



The Little Thief

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Magic

There once was a time when wolves lived in the great forests of northern England, and winters were so cold you could walk across the frozen lakes. The bare branches of trees were lines of black against the falling snow. Snow collected on the thicker branches and was blown by freezing winds from every twig, to fall in slow, swirling patterns to the ground. In places the snow lay in deep drifts that rose higher than the tops of your boots. People stayed by their warm firesides, and need must be dire indeed that spurred anyone to undertake a winter journey. But it was such a journey, through such a wood as this, that Matilda must take.

Matilda was a child of ten years. She lived in a lonely village, hedged in its little valley of small fields by high peaks, except to one side where the wood grew. Her mother had left her some time ago in the care of a neighbor. The rich man who employed Hilde, Matilda's mother, had sold some of his land and dismissed many of the people who worked in his fields. Hilde knew she would find no work in that region, so she determined to travel to the far side of the wood, where there were many towns and villages. Surely, she hoped, she could find some work that would support her and her daughter!

But then a sad thought came to her. Though she had some money saved, it was not much. Certainly not enough to buy a horse or to pay for a bed and dinner at an inn. In her travels there would be nights when she had to sleep outside in woodland or field. There might be days when food could not be found or bought. How could she take her darling child with her and expose her to such hardship? But what else could she do? Though she had friends, they had little money themselves and children of their own to support.

At last she thought of old Bertha. The old woman lived at the edge of the village, in a tumbling-down shack that leaned against a rocky rise as if for support. She had once helped Bertha by patching her roof against the rain.

The old woman had seemed grateful. "If I can ever do anything for you, Hilde dear, just let me know," she had said. But still Hilde hesitated. Bertha was good and kind, she believed. But that didn't mean she wasn't a witch. She knew most of the villagers thought so.

But when she questioned her daughter, Matilda was happy to be left with Bertha. "If I really can't go with you, Mum," she said, "I'd rather stay with Bertha than anyone else. I'm sure she'll look after me well. She gave me my doll!"

This doll was made from rags roughly stitched together, but Matilda loved it. They were too poor for her to have many toys. This doll and a small wooden dog were all she had.

They went together to Bertha's home, taking their few possessions with them. As they came up the path a crow rose from the roof, cawing loudly. It was Bertha's pet, Tatterdemalion. "Hilde! Hilde! Hilde!" he croaked in greeting. Bertha came to the door.

Soon it was agreed that Bertha would take care of Matilda, while Hilde traveled to the far side of the wood to look for work. "But Hilde, you will need to let me know where you are, so I can bring Matilda to you," Bertha said. "Here, take Tatterdemalion with you. He can always find his way home. When you are settled, send him with a message."

But the months went by with no word from Hilde. Every morning and every evening Matilda went to the door and looked out over the forest. Several times she saw a flying crow, but never the one she was hoping to see. Until one cold grey winter dawn she saw a black shape swooping towards her and her heart filled with joy.

"Tatterdemalion! What news?" she called to the bird.

"Hilde sent me!" he croaked as Bertha hurried to the door. "Hilde has a new home. Matilda must come to Hilde. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

"I'm sure I don't know what the hurry is about," Bertha said. "I can't travel today, I'm much too tired."

For the past few days Bertha had been complaining of how tired she was.

“Tomorrow? Please?” Matilda said. She longed to see her mother again.

“Please, Bertha?”

“We’ll see,” Bertha said. “If I’m feeling better.”

The next morning Bertha was too tired even to get out of bed. Finally she dragged herself up to sit on her bed and drink the tea Matilda had made. “I’m getting old,” she complained to Matilda. “Too old for winter journeys. My old bones are aching.”

Matilda couldn’t help her tears. She wanted so much to go to her mother. “Could I go by myself?” she suggested.

Bertha questioned Tatterdemalion and found that Hilde’s new home was not far from the forest’s edge on the other side. “Perhaps you should go by yourself,” she said. “If you wait for me, you might be here all winter. Get your things ready.” She called to her bird. “Tatterdemalion! Go to Hilde and tell her Matilda is on her way. She should reach the other side of the forest in two days.”

