

Peterkin

The Little Boy Who Grew Small

Once upon a time in a land far away there lived an old woodcutter and his wife in a cottage at the edge of a dark forest. And every day when they went out to cut wood, he would say, "How nice if we had a son to help us cut the wood and to take care of us when we are old."

One day they went deeper into the forest than ever before, until suddenly they came into a small clearing among the

trees and saw a crooked little house, and they stood there behind a shrub looking at it amazed. After a long, long time an ugly old woman came out of the house, looked around and sniffed the air and cried, "Somebody's in my clearing! Somebody's in my clearing!"

Then the wife stepped forward and said, "Dear lady, we didn't come to do you any harm. We just wanted to..."

And the old woman screamed, "Get out of my clearing! Get out of my clearing!"

The wife spoke again, "But we didn't mean any harm."

And the old woman said, "Well what do you want then? Everybody who comes here wants something. Tell me what you want, and I'll see that you get it. But then

you must go, and if you ever come again, it will go hard with you.”

The wife thought for a moment, then said, “If it please the Madame, I would like to have a son, a strong healthy son to help us cut wood and to be a comfort to us when we are old.”

Then the old woman laughed and laughed and said, “Ah, Ha, Ha, Ha! You’ll have a son all right, and you’ll see how he grows up fine and big and strong and helps you cut the wood.” And as she went back inside the house and slammed the door, the trees echoed with her laughing.

Then, since there was nothing more to do there, the woodcutter and his wife returned home and said nothing more about the happening until one morning a few weeks later the wife felt new life stir-

ring within her and said, "Now we are going to have our son."

So they waited out the happy time, until one day they had a beautiful bouncy baby boy. And since they were devout people and expected their boy to grow great in strength and character, they named him Peter.

The woodcutter built a rocking bed, made it big for the boy to grow into, so that he wouldn't have to make a new bed too soon. And the wife made some clothes big enough for him to grow into, and they fed him and bathed him, and took care of him and waited for him to grow.

But as the days went by, he grew smaller and smaller. Every morning when the woodcutter and his wife woke up, they went first to look at their little son, and

every morning he seemed to be a little smaller than he was the day before. His face and arms and legs grew older day by day, but the older they grew, the smaller they became, until he grew so small they could hold him in their hands like a mouse. Then they saw that Peter was not a name for one so small and called him Peterkin instead.

Though they loved their little son, they were sad because he was too small to ever cut wood. Still, the woodcutter made a tiny axe and a tiny saw and a tiny little knife. And he made a tiny wagon so small that a marble would fill it up completely. And Peterkin loved his toys and made a little world all for himself with tiny tables and chairs and cupboards, and he hid it under the closet where he could go to for-

get he was so small. But Peterkin loved his little wagon most of all, and if it didn't get stuck in the cracks of the wooden floor, he had great fun pulling it around the cottage.

One day when his father let him play outside by the woodpile, Peterkin found a marble almost buried in the sand. And he scratched and dug until he pulled it free, then carried it in his arms to his wagon. It was clear as the singing brook and redder than the setting sun, and it sparkled in the sunlight like the eyes of a happy maiden and glowed warm in the night like a softly burning ember. And every day he sat and looked at his bright red marble and wondered at its beauty.

From that day on he carried nothing else in his wagon, and his eyes gazed often into the marble's glow and found there a

strange promise that he could not understand.

Soon he was twelve years old, and the woodcutter said to his wife, "What shall we do with our Peterkin?" He's no good for cutting wood, but he must be good for something in the world. He's a fine little boy, but unless he learns a trade, he will need someone to take care of him when we grow old. We must send him somewhere where he can earn his keep."

The next morning with a heavy heart the woodcutter picked Peterkin up, held him in the palm of his hand, and told him it was time that he should go out into the world and learn to earn his keep. Then he put his little son in his shirt pocket and prepared to start out for the village, but not before Peterkin insisted that they take his

wagon and his marble, too. Then the three were off to the village, where they went looking to see who would take their son for an apprentice.

But everyone laughed when they saw the little boy and said, "What could he ever do?"

They took him first to the shoemaker, and the shoemaker said, "Oh, I could never use anybody that small. Why, his arm would catch in the eye of the needle." Then they went to the baker, and the baker said, "Oh, I could never use anybody that small, he would surely fall into the batter and go into the oven with the cakes."

And so they went from shop to shop, and from store to store throughout the whole village without any success until finally they came to the clock maker's

shop. There they knocked on the door expecting as bad words as before, but making their hopes as good as they could, they said, "O, Mr. Clockmaker, we have a little son here who needs to learn a trade, and we can find no one to take him for an apprentice because he is so small."

The clockmaker looked at the tiny boy standing in his father's shirt pocket and said, "Come here little fellow. Let's see what you can do. Now if you can keep your arms out of the gears, you might be able to help me." And carefully he picked up the boy with his fingers and set him down on the table among the gears and screws and said, "Now let's see you hold these little screws. They are much too small for me. We'll soon see if you can help me." And Peterkin reached down with

both arms, picked up up a tiny screw, placed it in its hole, and held it while the clockmaker tightened it in place.

Then the clockmaker said, I think I can use a little man like that to help me." So he took Peterkin and taught him how to make clocks, and they worked together very well.

The clockmaker made a little ladder of string and tinder so Peterkin could climb down from the table to the floor, and he built a special little door in the front door of his shop, too small for the cats to go through, but just right for the little boy.

Peterkin loved to go into mouse holes to find what the mice had stolen from the clock maker, and he brought back many screws and gears and other pieces and parts, and the clockmaker was happy that

the mice could not hide things from him any more.

But most of all Peterkin loved to go out under the stoop to watch the huge people walk by in the street. And always he took with him his precious red marble in his wagon because it filled him with a glow of love and happiness.

