

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Little Thumbling**

Once upon a time there was a poor basketmaker, and he and his wife had seven boys, each one smaller than the last, until the youngest one was little more at birth than the length of a finger; for this reason he was called Thumbling. It is true that he grew somewhat afterwards, but not really very much, and he kept the name of Thumbling. Yet he was a very clever and crafty little whippersnapper, and for shrewdness and adroitness he put all his brothers in the shade.

Things began to go very badly with the parents, for making baskets and plaiting straw is not such a lucrative profession as baking rolls or slaughtering calves; and when the times became unusually expensive, the basket-maker and his wife were worried to death about how to fill the bellies of their seven little mites, all of whom were blessed with extremely good appetites. So one evening when the children were in bed, both parents discussed what they were to do, and they decided to take the children with them into the forest where the willows grow whose withies are used for making baskets, and surreptitiously abandon them there. All this was heard by Thumbling, who was not asleep like his brothers, and he took careful note of his parents' evil resolve. He brooded all night long, unable to sleep a wink, over how he could go about helping himself and his brothers.

Early in the morning Thumbling ran to the stream, searched for white pebbles to fill his little pockets, and returned home. He did not breathe a word of what he had overheard to his brothers. Now the parents set out into the wood, telling the children to follow them; and Thumbling let one pebble after another fall onto the path without anyone noticing, for being the

youngest, smallest, and weakest, he always trotted along at the back. The parents had no idea what he was doing.

In the forest the parents secretly slipped away from the children – and suddenly they were not there. When the children realised this, they all as one raised a hullabaloo, except for Thumbling. Laughing, he said to his brothers, “Don’t bawl and howl so pitifully! We’ll find the way by ourselves, you’ll see.” And now Thumbling led the way instead of bringing up the rear, and using the white pebbles to guide his steps, he found the way back without any bother.



When the parents returned home, God blessed their house with money; an old debt on which they had given up hope was paid off to them by a neighbour, and now enough provisions were bought to make the table buckle. But this was followed by remorse at having abandoned the children, and the wife broke out into a wretched lament: “Oh dear God, dear God in Heaven! If only we hadn’t left the children in the forest! Oh, now they could

eat their bellyful, but wolves may already have them in their stomachs! Oh, if only our darling children were here!” – “Mother, we *are* here!” said little Thumbling, as calm as you please; he had just arrived at the door with his brothers and heard her lament. He opened the door and in toddled the little basketmakers – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. They had brought their hearty appetites back with them, and the cornucopia of food on the table was just what the doctor ordered. Great was the rejoicing, now that the children were back, and a merry life was lived as long as the money lasted, as is the habit of poor handicraftsmen.

It was not long at all before the cupboards in the basketmaker’s hut were bare again, and it was as well that they had no cellarer; and the resolution to abandon the children to their fate in the forest was awoken anew. As the plan was again discussed out loud as an evening conversation between father and mother, little Thumbling heard everything – the whole exchange, word for word – and laid it to heart.

On the next morning Thumbling wanted to slip out of the house once again to pick up pebbles, but alas! The door was bolted, and Thumbling was much too short to reach the bolt, so he thought of another way to help himself. When they were leaving for the forest, Thumbling put bread in his pockets; and he scattered crumbs on the path, thinking they would lead him back.

Everything came to pass as on the first occasion, only with the difference that Thumbling did not find the way home, for in the meantime birds had picked the path clean of crumbs. Now they were in a terrible pickle, and the brothers let out wails that would have melted a heart of stone. With these wails they made their faltering way through the wood until

