

The True History Of Sir Thomas Thumb

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At the court of great King Arthur, who lived, as all know, when knights were bold, and ladies were fair indeed, one of the most renowned of men was the wizard Merlin. Never before or since was there such another. All that was to be known of wizardry he knew, and his advice was ever good and kindly.

Now once when he was travelling in the guise of a beggar, he chanced upon an honest ploughman and his wife who, giving him a hearty welcome, supplied him, cheerfully, with a big wooden bowl of fresh milk and some coarse brown bread on a wooden platter. Still, though both they and the little cottage where they dwelt were neat and tidy, Merlin noticed that neither the husband nor the wife seemed happy; and when he asked the cause they said it was because they had no children.

“Had I but a son, no matter if he were no bigger than my goodman’s thumb,” said the poor woman, “we should be quite content.”

Now this idea of a boy no bigger than a man’s thumb so tickled Wizard Merlin’s fancy that he promised straight away that such a son should come in due time to bring the good couple content. This done, he went off at once to pay a visit to the Queen of the Fairies, since he felt that the little people would best be able to carry out his promise. And, sure enough, the droll fancy of a mannikin no bigger than his father’s thumb tickled the Fairy Queen also, and she set about the task at once.

So behold the ploughman and his wife as happy as King and Queen over the tiniest of tiny babies; and all the happier because the Fairy Queen, anxious to see the little fellow, flew in at the window, bringing with her clothes fit for the wee mannikin to wear.

An oak-leaf hat he had for his crown;

His jacket was woven of thistle-down.

His shirt was a web by spiders spun;

His breeches of softest feathers were done.

His stockings of red-apple rind were tyne

With an eyelash plucked from his mother’s eyne.

His shoes were made of a mouse's skin,

Tanned with the soft furry hair within.

Dressed in this guise he looked the prettiest little fellow ever seen, and the Fairy Queen kissed him over and over again, and gave him the name of Tom Thumb.

Now as he grew older—though, mind you, he never grew bigger—he was so full of antics and tricks that he was for ever getting into trouble. Once his mother was making a batter pudding, and Tom, wanting to see how it was made, climbed up to the edge of the bowl. His mother was so busy beating the batter that she didn't notice him; and when his foot slipped, and he plumped head and ears into the bowl, she just went on beating until the batter was light enough. Then she put it into the pudding-cloth and set it on the fire to boil.

Now the batter had so filled poor Tom's mouth that he couldn't cry; but no sooner did he feel the hot water than he began to struggle and kick so much that the pudding bobbed up and down, and jumped about in such strange fashion that the ploughman's wife thought it was bewitched, and in a great fright flung it to the door.

Here a poor tinker passing by picked it up and put it in his wallet. But by this time Tom had got his mouth clear of the batter, and he began holloaing, and making such a to-do, that the tinker, even more frightened than Tom's mother had been, threw the pudding in the road, and ran away as fast as he could run. Luckily for Tom, this second fall broke the pudding string and he was able to creep out, all covered with half-cooked batter, and make his way home, where his mother, distressed to see her little dear in such a woeful state, put him into a teacup of water to clean him, and then tucked him up in bed.

Another time Tom's mother went to milk her red cow in the meadow and took Tom with her, for she was ever afraid lest he should fall into mischief when left alone. Now the wind was high, and fearful lest he should be blown away, she tied him to a thistle-head with one of her own long hairs, and then began to milk. But the red cow, nosing about for something to do while she was being milked, as all cows will, spied Tom's oak-leaf hat, and thinking it looked good, curled its tongue round the thistle-stalk and—

There was Tom dodging the cow's teeth, and roaring as loud as he could:

“Mother! Mother! Help! Help!”

“Lawks-a-mercy-me,” cried his mother, “where's the child got to now? Where are you, you bad boy?”

“Here!” roared Tom, “in the red cow’s mouth!”

With that his mother began to weep and wail, not knowing what else to do; and Tom, hearing her, roared louder than ever. Whereat the red cow, alarmed—and no wonder!—at the dreadful noise in her throat, opened her mouth, and Tom dropped out, luckily into his mother’s apron; otherwise he would have been badly hurt falling so far.

