Hop o’ my Thumb

Once upon a time there lived a woodcutter and his wife, who had seven children, all of them boys. The eldest was only ten years old, the youngest only seven. You may find it surprising that the woodcutter had so many children in so short a time; but the fact is that his wife was a quick worker, and never produced fewer than two at once.

They were very poor, and the seven children were a great burden, since none of them was old enough to earn his living. What grieved them even more was that their youngest son was very delicate, and hardly ever spoke a word, which they took to show his stupidity, although it was a sign of intelligence. He was very small; when he was born he was hardly bigger than a man’s thumb, for which reason Hop o’ my Thumb was what he was called. The poor child was the family scapegoat and was always given the blame for everything. Despite this, he was the cleverest of all the brothers, and had the sharpest wits, and though he did not say much, he listened a lot.

There came a year when times were very hard,* and the shortage of food was so severe that the wretched couple resolved to get rid of their children. One night, after the children had gone to bed, while the woodcutter was sitting beside the fire with his wife, he said, with despair gripping his heart: ‘As you can see, we no longer have enough food for the children; I cannot bear to see them dying of hunger before my eyes, and I have decided to take them with me into the wood tomorrow and leave them there to get lost, which will be easy enough; for while they are occupied collecting sticks for firewood, all we will have to do is run away without letting them see.’
‘Alas!’ said the woodcutter’s wife, ‘how could you take your own children away in order to get rid of them?’ However many times her husband told her how poor they were, she could not agree to his plan: she was poor, but she was their mother. Nonetheless, after reflecting on the pain it would cause him to watch them dying of hunger, she did agree, and went to bed in tears.

Hop o’ my Thumb had overheard everything they said, because he could tell from his bed that they were discussing family business, and he had quietly got up and hidden under his father’s stool, so as to be able to listen without being seen. He went back to bed and stayed awake throughout the rest of the night, thinking of what he would have to do. He rose early and went down to the edge of a stream, where he filled his pockets with little white pebbles, and came back to the house.

They set off, and Hop o’ my Thumb kept quiet, saying nothing to his brothers of what he knew. They went into the deepest part of the forest, where none of them could see the others even from ten paces away. The woodcutter began cutting trees, and the children to gather twigs for making bundles of firewood. Their father and mother, seeing them busily at work, gradually went further away, and then suddenly ran off, along a hidden path.

When the children saw that they were alone, they started to cry and shout as loudly as they could. Hop o’ my Thumb let them cry, since he was certain that he would be able to find his way back to their house; while they had been walking along the path, he had dropped the little white pebbles he had in his pockets. He told them, therefore: ‘Brothers, never fear; our father and mother have left us here, but I will show you the way back to the house; just follow me.’ They followed him, and he led them towards the house by the same path that they had taken through the forest. They did not dare go in at once, but pressed themselves against the door to listen to what their parents were saying.

Hop o’ my Thumb leaves a trail of pebbles
Just at the time when the woodcutter and his wife were returning home, the lord of the manor had sent them ten silver crowns which had been owing to them for a long time, and which they had given up hope of ever seeing again. It saved their lives, for the wretched couple were dying of hunger. The woodcutter sent his wife out straight away to the butcher’s, and because it was a long time since they had had anything to eat she bought three times as much meat as she needed for supper for the two of them.

When they had eaten their fill, the woodcutter’s wife said: ‘Alas! where are our poor children now? All these leftovers would make a good meal for them. And, William, it was you who wanted to get them lost; I told you we would regret it. What will they be doing now in that forest? Alas and alack! perhaps they have already been eaten by the wolves! It is very cruel of you to abandon your children.’ The woodcutter eventually grew impatient, as she repeated a score of times that they would regret it and that she had told him so. If she did not hold her tongue, he said, he would give her a beating. Not that he himself was not upset, perhaps even more than his wife, but rather that she gave him no peace, and he resembled many other men in being very fond of women who speak well, while finding those who have always been right very troublesome.

