

“The Little Girl That Had No Tongue”: A Short Story by George MacDonald

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“The Little Girl That Had No Tongue” is a short story by the master of the Victorian fairy tale, George MacDonald. Unpublished in his lifetime, it existed only as a rough draft manuscript owned by the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The original was clearly not ready for publication, and some alterations in punctuation were necessary in order for the narrative to be cohesive. However, the vivid imagery, charm and moral symbolism of this enchanting story represent George MacDonald at his very best. “The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended,” he wrote. “Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairy tale to be.”

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There once was a little girl that had no tongue. She could not speak a single word, even the shortest or simplest. All day long she had to be silent. But she could hear wonderfully well, and she was always listening—listening to her brothers and sisters, listening to the wind, the brooks and the bees, the birds and grasshoppers, and the more she listened, the more she wanted to speak. It seemed as if she were the only one in the whole world that could say nothing at all. At last when the spring days came, she said to herself, “*I must speak, I must find a tongue somehow.*” She thought if she could only hear some grand new sound, perhaps it would fill her so full, that she would be obliged to speak. So one fine morning she set out. She listened to the sea as it splashed on the black stones, but no voice came to her. She listened to the music of the great cathedral organ, but that only made her feel more and more how very dumb she was, and she ran away from it as fast as she **[end of page 47]** could go. She never looked about, till she found herself in a great forest. Trees were all around, and everything was still and quiet, not a footstep to be heard. She did not know where she was going, but still she went on. The path grew narrow; the sky, which had been blue,

became grey and cloudy. The trees were thicker, and instead of oaks and beeches, firs and yew trees lifted up their dark branches. Stoats and weasels ran across the path; once, Elsie almost trod on a viper that slipped into a long tuft of grass. Flat toads sometimes crawled into a wet ditch, and blind worms crept under the hollow trees. There were a good many smoothly-folded leaves of the deadly nightshade but no flowers. Thrushes and swallows did not seem to live there, only great black nests were in the fir branches. The sun had gone in, the wind sighed, and sometimes a raven flew by.

Dark grey walls now became visible through the trees. Elsie saw before her a long, lofty square building. It had small grated windows, iron doors, and broken chimneys. She could not tell why, but she felt frightened as she looked at it. She came closer. Under the shadow of the moss-grown wall, she saw an iron grating. She looked down; two or three of the rails were broken away, and underneath was a dungeon—a dungeon full of men, women, boys and girls. Every one was bound down to the damp earth with strong ropes or dusty iron chains. Elsie could see what red blood-shot eyes they had, what pale, hungry faces, and what raw, ugly wounds the rusty iron had eaten into their flesh. When any one moved hand or foot, how the chains did clack and rattle!

“What o’clock is it?” asked a hoarse voice.

“It must be the afternoon,” answered another, “the shadows are getting longer and longer. It must be nearly three o’clock. Old Ironhand has gone away. Oh! if only we could get out; but we can’t, we can’t get out!” Ever so many voices took up the cry; the wind sighed in the trees, and the rooks cawed and flapped their black wings.

Not get out! thought Elsie, not get out . . . they *must get out*. If only there was a strong grown-up man or woman there, or even if she had a voice—the voice that would not come—she might rush off and tell people to be quick and help them out; but this she couldn’t do. Still, it was impossible to go away; she must stay there for a little longer. She thought no more now about [48] looking for a voice, but crouched down by the wall, to watch what would come next, and who the deliverer would be. Surely, someone would come.

A tall, bony woman rushed through the trees and stopped at the grating. “Aha! there you are,” she cried. “It serves you quite right, and I don’t pity you a bit. A nice way you are in: the chains pinch you firmly, I daresay, and the ground is damp, and you don’t get too much of Old Ironhand’s bread and water. What a set of fools you are not to get out—of course you could, if

you tried.”

She had hardly gone, when a man with a large black book in his hand, and a pale, grave face came up. “Just what I expected,” he began. “I always said how it would be. You needn’t think Giant Ironhand will keep you where you are. He has worse dungeons than these, dungeons where you won’t be able to see the sun, and chains that are twice as heavy as these. Get out, poor unhappy creatures, get out if you can, before you are worse off than you are now!”

And then he too went away. The wind sighed more than ever, and how those rooks did flap their black wings and caw among the dark branches. Louder and louder came the cry, “We can’t get out, we can’t get out!”

Elsie could stand it no longer. There was nothing else for it: she must go down into the dungeon herself. The bars were broken; she could easily slide through the hole, but first of all she began to hunt about in a heap of dust and rubbish. She rummaged there, till at last she dragged out an old iron bar, and then she pounced upon a worn out pocket knife, which somebody must have thrown away long before. Once it had had three or four blades; now it had only one, and that was tarnished, jagged and blunt. Still she thought it a great prize. And now she caught tight hold of the grating, squeezed through, and let herself drop. She slipped on the wet ground. In the long, narrow dungeon the air felt damp, moldy and close, and then how dark it was! She could just see, and that was all. Here, close by, was somebody doubled up unto a heap, groaning terribly; there was another with tangled, dark hair, and deep red scars on both arms. “Oh! dear,” cried one, “Will it ever be night?” “What good would that do?” answered a gruff voice, and then the chains clanked again.

