

Little Thumb

Charles Perrault

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Once upon a time there lived a woodcutter and his wife; they had seven children, all boys. The eldest was but ten years old, and the youngest only seven. People were astonished that the woodcutter had had so many children in such a short time, but his wife was very fond of children, and never had less than two at a time

They were very poor, and their seven children inconvenienced them greatly, because not one of them was able to earn his own way. They were especially concerned, because the youngest was very sickly. He scarcely ever spoke a word, which they considered to be a sign of stupidity, although it was in truth a mark of good sense. He was very little, and when born no bigger than one's thumb, for which reason they called him Little Thumb.

The poor child bore the blame of everything that went wrong in the house. Guilty or not, he was always held to be at fault. He was, notwithstanding, more cunning and had a far greater share of wisdom than all his brothers put together. And although he spoke little, he listened well.

There came a very bad year, and the famine was so great that these poor people decided to rid themselves of their children. One evening, when the children were all in bed and the woodcutter 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 are not able to keep our children, and I cannot see them starve to death before my face. I am resolved to lose them in the woods tomorrow, which may very easily be done; for, while they are busy in tying up the bundles of wood, we can leave them, without their noticing."

"Ah!" cried out his wife; "and can you yourself have the heart to take your children out along with you on purpose to abandon them?"

In vain her husband reminded her of their extreme poverty. She would not consent to it. Yes, she was poor, but she was their mother. However, after having considered what a grief it would be for her to see them perish with hunger, she at last consented, and went to bed in tears.

Little Thumb heard every word that had been spoken; for observing, as he lay in his bed, that they were talking very busily, he got up softly, and hid under his father's stool, in order to hear what they were saying without being seen. He went to bed again, but did not sleep a wink all the rest of the night, thinking about what he had to do. He got up early in the morning, and went to the riverside, where he filled his pockets with small white pebbles, and then returned home.

They all went out, but Little Thumb never told his brothers one syllable of what he knew. They went into a very thick forest, where they could not see one another at ten paces distance. The woodcutter began his work, and the children gathered up the sticks into bundles. Their father and mother, seeing them busy at their work, slipped away from them without being seen, and returned home along a byway through the bushes.

When the children saw they had been left alone, they began to cry as loudly as they could. Little Thumb let them cry, knowing very well how to get home again, for he had dropped the little white pebbles all along the way. Then he said to them, "Don't be afraid, brothers. Father and mother have left us here, but I will lead you home again. Just follow me."

They did so, and he took them home by the very same way they had come into the forest. They dared not go in, but sat down at the door, listening to what their father and mother were saying.

The woodcutter and his wife had just arrived home, when the lord of the manor sent them ten crowns, which he had owed them a long while, and which they never expected. This gave them new life, for the poor people were

almost famished. The woodcutter sent his wife immediately to the butcher's. As it had been a long while since they had eaten, she bought three times as much meat as would be needed 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; but it was you, William, who decided to abandon them. I told you that we would be sorry for it. What are they now doing in the forest? Alas, dear God, the wolves have perhaps already eaten them up. You are very inhuman to have abandoned your children in this way."

The woodcutter at last lost his patience, for she repeated it more than twenty times, that they would be sorry for it, and that she was right for having said so. He threatened to beat her if she did not hold her tongue. It was not that the woodcutter was less upset than his wife, but that she was nagging him. He, like many others, was of the opinion that wives should say the right thing, but that they should not do so too often.

She nearly drowned herself in tears, crying out, "Alas! Where are now my children, my poor children?"

She spoke this so very loud that the children, who were at the gate, began to cry out all together, "Here we are! Here we are!"

She immediately ran to open the door, and said, hugging them, "I am so glad to see you, my dear children; you are very hungry and tired. And my poor Peter, you are horribly dirty; come in and let me clean you."

Now, you must know that Peter was her eldest son, whom she loved above all the rest, because he had red hair, as she herself did.

They sat down to supper and ate with a good appetite, which pleased both father and mother. They told them how frightened they had been in the forest, speaking almost always all together. The parents were extremely glad to see their children once more at home, and this joy continued while the ten crowns lasted; but, when the money was all gone, they fell again into their former uneasiness, and decided to abandon them again. This time they resolved to take them much deeper into the forest than before.