The wife was all in tears, crying: ‘Alas! where are my children now, my poor children?’ Then once she said it so loudly that the children outside the door heard her, and started to shout all together: ‘Here we are! here we are!’ She ran quickly to let them in, and said, as she kissed them: ‘How happy I am to see you, my dear children! How tired you must be, and how hungry! Peter dear, you’re all covered in mud, come and let me clean you up.’ This Peter was her eldest son, whom she loved more than any of the others because his hair was reddish, and hers was as well. They all sat down to table, and ate with such an appetite that it did their parents’ hearts good to see them, and
the children all talked at once almost all the time as they told them how frightened they had been in the forest.

The good people were full of joy to see their children again, and their joy lasted as long as the silver crowns; but when the money ran out, they fell back into their former despair, and resolved to get the children lost once more, and to make sure of it by taking them much further away than the first time. But however much they tried to keep their plan a secret, Hop o’ my Thumb still heard them talking about it. He counted on being able to escape in the same way as before; but although he got up early so as to go and collect some little pebbles, he did not succeed, because he found that the door of the house had been double-locked. He could not think what to do, until the woodcutter’s wife gave them each a piece of bread for their breakfast, when it occurred to him that he could use breadcrumbs instead of pebbles, if he dropped them behind him along the paths where they would be going, and he put the bread away in his pocket.

Their father and mother led them into the thickest and darkest part of the forest, and as soon as they reached it they slipped away secretly along a side path, and left the children there. Hop o’ my Thumb was not too worried, since he believed that he could easily find his way by following the trail of breadcrumbs that he had dropped wherever they had passed; but he had a nasty surprise when he could not find a single crumb; the birds had come and eaten them all. So the children were very miserable; the further they walked the more they got lost, and the deeper they went into the forest. Night fell, and a great wind began blowing, which frightened them dreadfully. On every side they thought they could hear the noise of wolves howling, and coming closer to eat them. They hardly dared talk to each other or look round. It started to rain heavily, and they got soaked to the skin. At every step they slipped and fell into the mud, so that when they got up they were all dirty, not knowing how to get their hands clean.
Hop o’ my Thumb climbed up into a tree to see if he could make anything out. He looked around in every direction and saw a faint light which looked like a candle, but it was a long way off, outside the forest. He came down from the tree, and when he was on the ground he could no longer see anything. This alarmed him, but when he and his brothers had walked for some time towards the light he had seen, he saw it again as they came out from the wood. At last they reached the house where the candle was, but not without many a scare before they got there, because they had often lost sight of it, which happened whenever their path took them into a dip in the ground.

They knocked on the door and the housewife came to open it. She asked what they wanted; Hop o’ my Thumb said that they were poor children who had got lost in the forest, and asked her if she would let them sleep there, out of charity. Seeing what fine boys they were the woman started to cry, saying: ‘Alas! my poor lads, what have you done by coming here? Didn’t you know that this house belongs to an ogre who eats little children?’

‘Alas!’ answered Hop o’ my Thumb, trembling all over, like his brothers, ‘what shall we do? The wolves in the forest are bound to eat us tonight, if you will not give us shelter in your house. And in that case we would prefer the gentleman here to eat us; perhaps he will have pity on us if you would be kind enough to ask him.’

The Ogre’s wife, thinking that she could keep them hidden from her husband until the next morning, let them come in, and took them to get warm in front of a blazing fire; for there was a whole sheep roasting on the spit for the Ogre’s supper. As they were beginning to get warm, they heard someone knocking loudly on the door three or four times; it was the Ogre coming back. His wife immediately hid them under the bed, and went to open the door. The first thing the Ogre did was to ask whether his supper was ready and whether his wine had been drawn for

*The Ogre demands to know if his supper is ready*
him; then he at once sat down to table. The sheep was still red
with blood, but to him it seemed all the better for it. He sniffed
to right and left, saying that he could smell fresh meat. ‘It must
be that calf which I have dressed ready for cutting up that you
can smell,’ said his wife.