Elsie felt ever so many blood-shot eyes fixed on her, and hoarse voices called out, “What is she here for?” She could not answer. Her heart now beat fast; she stumbled over a bruised **[49]** ankle, she nearly fell over a bit of rusty chain. Just then, she heard someone say, “I wouldn’t be such a fool as to go on rubbing any more, Peter, it’s no use.” “I know it isn’t,” was the answer. These voices came from the end of the dungeon. Peter must be that boy in the corner with light hair, just like Elsie’s brother Ralph’s. He had let the chain fall, and his head was resting on his hands. She took courage, went over to him and knelt down; some of the links in the chain were very thin, and she began to hammer away with her iron bar. She found them much too strong for her; they would never break. But every second link had a join, and if the link was thin, and the join open, it might be just possible to slip it

through. Peter began to help; they pulled till they were red in the face, they pulled till they were covered with rust, they pulled till their hands were sore and bleeding, but still they pulled on. The sun was going towards the west; the cawing of the rooks grew fainter and fainter; in another hour or two, the owls would begin to think of coming out—and what if the giant should come? On they pulled in good earnest. One more—two—three—four—five—There! there! at last it had come—that last jerk had done it. Peter was free, was free indeed!

“I’m out! I’m out!” he screamed. He jumped up, stretched his numbed arms and legs, caught hold of Elsie, iron bar and all, and squeezed her, till she cried with pain and joy. A bit of rusty chain was still dangling at one of his feet, but that was nothing. The groaning had all stopped; everyone turned round to look on, and backwards and forwards, the cry went, “Only think, Peter is actually out.” If Elsie had had any idea she would have succeeded as well, it would have seemed quite enough, but now she began to think she must have another out, only one more. Presently a voice behind her said, “Little girl! little girl!” She turned about; there was a white, hollow face with wild staring eyes. It was a boy a good deal older than Peter who spoke. “I saw it all,” he said, “every bit. Look here: my name is Robert, and I’m tied with ropes. I’ve been hard at work trying to undo the knots, but I think there must be some charm in them, they won’t come undone. As for the rope itself, it’s as thick as a cable. If I only had a knife I could cut it, but there isn’t such a thing in the place.”

At the word ‘knife’ Elsie fumbled in her pocket, and drew out her prize. Robert’s eyes glistened, but no sooner had he tried it against his thumb, then his face fell again. “It’s the bluntest old thing I ever saw,” he grumbled. “Here, take it back.” But Elsie **[50]** wouldn’t take it back; she was trying it on the rope already. After great sawing, the tiniest bit in the world gave way. They bit it with their teeth, they tore it open with their nails, and again the old blunt blade came in and sawed a little more. Slowly, very slowly, it was beginning to loosen. You might have heard a pin drop in the dungeon; all strained their necks to look on, and the whispers on every side were, “Will it ever give way?” Another cut,—it was giving, certainly it was giving more—It had given! Down fell Robert, but he was up in a trice. He shook himself out from the broken cord, and shouted till the dungeon rang again. As for Peter, he capered about like a wild thing.

“Come come,” said he, catching hold of Elsie, “there are two of us now—let us be off while we can, or Old Ironhand will be coming home, and

then there will be a row.”

“And you are going to leave us behind,” said a miserable little voice in the corner. But the creature that it came from was even more miserable than the voice. He was all wizened and shriveled up just like an old, old man, this was little Johnny, the youngest in the whole place. It would be impossible not to try and take him. So the hammering and filing began again. His chains were not so strong, and they were eaten away with rust; they would soon give way. Before the last red gleam had faded out of the sky, they did fall rattling to the ground. Johnny crept out, trembling from head to foot, for he could hardly believe such a good thing could be true.

And now they must go indeed. Hark! there is the great watchdog. Giant Ironhand was on his way home, and would be at the door in no time. Robert, the tallest, must stand up, and let the others mount on his shoulders; then they must catch hold of the bars, and squeeze themselves through as best they could. Up, Peter; up, Elsie; up, little Johnny, and now Robert himself must give a tremendous jump, and they must hold out their hands and help to drag him through. A tight squeeze, a good many bruises, and it is done.

Once out of the dungeon, there is nothing to be thought of but running—not through the thick part of the forest; they would only get tangled in trees and perhaps fall into gins and traps. Out into **[51]** the open country, through the fir plantation, that must be their way. There! listen to the hoofs of the giant’s black horse. Old Ironhand is riding up to the castle door. He is getting down; his spurs clank on the stone steps, and how sharp the crack of his great whip sounds! He will be after them in a minute; soon the tread of his heavy boots that can take twenty-seven steps to their one will be heard coming closer and closer. Their hearts beat quick; hand in hand they dart along the thick grass and scramble over the deep ditch. Peter’s bit of rusty chain is dragging all the time in the damp earth, and now and then rattling against a sharp stone. On, on, on, over roots of trees, over briars, over brambles, yellow gorse, ant hills, bracken fern, tangled heath, great-rabbit holes. Hark! the castle door has shut with a loud bang. The giant smacks his whip; he scolds his servants, he whistles to his fierce dogs, he stamps on the ground; he is after them indeed.

