

## THE CLEVER THIEF

by Sophie Masson

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There once was a boy who was captured by robbers. Now, these robbers were the most feared in the whole country. They held up travelers and robbed coaches, and their cave was full of stolen gold and silver and precious stones.

It was the custom of the robbers to make all their captives steal as well. In this way, the robbers kept adding new members to their gang, because no one ever dared to refuse. And once you'd stolen, you were in for good, because you were marked as a member of the gang and would go to prison if you were caught.

Now, the boy I am telling you about was as bright as a dewdrop and twice as fast as the breeze. But in the robbers' cave, he pretended to be dull and stupid while he tried to think of a way out of his predicament.

One night, the robber chief said to him, "Boy, tonight you will join our gang. I want you to go down to the highroad and relieve all the travelers of their purses." And he smiled, his broken yellow teeth giving him a wolfish look. The boy, though very much frightened, nodded vacantly and grinned a silly grin. The robber chief felt a little uneasy at that grin—was the boy too stupid to understand?—but he sent him out nevertheless and waited in the cave for his return.

The boy went out to the highroad, and he saw all the travelers passing by. As he had been told to do, he stepped out into the road, shouting, "Your purse or your life!" He was a tall, thin, gangling boy, with eyes that shone like ice, and the travelers were frightened by his strangeness. So they stopped, pulled out their purses, heavy with gold and silver and copper coins, and gave them to him, trembling. He opened the purses, tipped out all the money into the travelers' palms, and took the empty bags, saying, "My chief has told me he wants your purses." Then he gave a grin as empty as an abandoned house. The travelers didn't wait to hear more; they bolted, taking their money with them, full of their good fortune.

So the boy went back to the cave, loaded with silk and leather and cotton purses, some new, some old, some large, some small. And he said to the robber chief, “Master, here are the purses you wanted,” while he grinned his silly grin.

“Fool!” The robber chief called out, pale with rage. “Fool! I didn’t just want their purses; I wanted their money as well!”

“Oh,” the boy said, and his face drooped at the corners, as if he were sorry for what had happened. Inside his bright, quick heart, though, a smile danced and sparkled.

The robber chief contained himself with difficulty. Then he said, “Tomorrow night, you will go out again. And this time, this time, boy, I want you to get all their change! Do you hear, *all their change*, boy!”

The boy nodded eagerly, his eyes seeming as dull as dirty water. Again the robber chief felt uneasy, but he thought that surely no one could be as stupid as that a second time.

So the next night, the boy went out again to the highroad. Again he stepped into the road, calling out, “Your change or your life! Your change or your life!” And his tall, thin shape, ghostly in the moonlight, made travelers uneasy and frightened, so they stopped and pulled out their purses, heavy with gold and silver and copper coins. The boy carefully emptied the purses, counted out all the copper coins, and put them in his large pockets. Then, just as carefully, he returned all the gold and silver coins to the travelers’ purses and handed them back. He smiled at them with a smile that did not seem quite as dull and vacant and told them to go on their way.

After a hard night’s work, the boy went back to the robbers’ cave, his pockets filled with copper coins. He emptied them out in front of the robber chief, grinning like a jack-o’-lantern.

The robber chief couldn’t believe his eyes. “Copper?” he roared. “Where is the gold, where is the silver?”

“But you said change,” the boy whispered, as if he were afraid. “Change is copper, isn’t it?”

“Boy!” the robber chief screamed. “You will go out one more time and bring back *everything*. Everything, you hear! And if you don’t...” His broken teeth glittered, his wicked eyes flashed, his hand drew slowly across the boy’s throat.

The boy gulped a little, as if he were afraid. And indeed he was, a bit, but his bright, quick mind was working like a windmill, spinning out ideas. “Yes, master,” he whispered, and bent his head.

So the next night, the boy went out for the third and final time. He stepped into the highroad in the moonlight, his figure tall and straight, his eyes shining, and he stopped the travelers and talked to them. As he spoke, their eyes would begin to shine, their mouths to smile.

At the end of the night, there were many travelers assembled there, with the boy in the middle of them. As the sun began to edge over the corner of the world, they were all climbing up the hill toward the robbers’ cave, where they found the thieves snoring, fast asleep. Working quickly and quietly, the travelers and the boy gathered up all the robbers’ weapons and put them in a huge sack.

Wasn’t the robber chief surprised when he opened his eyes to the great assembly in his cave! He sprang to his feet, as did the other members of his gang, but it was too late. Every sword, every dagger, every knife and bow and arrow had gone into the sack the boy held. Weaponless, helpless, the robbers and their chief looked at the boy and heard him say, “You told me to bring everything. Everything I brought, and everyone.”

Now it was the turn of the robber chief to bend his head as he and his men were led out of the cave, down the hill, and toward the town. Now and then, he lifted his eyes and looked at the boy, so thin and gangling, and felt his smile, as bright and fleeting as the dew on the grass.