Adventures like these were not Tom’s fault. He could not help being so small, but he got into dreadful trouble once for which he was entirely to blame. This is what happened. He loved playing cherry-stones with the big boys, and when he had lost all his own he would creep unbeknownst into the other players’ pockets or bags, and make off with cherry-stones enough and galore to carry on the game!

Now one day it so happened that one of the boys saw Master Tom on the point of coming out of a bag with a whole fistful of cherry-stones. So he just drew the string of the bag tight.

“Ha! ha! Mr. Thomas Thumb,” says he jeeringly, “so you were going to pinch my cherry-stones, were you? Well! you shall have more of them than you like.” And with that he gave the cherry-stone bag such a hearty shake that all Tom’s body and legs were sadly bruised black and blue; nor was he let out till he had promised never to steal cherry-stones again.

So the years passed, and when Tom was a lad, still no bigger than a thumb, his father thought he might begin to make himself useful. So he made him a whip out of a barley straw, and set him to drive the cattle home. But Tom, in trying to climb a furrow’s ridge—which to him, of course, was a steep hill—slipped down and lay half stunned, so that a raven, happening to fly over, thought he was a frog, and picked him up intending to eat him. Not relishing the morsel, however, the bird dropped him above the battlements of a big castle that stood close to the sea. Now the castle belonged to one Grumbo, an ill-tempered giant who happened to be taking the air on the roof of his tower. And when Tom dropped on his bald pate the giant put up his great hand to catch what he thought was an impudent fly, and finding something that smelt man’s meat, he just swallowed the little fellow as he would have swallowed a pill!

He began, however, to repent very soon, for Tom kicked and struggled in the giant’s inside as he had done in the red cow’s throat until the giant felt quite squeamish, and finally got rid of Tom by being sick over the battlements into the sea.

And here, doubtless, would have been Tom Thumb’s end by drowning, had not a big fish, thinking that he was a shrimp, rushed at him and gulped him down!

Now by good chance some fishermen were standing by with their nets, and when they drew

them in, the fish that had swallowed Tom was one of the haul. Being a very fine fish it was sent to the Court kitchen, where, when the fish was opened, out popped Tom on the dresser, as spry as spry, to the astonishment of the cook and the scullions! Never had such a mite of a man been seen, while his quips and pranks kept the whole buttery in roars of laughter. What is more, he soon became the favourite of the whole Court, and when the King went out a-riding Tom sat in the Royal waistcoat pocket ready to amuse Royalty and the Knights of the Round Table.

After a while, however, Tom wearied to see his parents again; so the King gave him leave to go home and take with him as much money as he could carry. Tom therefore chose a threepenny bit, and putting it into a purse made of a water bubble, lifted it with difficulty on to his back, and trudged away to his father's house, which was some half a mile distant.

It took him two days and two nights to cover the ground, and he was fair outwearied by his heavy burden ere he reached home. However, his mother put him to rest in a walnut shell by the fire and gave him a whole hazel nut to eat; which, sad to say, disagreed with him dreadfully. However, he recovered in some measure, but had grown so thin and light that to save him the trouble of walking back to the Court, his mother tied him to a dandelion-clock, and as there was a high wind, away he went as if on wings. Unfortunately, however, just as he was flying low in order to alight, the Court cook, an ill-natured fellow, was coming across the palace yard with a bowl of hot furmenty for the King's supper. Now Tom was unskilled in the handling of dandelion horses, so what should happen but that he rode straight into the furmenty, spilt the half of it, and splashed the other half, scalding hot, into the cook's face.

He was in a fine rage, and going straight to King Arthur said that Tom, at his old antics, had done it on purpose.