‘I can smell fresh meat, as I’ve told you already,’ retorted the
Ogre, looking crossly at his wife, ‘and there’s something going
on here that I don’t know about.’ And as he spoke he got up
from the table and went straight over to the bed. ‘Aha!’ he said,
‘so you have been playing tricks on me, have you! A curse on
you, woman! I don’t know why I don’t eat you too; it’s lucky
for you that you’re old and tough. But here’s some game that
will do nicely for three of my Ogre friends who should be
coming to see me some day soon.’

He pulled them out from under the bed one after the other.
The poor children knelt down and begged for mercy, but the
Ogre they had to deal with was the cruellest ogre of all, and far
from taking pity on them he was already devouring them with
his eyes, telling his wife that they would be tasty morsels when
she had made a good sauce to go with them. He went to fetch a
carving knife, and went across to the wretched children, sharp-
ening it as he did so on a long whetstone which he held in his left
hand. He had already taken hold of one of the boys when his
wife said: ‘What are you doing, at this hour of the night? Isn’t
there time enough tomorrow morning?’

‘Quiet,’ replied the Ogre, ‘the meat will taste better if it hangs
longer.’

‘You’ve already got plenty of meat hanging up,’ his wife
answered; ‘there’s a calf, two sheep, and half a pig!’

‘You’re right,’ said the Ogre; ‘give them a good supper, so
that they won’t get thin, and put them to bed.’ The good woman
was delighted, and brought them some supper, but they were
too frightened to eat anything. As for the Ogre, he went back to
his wine delighted to have such a good treat for his friends, and
drank twice as much as usual, which went to his head and made him go off to bed.

The Ogre had seven daughters, who were still children. These little ogresses had very fine complexions, because they ate fresh meat like their father, but they had small eyes, very round and grey, hooked noses, and very big mouths that had long sharp teeth with wide gaps in between. They were not yet really wicked, but showed great promise; already they would bite little children to suck their blood. They had been taken up to bed early, and all seven of them were lying in a wide bed, with golden crowns on their heads. Another bed just as wide was in the same room, and in this one the Ogre’s wife put the seven little boys for the night, after which she went to bed next to her husband.

Hop o’ my Thumb, who had noticed that the Ogre’s daughters had golden crowns on their heads, was afraid that the Ogre would feel remorse for not cutting the boys’ throats that same night, so he got up in the middle of the night and, taking the caps that he and his brothers were wearing, he put them very gently on the heads of the Ogre’s daughters, first removing their golden crowns, which he put on his own and his brothers’ heads, so that the Ogre might mistake them for his daughters, and his daughters for the boys whose throats he meant to cut.

It happened just as he thought; for the Ogre, waking up about midnight, was sorry that he had delayed until next day the business that he could have done the day before. He jumped quickly out of bed and took his carving knife, saying: ‘Let’s just see how my fine little lads are keeping; we’ll get it over and done with this time.’ He groped his way up to his daughters’ bedroom in the dark and went to the bed where the little boys were; they were all asleep, except for Hop o’ my Thumb, who was scared out of his wits when he felt the Ogre’s hand on his head, after he had tried the other brothers’ heads already. Having felt the golden crowns, the Ogre said to himself: ‘My word! I’d have
made a fine mess of things there. Obviously I drank too much last night.’

Then he went to his daughters’ bed, where he could feel the caps belonging to the little boys. ‘Aha! there they are,’ he said, ‘the fine fellows! let’s get to work.’ And with these words he set to without hesitation and cut the throats of all his seven daughters. And very pleased with himself for having settled the matter so quickly, he went back to bed beside his wife. As soon as Hop o’ my Thumb heard the Ogre snoring, he woke his brothers and told them to get dressed and follow him. They went quietly down to the garden and jumped over the wall. They ran almost all night, trembling all the time, and not knowing where they were going.

When the Ogre woke up, he told his wife: ‘Go upstairs and dress those lads from last night.’ The Ogress was very surprised by such kindness from her husband, not suspecting that he meant her to get them ready for cutting up;* she thought that he was telling her to put their clothes on. She went upstairs, and was completely taken by surprise to see her seven daughters with their throats cut and bathed in blood. The first thing she did was to faint (which is what almost all women resort to first in such circumstances). The Ogre, fearing that his wife would take too long over the task, went up to help, and was just as amazed as she had been when he saw the dreadful spectacle before him. ‘Ah! what have I done?’ he cried. ‘The little wretches!—I’ll soon pay them back for this.’ He threw a jugful of water in his wife’s face, and when she had recovered her senses he said: ‘Give me my seven-league boots so that I can go and catch them.’