Although they tried to talk secretly about it, again they were overheard by Little Thumb, who made plans to get out of this difficulty as well as he had the last time. However, even though he got up very early in the morning to go and pick up some little pebbles, he could not do so, for he found the door securely bolted and locked. Their father gave each of them a piece of bread for their breakfast, and he fancied he might make use of this instead of the pebbles, by throwing it in little bits all along the way; and so he put it into his pocket.

Their father and mother took them into the thickest and most obscure part of the forest, then, slipping away by an obscure path, they left them there. Little Thumb was not concerned, for he thought he could easily find the way again by means of his bread, which he had scattered along the way; but he was very much surprised when he could not find so much as one crumb. The birds had come and had eaten every bit of it up. They were now in great distress, for the farther they went the more lost and bewildered they became.

Night now came on, and there arose a terrible high wind, which made them dreadfully afraid. They fancied they heard on every side of them the howling of wolves coming to eat them up. They scarcely dared to speak or turn their heads. After this, it rained very hard, which drenched them to the skin; their feet slipped at every step they took, and they fell into the mire, getting them muddy all over. Their hands were numb with cold.

Little Thumb climbed to the top of a tree, to see if he could discover anything. Turning his head in every direction, he saw at last a glimmering light, like that of a candle, but a long way from the forest. He came down, but from the ground, he could no longer see it no more, which concerned him greatly. However, after walking for some time with his brothers in the direction where he had seen the light, he perceived it again as he came out of the woods.

They came at last to the house where this candle was, but not without many fearful moments, for every time they walked down into a hollow they lost sight of it. They knocked at the door, and a good woman opened it. She

asked them what they wanted.

Little Thumb told her they were poor children who had been lost in the forest, and begged her, for God's sake, to give them lodging.

The woman, seeing that they were good looking children, began to weep, and said to them, "Alas, poor babies, where are you from? Do you know that this house belongs to a cruel ogre who eats up little children?"

"Ah! dear madam," answered Little Thumb (who, as well as his brothers, was trembling all over), "what shall we do? If you refuse to let us sleep here then the wolves of the forest surely will devour us tonight. We would prefer the gentleman to eat us, but perhaps he would take pity upon us, especially if you would beg him to."

The ogre's wife, who believed she could hide them from her husband until morning, let them come in, and had them to warm themselves at a very good fire. There was a whole sheep on the spit, roasting for the ogre's supper.

After they warmed up a little, they heard three or four great raps at the door. This was the ogre, who was come home. Hearing him, she hid them under the bed and opened the door. The ogre immediately asked if supper was ready and the wine drawn, and then sat down at the table. The sheep was still raw and bloody, but he preferred it that way. He sniffed about to the right and left, saying, "I smell fresh meat."

His wife said, "You can smell 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 directly to the bed. "Ah, hah!" he said. "I see then how you would cheat me, you cursed woman; I don't know why I don't eat you as well. It is fortunate for you that you are tough old carrion. But here is good game, which has luckily arrived just in time to serve to three ogre friends who are coming here to visit in a day or two."

With that he dragged them out from under the bed, one by one. The poor children fell upon their knees, and begged his pardon; but they were dealing with one of the cruelest ogres in the world. Far from having any pity on them, he had already devoured them with his eyes. He told his wife that they would be delicate eating with good savory sauce. He then took a large knife, and, approaching the poor children, sharpened it on a large whetstone which he held in his left hand.

He had already taken hold of one of them when his wife said to him, "Why do it now? Is it not tomorrow soon enough?"

"Hold your chatter," said the ogre; "they will be more tender, if I kill them now."

"But you have so much meat already," replied his wife. "You have no need for more. Here are a calf, two sheep, and half a hog."

"That is true," said the ogre. "Feed them so they don't get too thin, and put them to bed."

The good woman was overjoyed at this, and offered them a good supper, but they were so afraid that they could not eat a bit. As for the ogre, he sat down to drink, being highly pleased that now had something special to treat his friends. He drank a dozen glasses more than ordinary, which went to his head and made him sleepy.

The ogre had seven little daughters. These young ogresses all had very fine complexions, because they ate fresh meat like their father; but they had little gray eyes, quite round, hooked noses, and very long sharp teeth, well spaced from each other. As yet they were not overly mischievous, but they showed great promise for it, for they had already bitten little children in order to suck their blood.

They had been put to bed early, all seven in a large bed, and each of them wearing a crown of gold on her head. The ogre's wife gave the seven little boys a bed just as large and in the same room, then she went to bed to her husband.