Now the King's favourite dish was hot furmenty; so he also fell into a fine rage and ordered Tom to be tried for high treason. He was therefore imprisoned in a mouse-trap, where he remained for several days tormented by a cat, who, thinking him some new kind of mouse, spent its time in sparring at him through the bars. At the end of a week, however, King Arthur, having recovered the loss of the furmenty, sent for Tom and once more received him into favour. After this Tom's life was happy and successful. He became so renowned for his dexterity and wonderful activity, that he was knighted, by the King under the name of Sir Thomas Thumb, and as his clothes, what with the batter and the furmenty, to say nothing of the insides of giants and fishes, had become somewhat shabby, His Majesty ordered him a new suit of clothes fit for a mounted knight to wear. He also gave him a beautiful prancing grey mouse as a charger.

It was certainly very diverting to see Tom dressed up to the nines, and as proud as Punch.

Of butterflies' wings his shirt was made,

His boots of chicken hide,

And by a nimble fairy blade,

All learned in the tailoring trade,

His coat was well supplied.

A needle dangled at his side,

And thus attired in stately pride

A dapper mouse he used to ride.

In truth the King and all the Knights of the Round Table were ready to expire with laughter at Tom on his fine curveting steed.

But one day, as the hunt was passing a farm-house, a big cat, lurking about, made one spring and carried both Tom and the mouse up a tree. Nothing daunted, Tom boldly drew his needle sword and attacked the enemy with such fierceness that she let her prey fall. Luckily one of the nobles caught the little fellow in his cap, otherwise he must have been killed by the fall. As it was he became very ill, and the doctor almost despaired of his life. However, his friend and guardian, the Queen of the Fairies, arrived in a chariot drawn by flying mice, and then and there carried Tom back with her to Fairyland, where, amongst folk of his own size, he, after a time, recovered. But time runs swiftly in Fairyland, and when Tom Thumb returned to Court he was surprised to find that his father and mother and nearly all his old friends were dead, and that King Thunstone reigned in King Arthur's place. So every one was astonished at his size, and carried him as a curiosity to the Audience Hall.

"Who art thou, mannikin?" asked King Thunstone. "Whence dost come? And where dost live?"

To which Tom replied with a bow:

"My name is well known.

From the Fairies I come.

When King Arthur shone,

This Court was my home.

By him I was knighted,

In me he delighted

—Your servant—Sir Thomas Thumb.”

This address so pleased His Majesty that he ordered a little golden chair to be made, so that Tom might sit beside him at table. Also a little palace of gold, but a span high, with doors a bare inch wide, in which the little fellow might take his ease.

Now King Thunstone’s Queen was a very jealous woman, and could not bear to see such honours showered on the little fellow; so she up and told the King all sorts of bad tales about his favourite; amongst others, that he had been saucy and rude to her.

Whereupon the King sent for Tom; but forewarned is forearmed, and knowing by bitter experience the danger of royal displeasure, Tom hid himself in an empty snail-shell, where he lay till he was nigh starved. Then seeing a fine large butterfly on a dandelion close by, he climbed up and managed to get astride it. No sooner had he gained his seat than the butterfly was off, hovering from tree to tree, from flower to flower.

At last the royal gardener saw it and gave chase, then the nobles joined in the hunt, even the King himself, and finally the Queen, who forgot her anger in the merriment. Hither and thither they ran, trying in vain to catch the pair, and almost expiring with laughter, until poor Tom, dizzy with so much fluttering, and doubling, and flittering, fell from his seat into a watering-pot, where he was nearly drowned.

So they all agreed he must be forgiven, because he had afforded them so much amusement.

Thus Tom was once more in favour; but he did not live long to enjoy his good luck, for a spider one day attacked him, and though he fought well, the creature’s poisonous breath proved too much for him; he fell dead on the ground where he stood, and the spider soon sucked every drop of his blood.

Thus ended Sir Thomas Thumb; but the King and the Court were so sorry at the loss of their little favourite that they went into mourning for him. And they put a fine white marble monument over his grave whereon was carven the following epitaph:

Here lyes Tom Thumb, King Arthur’s Knight,

Who died by a spider's fell despite.
He was well known in Arthur's Court,
Where he afforded gallant sport.
He rode at tilt and tournament,
And on a mouse a-hunting went.
Alive he filled the Court with mirth,
His death to sadness must give birth.
So wipe your eyes and shake your head,
And say, "Alas, Tom Thumb is dead!"

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