On, on, on, up the hill, out of the plantation, over the ploughed field. Peter is down; his rusty chain has caught on one of the deep furrows. Up again, Peter, run for your life; take hold of Elsie’s hand, never mind the rusty iron, never mind your trembling knees or your panting breath. If you stop for an instant, the giant will have his grip on you. He is coming nearer, and how

the wolf-dogs bark! Over the hedge, jump the ditch; the thorns are very sharp, but once beyond the dip of the hill, once through the sparkling water, you are safe, and can snap your fingers at any giant. How the great boughs crash, as Ironhand knocks his head against them! What a heavy tread he plants on the damp earth, and it is coming ever nearer; the ground shakes under it. They feel his breath blow like a cold wind on their cheeks; it stirs their hair. His big hand almost clutches their shoulders, but they are too quick for him, they are scrambling down the bank, they are in the water. He can't touch them there! It is nearly up to their necks; they have enough to do to keep little Johnny's chin above it, but the middle is reached at last. The worst is over. They are getting near the opposite bank; they clutch hold of great bunches of willow-wood, and up with them. The slippery bank is climbed—they are safe! Giant Ironhand must go home without them. He shakes his big head with its long matted red hair, he doubles up his giant fist as much as to say, "I would if I could," and then he stamps frowning away. They don't care a straw for him now. They are panting, they are ragged, they are muddy, they are bleeding, but they are free. Hurrah! Peter, Robert, and little Johnny throw up their tattered caps, and cry, Hurrah! with all their might. [52]

Now it was very strange that whoever went through those waters, which were known in that country by the name of Peace, always had a wish to sing. It was more perhaps than a wish: people felt that sing they must and should. So the three boys all began to think of singing. They had known many songs once, but some they had forgotten, and some they did not care for just then. What at last they did remember was a verse they had heard long before on Sunday afternoons, when the sun shone warm and bright, and the bells rang out for church. I daresay you all know it very well.

“Rejoice, the Lord is King.
Your God and King adore.
Children, give thanks and sing
And praise him evermore.
Lift up your hearts, lift up your voice.
Rejoice! again I say Rejoice!”

Whether it was gladness made their voices sweet, I can't tell, but in the silent evening air, they sounded as fresh and bright as a thrush's song. Tears of quiet joy came into Elsie's clear blue eyes. Just then, soft, and very close to her, someone said, "Rejoice!" It was not one of the three boys, for they were singing on in front; it was not a little tomtit that had forgotten to go to bed, or a starling that was out late at night. No, the word was said far

too plainly for that. Neither was it someone hidden behind the hedge; it was much too near and close. There it was again! “Rejoice! rejoice! rejoice!” What could it be? How very near it seemed to Elsie; it almost seemed to be in her. Why, it *was* in her—it was her!

“It’s me! it’s me!” she cried. “I said rejoice. Peter, Robert, Johnny, listen, listen! I said rejoice. Elsie can speak, Elsie has found a tongue.”

They turned round. Johnny’s eyes grew wider and wider. What was this about speaking and finding tongues? They certainly had never heard the little girl say anything before, but then they had all thought she was not quite ‘canny’; not exactly like themselves. But when they heard how she had gone to look for a voice, and [53] had found none, and that now, listening to their singing in the quiet night air, it had come to her, they were nearly as glad as she was, and all began to shout, “Elsie can speak, Elsie has found a tongue.” The echo went over the still dewy fields, over the hedges where the glow-worms glistened, over the leafy woods where the winds were at rest, and over the silvery waters of the river of Peace. And some of the birds raised their heads from under their wings, and gave a sleepy twitter in their dreams. Past the city, and by the rushing sea they went; and now they came in sight of the little cottage where Elsie lived. Through the trees, the rushlights gleamed in the upstairs windows. Everyone was going to bed.

“Who’s there?” cried a voice in answer to the loud knocking.

“It’s me, it’s Elsie! Father, mother, everybody, get up and come down. Only think, I can speak. I have found a tongue.”

What a great cry of joy there was then! The bolts were unfastened, the doors were unbarred. Elsie had been given up as lost, and now that she had come back with a voice, they could not be half glad enough. Of course there was a great deal of kissing and hugging, and you may be sure the boys came in for a share. A fire was lighted, the kettle was put on, and tea was laid out. Peter, Robert, and little Johnny were famished, and looked on with delight. Soon, great bunches of bread and butter began to disappear, one after another, like lightning, but that night no one ever once thought of the baker’s bill.

Elsie had to tell her story a great many times; over and over again she had to say how she had stumbled on the forest, and what Old Ironhand’s castle was like. She did not know whether any one else could find a voice as she had done; she only knew it was when she had forgotten all about it, that it came to her. [54]