One day he went walking outside the shop after a rain. The puddles were like great lakes to him, and he loved to watch the giant waves made by the sloshing of the people's boots. Then of a sudden he heard a strange sound, and he turned around to see a frog, as tall as he, but oh so wide, squatting and smiling at him. He stood and watched for a moment, then said, "Mr. Frog, you look like a good fellow. I think we could be friends." And so

he sat down beside the frog, and just sat there a long time, and neither said another word as they sat there together watching the rain splitter splatter on the cobblestones.

All at once Peterkin heard a gasp and a rattle, and he looked and saw a little beetle trying to crawl from one wet cobblestone to another, getting all wet and looking terribly uncomfortable in the rain. He just got part way down into the crack between two cobbles when a giant boot sloshed in the nearest puddle, and a wall of water came rushing through the crack so high that he almost drowned.

Peterkin ran out into the rain, picked up the beetle with both arms, and carried him to his wagon where he could sit on the red marble to dry. Then he went back and

sat down again silent by the frog for a long time.

Finally the frog took a sad breath and made a huge sigh, then in a deep and wonderful voice he said, "How little do we know what powers lie in our hands." A long silence of great sorrow hung around them both, though Peterkin didn't know whence it came, or why. Finally the frog sighed again, as if a great agony boiled up in his soul, then he said, "If you do now exactly as I tell you, you will bring happiness to us both."

Peterkin said an earnest Yes with his heart, though not a word escaped his lips, until the frog continued. "Tonight between the going of the sun and the coming of the moon you must take your carbuncle in your arms and follow the North Star

until you come to the Linden tree at the end of the village. Behind the tree you will find a small path all grown over with briar and bramble that would be impossible for anyone to pass there except he were as small as you. No one has walked on it for many a year, but you can find the way if you have the will. Run all the night through as fast as you can, and let nothing stop you or slow you and let no one see you going or coming back. Before the sun rises you will find where a clear brook runs under an old oak tree, and beside the tree there will be a little piece of ground that looks ready for seed. Plant there your carbuncle and water it carefully from the brook. As the day begins to warm, a plant will grow. Watch it until the fruit is ripe, then pick it and carry it back here to me under the light

of the moon, and be sure to arrive here before the sun shines again.”

And so Peterkin ran through the night as fast as he could, and the brambles and thorns tried to hook him on every side, and above his head was completely overgrown with thorn and thicket, so that a regular person would never imagine there had ever been a path in that place. But he ran like a brook and the carbuncle in his arms made a fine rosy light for his feet.

As the sun began to glow behind the mountain, he found the oak tree and the clearing and the clear brook, just as the frog had said, and there was the little piece of ground, hardly big enough for a mouse to sit on, waiting for his seed. Carefully he planted the carbuncle just as the frog had told him, and carefully he watered it, and

within a few minutes leaves rose through the earth, and in a few more minutes a vine climbed higher than his head. Then leaves grew out full and made a great shade of foliage. In an hour there sprouted a bud, and before noon a fragrant white flower bloomed. By mid-afternoon the flower was a tiny green fruit that grew and swelled, until as the sun began to lower, the fruit began turning red, and as the sun struck the edge of the mountain with red fire, it was not nearly as red and bright as the fruit had grown. Peterkin gazed in wonder as he saw how the fruit glistened and sparkled with red fire. Even his beloved marble was not any brighter or redder.

Then carefully he picked the fruit and ran back through the night the way he had

come, and with the blanching of the stars he arrived back in the village, tired and thirsty and lame and sore, but with the fruit perfect and whole in his arms. And the frog met him under the stair and smiled and said, "Now you have made our fortune this day. Now you will see a great wonder."

So the frog led Peterkin through a dark curtain under the stair and into a rich little room lighted by the most fragrant candles. There he saw a fine oaken table and fine silk curtains on the wall and mirrors and tapestries of furious battles with horses and knights in armor, and there were gold and silver cups so tiny to hold just a drop of tea and tiny golden knives and spoons to hold just a crumb of bread,

and the fine oaken table was as high as a mouse's chin.

Then the frog bade him sit at the oaken table, and took a golden knife and cut the fruit in halves, and passed one half across the table to Peterkin and said, "Now let us feast, for today our fortune is in our hands."

And as they began to eat, a great happiness flowed over Peterkin, and he thought no fruit ever tasted so fine in all the world, and he felt great changes stirring within him, but he didn't know what they were. As he looked around the room, it seemed that everything was changing but still staying the same. He turned to ask the frog what was the meaning of all this, but instead of a frog he saw a beautiful young king, or at least a prince, the same

size as himself, and the prince smiled at him and pointed to the window and said, "Now look what you have done for us, my friend."

Peterkin looked out the window and saw that he was in a high tower looking down over the village where he lived and worked, and the tower was part of a great castle with heavy iron gates and many towers and gardens and fountains, and beyond the village were green meadows and farms and rolling fields of ripening grain stretching to the edge of the sky. And he looked at himself and saw he was no longer small, but a full grown man, and the the oaken table and the golden cups and the tapestries had grown with him.

Then with a question on his tongue he turned to the prince, but the words

would not come. And the prince read the question in his eyes and said, "My friend, because you loved and because you carried kindness in your heart and because you followed your promise, you have released us both from the spell of that witch of the forest who stole my kingdom. I am the king of all this you see, and you will be my Prime Minister."

And so the prince and his friend lived forever in peace and happiness, and Peterkin brought his parents to the castle and cared for them when they were old. But no one called him Peterkin any more, for he was known throughout all the kingdom as Peter the Grand.

As for the dark forest, it rolled away like the mists of morning on a warm spring

Peterkin

109

day, and the ugly old woman was never
seen nor heard from again.