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

All of this happened according to his plan for, the ogre awakened about midnight and, regretting that he had put off until morning that which he might have done tonight, he hastily got out of bed and picked up his large knife. "Let us see," he said, "how our little rogues are doing! We'll not make that mistake a second time!"

He then went, groping all the way, into his daughters' room. He came to the bed where the little boys lay. They were all fast asleep except Little Thumb, who was terribly afraid when he felt the ogre feeling about his head, as he had done about his brothers'. Feeling the golden crowns, the ogre said, "That would have been a terrible mistake. Truly, I did drink too much last night."

Then he went to the bed where the girls lay. Finding the boys' caps on them, he said, "Ah, hah, my merry lads, here you are. Let us get to work." So saying, and without further ado, he cut all seven of his daughters' throats. Well pleased with what he had done, he went to bed again to his wife.

As soon as Little Thumb heard the ogre snore, he wakened his brothers and told them to put on their clothes immediately and to follow him. They stole softly down into the garden, and climbed over the wall. They kept running nearly the whole night, trembling all the while, and not knowing which way they were going.

The ogre, when he awoke, 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 how he intended that she should dress them, thinking that he had ordered her to go and put their clothes on them, she went up, and was horribly astonished when she saw her seven daughters with their throats cut and lying in their own blood.

She fainted away, for this is the first expedient almost all women find in such cases. The ogre, fearing his wife would be 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.

"What have I done?" he cried. "Those wretches shall soon pay for this!" He threw a pitcher of water on his wife's face, and, having brought her to herself, cried, "Bring me my seven-league boots at once, so that I can catch them."

He went out, and ran this way and that over a vast amount of ground. At last he came to the very road where the poor children were, and not more than a hundred paces from their father's house. They saw the ogre coming, who was stepping from mountain to mountain, and crossing over rivers as easily as if they were little streams. Little Thumb hid himself and his brothers in a nearby hollow rock, all the while keeping watch on the ogre.

The ogre was very tired from his long and fruitless journey (for seven-league boots are very tiring to wear), and decided to take a rest. By chance he sat on the rock where the little boys had hid themselves. He was so tired that he fell asleep, and began to snore so frightfully that the poor children were no less afraid of him than when he had held up his large knife and was about to cut their throats. However, Little Thumb was not as frightened as his brothers were, and told them that they immediately should run away towards home while the ogre was asleep so soundly, and that they should not worry about him. They took his advice, and soon reached home. Little Thumb came up to the ogre, pulled off his boots gently and put them on his own feet. The boots were very long and large, but because they were enchanted, they became big or little to fit the person who was wearing them. So

they fit his feet and legs as well as if they had been custom made for him. He immediately went 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. He has been captured 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 were holding their daggers to his throat he saw me, and begged me to come and tell you the condition he is in. You should give me everything he has of value, without keeping back anything at all, for otherwise they will kill him without mercy. Because his case is so very urgent, he lent me his boots (you see I have them on), that I might make the more haste and to show you that he himself has sent me to you."

The good woman, being sadly frightened, gave him all she had, for although this ogre ate up little children, he was a good husband. Thus Little Thumb got all the ogre's money. He returned with it to his father's house, where he was received with great joy.

There are many people who do not agree with this last detail. They claim that Little Thumb never robbed the ogre at all, that he only made off with the seven-league boots, and that with a good conscience, because the ogre's only use of them was to pursue little children. These folks affirm that they are quite sure of this, because they have often drunk and eaten at the woodcutter's house.

These people claim that after taking off the ogre's boots, Little Thumb went to court, where he learned that there was much concern about the outcome of a certain battle and the condition of a certain army, which was two hundred leagues off. They say that he went 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 could do so. Little Thumb was as good as his word, and returned that very same night with the news. This first feat brought him great fame, and he could then name his own price. Not only did the king pay him very well for carrying his orders to the army, but the ladies of the court paid him handsomely to bring them information about their lovers. Occasionally wives gave him letters for their husbands, but they paid so poorly, that he did not even bother to keep track of the money he made in this branch of his business.

After serving as a messenger for some time and thus acquiring great wealth, he went home to his father, where he was received with inexpressible joy. He made the whole family very comfortable, bought positions for his father and brothers, all the while handsomely looking after himself as well.