He set off to track them down, and when he had run great distances in every direction, he finally came upon the children’s trail; they were no more than a stone’s throw from their father’s house. They could see the Ogre stepping from mountain to mountain; he crossed rivers as easily as if they were tiny streams.
Hop o’ my Thumb, seeing a hollow in a rock nearby, made his brothers hide in it, and squeezed in after them, watching all the time to see what had become of the Ogre.

The Ogre, who was very weary after having travelled all that way to no purpose (for seven-league boots are tiring for the person who wears them), decided to have a rest; by chance, he came to sit down on the rock where the boys were hiding. He was so exhausted that he could go no further, and after he had rested for a while he went to sleep, and began to snore so dreadfully that the poor children were just as frightened as when he had had his carving knife in his hand to cut their throats. Hop o’ my Thumb was not as frightened, and told his brothers that they must escape quickly and run into their house while the Ogre was fast asleep, and that they were not to worry about him. They did as he suggested and soon reached the house.

Hop o’ my Thumb went up to the Ogre and gently pulled his boots off; then he put them on himself. They were very big and very wide, but they were magic boots, and had the power of becoming larger or smaller to suit the legs of whoever put them on, so that they fitted Hop o’ my Thumb as closely as if they had been made for him. He went straight back to the Ogre’s house, where he found the wife in tears beside her daughters who had had their throats cut.

‘Your husband is in great danger,’ Hop o’ my Thumb told her; ‘for he has been captured by a gang of robbers, who have sworn to kill him unless he gives them all his gold and silver. Just when they were holding a knife to his throat, he saw me, and begged me to come and tell you of the danger he is in, and say that you are to give me everything he owns that is of value, and not to keep anything back, because otherwise they will kill him without mercy. The message was so urgent that he told me to take his seven-league boots, as you can see, so as to make haste, and also so that you will not think that I am an impostor.’ The good woman was very alarmed and immediately gave him
everything she had, for the Ogre was a very good husband to her, even though he ate small children. So Hop o’ my Thumb, laden with all the Ogre’s wealth, went back to his father’s house, where he was welcomed with great rejoicing.

Now there are many people who disagree about this last incident, and who claim that Hop o’ my Thumb never stole the Ogre’s money, although they admit that he had no scruples about taking his seven-league boots, because all they were ever used for was to chase small children. These people declare that their information comes from a reliable witness, since they have in fact been given food and drink in the woodcutter’s house. They affirm that, when Hop o’ my Thumb put on the Ogre’s boots, he went to the King’s court, knowing that they were very anxious there about an army that was two hundred leagues away, and wanted to know the outcome of a battle that had been fought. They say that he went to see the King, and told him that if he wished he would bring him news of the army before the day was out. The King promised him a large sum of money if he was successful. Hop o’ my Thumb brought the news that very evening, and having made himself well known by this first commission, he was able to earn as much as he wanted, for the King paid him handsomely to carry his commands to the army, and innumerable ladies gave him whatever he wanted in order to get news of their lovers, which brought him more money than anything else. There were some women who entrusted him with letters for their husbands, but they paid him so badly, and it amounted to so little, that he never bothered to count what he had earned in this way.

After he had been in business as a courier for a time, and had amassed great wealth, he went back home to his father’s house, where the rapturous welcome he received is beyond all imagining. He gave all his family enough for them to live in comfort, and established his father and brothers in official posts that had just been created;* in this way he started them all on their careers,
while improving his own position at Court in the best possible manner.

**THE MORAL OF THIS TALE**

If every son grows strong and tall,  
Well-mannered and well-liked by all,  
Then parents with large families are pleased;  
But when a son is silent, weak, and small,  
He’s likely to be bullied, mocked, and teased.  
But sometimes it’s the smallest who does best,  
And brings prosperity to all the rest.