Matilda packed up her doll and her toy dog and the only change of clothes she had, along with a thick blanket. Then she put on her warm coat with its fur-lined hood and went to say goodbye to Bertha, who had looked after her so well.

“I’ll miss you, Matilda,” the old woman said, kissing her. “Wait, I have something to help you on your journey.”

What could it be? Warm gloves would be useful, Matilda thought. But to her surprise, Bertha shuffled to her sewing-basket and took out three little china thimbles. They were painted each in a different color.

One was the green of a springtime leaf. “This will keep you in health and strength, so your journey will not wear you out,” Bertha said.

The second was the bright red of a poppy. “This will keep you warm despite the falling snow or icy wind, so the winter weather will not freeze you.”

The third was the rich yellow of an egg yolk or a sunflower petal. “This will keep the wolves away, and bring a

friend to you at time of need.”

Matilda took the three thimbles and some food Bertha gave her and set out for the forest. It began to snow; white flakes swirled in the east wind as if someone had torn a pillow filled with swan-feathers. There was a path through the woodland that she knew would lead her to the other side, if only it was not covered over by the falling snow. Matilda was determined to stay on the path if she could. The last thing she wanted was to get lost in the forest.

She reached the end of the snow-dusted fields and saw the trees grow thick and tall before her. Where the path entered the forest someone sat on the ground, leaning on an ancient oak. As she got closer she saw what kind of person it was.

Long white hair, dull and tangled, parted in front of a pale face with a pointed chin. The eyes were empty of expression and had very dark irises, almost black. The rest of the eye was red instead of white, as if the eyes had been painted on a glass that someone had filled with red wine. As Matilda came near the stranger tried to rise. Wings fluttered feebly at her back.

“Don’t be afraid, fairy,” Matilda said. “I won’t harm you.”

The fairy sank back to the ground. She leaned back against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. Matilda thought she might have been afraid herself if the fairy hadn’t appeared so weak.

As she passed the fairy those bloodshot eyes snapped open. “Child, you have something magical with you,” the fairy said in a faint voice. “Even in my weakened state I can sense it.”

Matilda paused. Should she tell the fairy about Bertha’s magic gifts, or was it best to keep them secret?

“I am dying,” the fairy told her. “Another night in this cold wet world will kill me. I must get to a door to fairyland where it is always summer, but there is no such door on this side of the wood. Now I have come to the end of my strength and can go no farther. Child, can you help me with your magic?”

Matilda thought about the three magic thimbles. Bertha had said the green thimble would keep her in health and strength. It might do the same for the fairy. She herself had never had any illness her short life apart from a slight cold. She would still have the red thimble to keep her warm and the yellow one to keep the wolves away.

She shouldn't even need the green thimble for herself. And the fairy would die without her help.

She took the green thimble out of her bag and gave it to the fairy. "Here, this magic thimble should bring back your health and strength."

"Thank you, child," the fairy said. As she took the thimble in her hand her wings fluttered and her face lost some of its frailty. "I will never forget your kindness." Her voice was already stronger.

Matilda left the fairy and continued on her way through the forest. The farther she went the closer together the trees grew and the less snow had filtered down onto the path. There was just enough light to see her way, though the path narrowed in places and thorny brambles looped across to catch at her skirts. She walked briskly, hoping to get as far as she could before the early midwinter sunset.

When it was almost dark, she moved a little way off the path and settled under the trees, tucked between wild shrubs and wrapped in her blanket. She ate some of the food Bertha had given her, and used the red thimble to melt a cupful of snow. Then she lay down and pulled the blanket up over her ears. With the red thimble clutched in her hand, she didn't feel the icy wind. Walking all day had made her tired and soon she was asleep.

A while later Matilda opened her eyes to find herself in complete darkness. She heard rustling noises close by. Then came the howl of a wolf. She shuddered, drawing her legs up to make herself small under the blanket. She felt in her bag with nervous hands until she found the yellow thimble. Another howl broke the silence of the forest. She waited, trembling. The howls came again but this time from farther away. The wolf pack was moving on, but it was some time before she could get back to sleep.

