crossly at his wife, "and there is something here which I do not understand."

As he spoke these words he got up from the table and went straight to the bed.

"Ah!" said he, "that is how you would cheat me; I know not why I do not eat you, too; it is well for you that you are tough. Here is game, which comes very luckily to entertain three Ogres of my acquaintance who are to pay me a visit in a day or two."

He dragged them out from under the bed, one by one. The poor children fell upon their knees and begged his pardon, but they had to do with one of the most cruel of Ogres, who, far from having any pity on them, was already devouring them in his mind, and told his wife they would be delicate eating when she had made a good sauce.



Little Thumb



He then took a great knife, and, coming up to these poor children, sharpened it upon a great whetstone which he held in his left hand. He had already taken hold of one of them when his wife said to him:--

"What need you do it now? Will you not have time enough to-morrow?"

"Hold your prating," said the Ogre; "they will eat the tenderer."

"But you have so much meat already," replied his wife; "here are a calf, two sheep, and half a pig."

"That is true," said the Ogre; "give them a good supper that they may not grow thin, and put them to bed."

The good woman was overjoyed at this, and gave them a good supper; but they were so much afraid that they could not eat. As for the Ogre, he sat down again to drink, being highly pleased that he had the wherewithal to treat his friends. He drank a dozen glasses more than ordinary, which got up into his head and obliged him to go to bed.

The Ogre had seven daughters, who were still little children. These young Ogresses had all of them very fine complexions; but they all had little gray eyes, quite round, hooked noses, a very large mouth, and very long, sharp teeth, set far apart. They were not as yet wicked, but they promised well to be, for they had already bitten little children.

They had been put to bed early, all seven in one bed, with every one a crown of gold upon her head. There was in the same chamber a bed of the like size, and the Ogre's wife put the seven little boys into this bed, after which she went to bed herself.

Little Thumb, who had observed that the Ogre's daughters had crowns of gold upon their heads, and was afraid lest the Ogre should repent his not killing them that evening, got up about midnight, and, taking his brothers' bonnets and his own, went very softly and put them upon the heads of the seven little Ogresses, after having taken off their crowns of gold, which he put upon his own head and his brothers'; so that the Ogre might take them for his daughters, and his daughters for the little boys whom he wanted to kill.

Things turned out just as he had thought; for the Ogre, waking about midnight, regretted that he had deferred till morning to do that which he might have done overnight, and jumped quickly out of bed, taking his great knife.

"Let us see," said he, "how our little rogues do, and not make two jobs of the matter."

He then went up, groping all the way, into his daughters' chamber; and, coming to the bed where the little boys lay, and who were all fast asleep, except Little Thumb, who was terribly afraid when he found the Ogre fumbling about his head, as he had done about his brothers'; he felt the golden crowns, and said:--

"I should have made a fine piece of work of it, truly; it is clear I drank too much last night."

Then he went to the bed where the girls lay, and, having found the boys' little bonnets:--

"Ah!" said he, "my merry lads, are you there? Let us work boldly."

And saying these words, without more ado, he cruelly murdered all his seven daughters. Well pleased with what he had done, he went to bed again.

So soon as Little Thumb heard the Ogre snore, he waked his brothers, and bade them put on their clothes quickly and follow him. They stole softly into the garden and got over the wall. They ran about, all night, trembling all the while, without knowing which way they went.

The Ogre, when he woke, said to his wife: "Go upstairs and dress those young rascals who came here last night." The Ogress was very much surprised at this goodness of her husband, not dreaming after what manner she should dress them; but, thinking that he had ordered her to go up and put on their clothes, she went, and was horrified when she perceived her seven daughters all dead.

She began by fainting away, as was only natural in such a case. The Ogre, fearing his wife was too long in doing what he had ordered, went up himself to help her. He was no less amazed than his wife at this frightful spectacle.

"Ah! what have I done?" cried he. "The wretches shall pay for it, and that instantly."

He threw a pitcher of water upon his wife's face, and having brought her to herself, "Give me quickly," cried he, "my seven-leagued boots, that I may go and catch them."



Little Thumb



He went out into the country, and, after running in all directions, he came at last into the very road where the poor children were, and not above a hundred paces from their father's house. They espied the Ogre, who went at one step from mountain to mountain, and over rivers as easily as the narrowest brooks. Little Thumb, seeing a hollow rock near the place where they were, hid his brothers in it, and crowded into it himself, watching always what would become of the Ogre.

The Ogre, who found himself tired with his long and fruitless journey (for these boots of seven leagues greatly taxed the wearer), had a great mind to rest himself, and, by chance, went to sit down upon the rock in which the little boys had hidden themselves. As he was worn out with fatigue, he fell asleep, and, after reposing himself some time, began to snore so frightfully that the poor children were no less afraid of him than when he held up his great knife and was going to take their lives. Little Thumb was not so much frightened as his brothers, and told them that they should run away at once toward home while the Ogre was asleep so soundly, and that they need not be in any trouble about him. They took his advice, and got home quickly.

Little Thumb then went close to the Ogre, pulled off his boots gently, and put them on his own legs. The boots were very long and large, but as they were fairy boots, they had the gift of becoming big or little, according to the legs of those who wore them; so that they fitted his feet and legs as well as if they had been made for him. He went straight to the Ogre's house, where he saw his wife crying bitterly for the loss of her murdered daughters.

"Your husband," said Little Thumb, "is in very great danger, for he has been taken by a gang of thieves, who have sworn to kill him if he does not give them all his gold and silver. At the very moment they held their daggers at his throat he perceived me and begged me to come and tell you the condition he was in, and to say that you should give me all he has of value, without retaining any one thing; for otherwise they will kill him without mercy. As his case is very pressing, he desired me to make use of his seven-leagued boots, which you see I have on, so that I might make the more haste and that I might show you that I do not impose upon you."

The good woman, being greatly frightened, gave him all she had; for this Ogre was a very good husband, though he ate up little children. Little Thumb, having thus got all the Ogre's money, came home to his father's house, where he was received with abundance of joy.

There are many people who do not agree in regard to this act of Little Thumb's, and pretend that he never robbed the Ogre at all, and that he only thought he might very justly take off his seven-leagued boots because he made no other use of them but to run after little children. These folks affirm that they are very well assured of this, because they have drunk and eaten often at the fagot-maker's house. They declare that when Little Thumb had taken off the Ogre's boots he went to Court, where he was informed that they were very much in trouble about a certain army, which was two hundred leagues off, and anxious as to the success of a battle. He went, they say, to the King and told him that if he desired it, he would bring him news from the army before night.

The King promised him a great sum of money if he succeeded. Little Thumb returned that very same night with the news; and, this first expedition causing him to be known, he earned as much as he wished, for the King paid him very well for carrying his orders to the army. Many ladies employed him also to carry messages, from which he made much money. After having for some time carried on the business of a messenger and gained thereby great wealth, he went home to his father, and it is impossible to express the joy of his family. He placed them all in comfortable circumstances, bought places for his father and brothers, and by that means settled them very handsomely in the world, while he successfully continued to make his own way.