it became pitch dark, and they were extremely afraid – except for Thumbling, who did not howl and felt no fear. The seven brothers slept on soft moss, shielded under the leafy canopy of a tree, and when day broke Thumbling climbed a tree to reconnoitre the area. At first he saw nothing but forest trees, but then he discovered the roof of a small house; and making a note of the direction, he slid down the tree and bravely walked ahead of his brothers. After many a struggle with thickets, thorns, and thistles, they all saw the house as it appeared through the bushes, and they cheerfully strode towards it before knocking very humbly at the door. Then a woman came out, and Thumbling asked her very nicely to let them in, for they had lost their way and knew not where to go. The woman said, “Oh, you poor children!” and she let Thumbling and his brothers come in, but she told them straight away that they were in the house of an ogre who particularly liked to devour little children. That was a pretty confidence to be told! When they heard this, the children trembled like aspen-leaves; they would dearly have liked to have something to eat, but now they were to be eaten instead. But the woman was kind and sympathetic, hiding the children and giving them a bite to eat as well. Shortly afterwards steps could be heard and there were loud knocks at the door; it was none other than the homecoming ogre. He sat down at the table for his meal, was served with wine, and sniffed as if he smelt something, then he cried to his wife: “I scent human flesh!” She tried to talk him out of this, but he followed his nose and found the children. They were well-nigh dead from terror. Already he was whetting his long knife to slaughter the children with, and it was only by degrees that he yielded to his wife’s pleas to let them live a little longer and fatten them up, for they were far too scrawny, especially little

Thumbling. So the evil man and child-eater was finally appeased. The



children were put to bed, and this was in the same bedroom where Ogre's seven daughters slept in another big bed. They were the same ages as the seven brothers and were very ugly of countenance, but each one wore a little golden crown on her head. Thumbling had noticed this, and slipping out of bed in all silence, he took his and his brothers' nightcaps and put them on the heads of Ogre's daughters, whose crowns he put on his own and his brothers' heads.

The Ogre drank a great deal of wine, and his evil inclination to murder the children coming over him again, he took his knife and stole into the bedroom where they were sleeping, intending to cut their throats. But it was pitch-dark in the chamber, and the Ogre lumbered blindly around until he bumped into a bed. Then he felt for the heads of those sleeping in it, and feeling the crowns, he said: "Hold it! These are your daughters. You drunken ass, you almost committed a hare-brained blunder!"

Now he groped for the other bed, felt the nightcaps there, and cut his

seven daughters' throats, one after the other. Then he went back to bed and slept off his inebriation. When Thumbling heard him snoring, he woke his brothers, they stole out of the house, and then they took to their heels. But however much they hurried, they had no idea where they were going, and they ran around in confusion, full of anxiety and dread, again and again.

When morning came, the Ogre awoke and spoke to his wife: "Go and prepare the tots, the ones from yesterday!" She thought she would be waking the children, and she went up to the bedroom full of fear for them. What a terrible shock for the woman when she saw what had happened! She fell at once into a swoon from the dreadful sight before her eyes. When the Ogre thought she was taking too long he went up himself, and there he saw what he had done. The rage he flew into was indescribable. Now he put on his Seven-League-Boots; these boots carried you a league if you took seven steps in them, which is no mean feat. It was not long before the seven brothers saw him in the distance, striding over hill and dale, to their great consternation; but Thumbling hid himself and them in the hollow of a large rock. When the Ogre came to this rock, he sat down on it to rest a little, for he had grown tired; and he soon fell asleep, and his snores sounded like the roaring of a tempest. While the Ogre slept and snored so, Thumbling sneaked out like a mouse from his hole and pulled off his League-Boots, then put them on himself. Fortunately, these boots had the property of fitting every foot to a T, as if tailor-made. Now he took one of his brothers with each hand, and the rest linked hands, and so they went – in the blink of an eye – back home with seven-league footsteps. There they were all made welcome, but Thumbling advised his parents to keep a careful eye on his

brothers, for he now wished to earn his livelihood himself with the help of the boots. The words were hardly out of his mouth when he took a step and was already far away; another step, and he stood on a mountain, over half a league away; another step, and he was lost to his parents' and brothers' sight.

After this, Thumbling made his fortune with his boots, and made many great and far journeys, and served many lords; and whenever a place was not to his liking he speedily moved on. No pursuer on foot nor on horseback could catch up with him, and the adventures he underwent, with the help of his boots, beggar all description.