She woke to the dawn call of small birds – tu tu tweet, tu tu tweet! As soon as she'd eaten she packed her blanket, strapped her bag to her back and continued on her way. She wanted to walk as far as she could before the winter darkness fell once more.

When she had walked a long way, she saw someone standing on the path. It was a child – a small boy about six years old. As soon as he saw Matilda he gave her a look of alarm and ran off the path under the trees.

"Don't be afraid!" she called to him. "I won't hurt you. My name's Matilda."

The little boy peeked out at her from behind a tree. He took a hesitant step towards her. "Have you got any

food?” he asked, his voice not much louder than a whisper.

Matilda sat down by the path and took some bread and a little cheese from her bag. “Come on,” she said. “You can share this with me.”

“I’m John,” the boy said, sitting next to her. They ate the bread and cheese, John tearing the bread into pieces and cramming it into his mouth.

“You haven’t eaten at all today, have you?” Matilda said to him. “Are your parents very poor?”

“It’s just my father,” the boy said. “He went away days ago and never came back. I was so hungry! And it was cold, and the wolves howled all night.”

“I heard them last night. Weren’t you frightened?”

John nodded. “Will you stay with me and look after me?”

“I can’t,” Matilda replied, though with a pang of pity for the child. “I have to go to my mother, she’s waiting for me.” Was there anything she could do for this lonely child? She rummaged in her bag and took out her wooden dog. She gave the toy one last regretful look. “Here, John, you can have this. I’m too big to play with it anyway.”

John hugged the dog close to him. “I wish you could stay with me.” He spotted something that had fallen from her bag and reached for it. “Can I have that too?”

It was the red china thimble. Matilda caught his hand before he could pick it up.

“No, John, I need that for my journey,” she said. “It’s a magic thimble that keeps me warm when I have to sleep outside. You have a home to sleep in, don’t you?”

“We have a cabin not far from here. But without my father to chop wood for the fire, it’s so cold at night!”

“At least you’re not out in the snow,” Matilda replied as she let go his hand.

At once John snatched up the red thimble and ran into the trees, thimble in one hand and toy dog in the other. Matilda followed, but John could squeeze through gaps in the thickets which were too small for her. Soon she had lost sight of him.

She stopped. The wood was silent. Should she go farther in to look for John, or continue on her journey? She decided she couldn't risk getting lost. She would go back to the path while she could still find the way.

It wasn't long before sunset came and she was unable to see the path before her. She sat down between two wide tree trunks, shivering in the dark, blanket wrapped round her, and ate a little more bread and cheese. There was not much left, but she hoped to reach the other side of the forest the next day. Then with luck it would not be long before she found her mother. The thought that tomorrow night she might be sitting by Hilde's warm fire was the only thing that made the darkness and cold bearable.

After eating she lay down, but it was so cold she could not sleep. Her blanket could not keep out the icy east wind. A few flakes of snow fell down between the trees, then more followed. A flurry blew down on her from a branch above. She began to fear that she would wake at dawn to find herself buried in snow.

If only that little thief John had not taken her red thimble! She remembered how warm she had been the night before. Even the green thimble would be of use, preserving her health and strength for tomorrow's walk, however wet and cold she might get. At least she had the yellow one to keep the wolves away, if wolves dared leave their dens on a night like this. The yellow thimble would also bring her a friend in need, but what use was that to her, here in the forest? She only knew two people here; the fairy and the little thief.

She thought she saw a faint light in the distance, a glimmer between the trees. Yes, there it was again. A silver shining, coming nearer, following the path towards her.

As it came closer she could make out a shape in the shining, and when it was almost up to her she recognized the fairy. She was so changed! Silver gleams lit up the fairy's long smooth hair, her pale skin glowed and the whites of her eyes shone like pearls.

“Fairy!” Matilda called. “I see my green thimble has worked for you, and I am glad of it. Please may I have it back now? I’m not sure I could survive this freezing night without it.”

“You are a child of this world,” the fairy answered. “I have more need of its magic than you. You are built to live through these harsh winters, while I am not. If I had not fallen in love with a human man, I would have been back in fairyland before the first snow fell. Like a fool I stayed too long and almost died. I still must travel a night and a day before I reach the door to fairyland, so I cannot give the charm to you.”

Matilda began to plead for the thimble, but the fairy was no longer listening. Her shining form moved on down the path, the only bright thing in the darkness under the trees.

Tears came to Matilda’s eyes. Seeing the fairy had given her hope, but hope had soon been snatched away.

What was that she heard? Someone running through the trees?

John burst out of the darkness onto the path. “Come back!” he shouted at the fairy’s disappearing form. “Don’t leave me again!”

“John, that wasn’t your father,” Matilda said. “I’m sorry.”

“I saw a light, and I thought...” John began to cry.

Matilda got up and put her arms round him. “You’d better go home,” she said. “If your father does come back, that’s where he’ll expect to find you.”

“Matilda, please come with me,” John begged. “I’m sorry I took that red thing. I’ll give it back. Only please don’t leave me alone tonight. I’m so scared of the wolves!”

“I’ll stay with you, just for one night,” Matilda agreed. “I’ve got another charm that will keep the wolves away.” Though she would be careful not to show John the yellow thimble.

It was not far to the cabin where John lived. Four walls and a roof, Matilda thought. What a difference they made. Now she was sheltered from freezing wind and falling snow. They huddled together under all the blankets they had, the red thimble between them.

“I feel safe now,” John whispered.

At dawn the next morning Matilda got up and looked round the cabin. There was a man’s shirt that looked almost new, and a well-made axe. If John’s father had planned to be away for some time, wouldn’t he have taken these things with him? Perhaps a wolf had got him.

She woke John. “I have to leave now,” she said. “You could come with me. We’ll go to my mother’s new home. Perhaps someone in her village might have seen your father.”

“I don’t want to spend another night on my own here,” John said.

They left together and soon were back on the path. John couldn’t walk as fast as Matilda and she soon got impatient.

“John, you’ll have to go faster. I want to find my mother today! Can’t you run?”

So John ran till he got tired, then walked for a bit, then ran again. It wasn’t long before they reached the edge of the forest and saw the empty white of snow-covered fields stretching out ahead of them. A single crow circled overhead.

“Tatterdemalion!” Matilda called and the bird glided down to land on the snow in front of their feet.

“Matilda!” he croaked. “I’ve come to lead you to your mother.”

Matilda and John followed the crow until they came to a stile at the edge of a field. They could see some workers at the far side. They climbed over the stile as Tatterdemalion flew ahead. One of the workers looked up and saw the crow, then started to run towards them.

“Mother!” Matilda called as she almost stumbled in her haste. They met and their arms went round each other.

“Matilda, my sweetest. I worried so much. But here you are!” Hilde saw John coming shyly up to them. “But

who is this child?"

"The farmer I work for now is a good, kind man," Hilde said. "A few days ago a man fell through thin ice. They pulled him out but he took ill with a fever. He's in bed at the farmer's house now. John, shall we go there and see if he is your missing father?"

They went to the farmer's house, Tatterdemalion circling above. The farmer's wife opened the door and let them into the kitchen. Hilde asked her for news of the invalid.

"He's so much better this morning, he wants to go home. I don't think he's well enough yet, I'm trying to persuade him to stay another night with us."

A pale thin man came into the kitchen. "John! How did you get here?" he said in amazement. John ran to him and the man scooped him up and clutched him tight.

Matilda stayed with the farmer's wife, John and his father while her mother finished her day's work. Then Hilde took Matilda to their new home. Soon Hilde had a fire going. There was food and comfort. Hilde had made a perch for Tatterdemalion.

"I suppose you'll want to get back to Bertha," Matilda said to the crow.

"Tomorrow I go," he agreed.

"Take these for her. I don't need them anymore," Matilda said. She made a tiny bag out of a scrap of cloth and put the red and yellow china thimbles inside. Before he flew away, she would tie the bag around the crow's neck. "I hope she's not lonely without me. Perhaps the yellow thimble will bring her a friend."

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