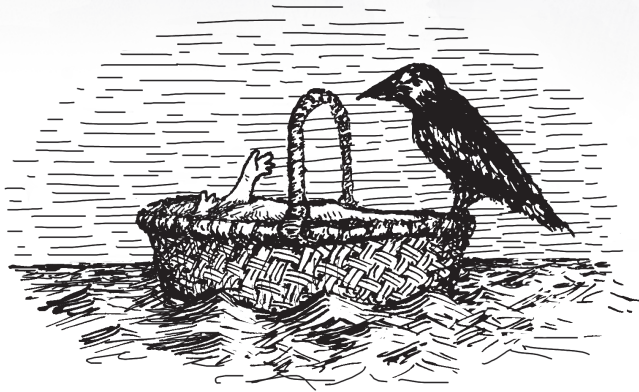


∞ CHAPTER ONE ∞
PETER NIMBLE'S FIRST TEN YEARS



Now, for those of you who know anything about blind children, you are aware that they make the very best thieves. As you can well imagine, blind children have incredible senses of smell, and they can tell what lies behind a locked door—be it fine cloth, gold, or peanut brittle—at fifty paces. Moreover, their fingers are small enough to slip right through keyholes, and their ears keen enough to detect the faintest clicks and clacks of every moving part inside even the most complicated lock. Of course, the age of *great* thievery has long since passed; today there are few child-thieves left, blind or otherwise. At one time, however, the world was simply thick with them. This is the story of the greatest thief who ever lived. His name, as you've probably guessed, is Peter Nimble.

As with most infants, Peter came into this world with no name

at all. One morning, a group of drunken but good-hearted sailors spotted him bobbing in a basket alongside their ship. Perched on the boy's head was a large raven, which had, presumably, pecked out his eyes. Disgusted, the sailors killed the bird and delivered the child to the authorities of a nearby port town.

Though the magistrates had no use for a blind infant, a local bylaw required them to at least give the boy a name. By silent show of hands, they christened him Peter Nimble, after a misremembered nursery rhyme. With this name and nothing else, he was sent off to make his way in the world.

For the first while, he was nursed on the milk of a wounded mother-cat, whom he met after crawling beneath the local alehouse. The cat permitted baby Peter to live with her in exchange for his picking the lice and ticks from her fur—until one tragic day some months later when the alehouse manager discovered them huddled beneath his porch. Furious at finding vermin in his establishment, the man shoved the whole family into a bag and tossed them into the bay.

Using his skillful fingers to untie the knot on that bag marked the beginning of Peter's career. Being furless and naturally buoyant, he managed to make it back to shore without too much trouble. (The cats, on the other hand, did not fare so well.)



Until this point, you have been witness to Peter's rather typical infancy—probably not unlike your own. But it was only a matter of

time before he distinguished himself from the teething masses. The first hints of this appeared in Peter's uncanny gift for survival. Since he had no parents to purchase clothes and food for him, he found it necessary to take matters into his own hands.

There is an old saying about how easy it is to "take candy from a baby." This saying is utterly false; anyone who has tried to take *anything* from a baby knows well what sort of crying, kicking, and general commotion will ensue. It is very easy, however, for babies to take things from *us*. Despite being blind, young Peter had no trouble sniffing out fruit stands and vegetable carts to steal from. He would toddle wherever his nose led him and innocently cut his teeth on whatever food he wanted. He soon began to pinch other necessities, such as clothes, bedding, and a bandage for his eyes. He tried stealing shoes, but found that he preferred going barefoot. By his third birthday, he was an expert in petty theft and a known menace to the vendors. More than once he had been caught in the act, only to slip away before the constable could be alerted.

One problem with a life of crime is that it lowers your chances of social advancement. Law-abiding citizens take one look at children like Peter and turn the other way—never to offer sweets, toys, or hope of adoption. In providing for himself, our boy had all but guaranteed that he would grow up parentless and alone.

All that changed, however, when he met an enterprising fellow named Mr. Seamus.

Mr. Seamus was a tall, wiry man with meaty hands and an

enormous head. Because of his clumsy touch, he had been unable to live out his dream of becoming a cat burglar. Instead, Mr. Seamus had taken a career as a beggar monger. A beggar monger, as you might imagine, is someone who deals in beggars. The man had built up a business of adopting orphans, maiming them good and proper, and then sending them out into the streets to beg for coins. Any child who dared come home empty-handed was throttled and sold to the workhouse. All told, Mr. Seamus had probably gone through about thirty orphans in his career.

Peter was five years old when the beggar monger first spied him beside a fruit stand in the market. “Hullo, boy!” Mr. Seamus said upon his approach. “What’s your name?”

“They call me Blind Pete, sir,” the small boy said, still too young to know not to talk to strangers.

Mr. Seamus leaned closer for a better look at him. It was his experience that blind children made especially successful beggars. “And where are your parents?” he asked.

“I don’t have parents,” the boy answered. By now Peter’s hunger was getting the best of him, and so he quickly reached a hand behind his back and stole an apple from the fruit cart.

Mr. Seamus glimpsed this action out of the corner of one eye, and it nearly took his breath away. The boy had stolen the apple not from the top of the stack, but from somewhere deep in the *middle*, leaving the outside completely untouched. For an ordinary person, such a feat would be impossible, but for this filthy child it was second

nature. Mr. Seamus knew at once that he was standing before a very gifted thief.

The man leaned closer, eyeing the boy's delicate fingers. "Well, Pete," he said in his sweetest voice. "My name's Mr. Seamus, and I'm ruddy glad we met. You see, I'm a great, important businessman, but I've got no son to share my riches with." Mr. Seamus took the apple from Peter's small hands, biting into it as he spoke. "How would you like," he bit again, "to become my business partner? You could live with me in my mansion, eat my food, and play with my dog, Killer."

"What kind of dog is it?" Peter asked, hoping very much it was big enough for him to ride.

"It's a . . . *Siamese*," Mr. Seamus said, after thinking a moment.

"Are Siamese big?"

"The biggest. I suppose he could swallow you whole if he wanted." Mr. Seamus tossed the apple core into his mouth and swallowed it whole. "Now, what do you say, boy?"



There was no mansion. There were no riches, servants, or feasts. Killer was real enough, but he was missing a leg and quite old—and like most old things, he hated children. Instead of giving Peter rides, he spent most of his time limping, growling, and lapping the drip off his disgusting snout.

Mr. Seamus gave up beggar mongering and never looked back. He sold off his other orphans and devoted himself entirely to Peter's education in thievery. For the first year, he locked all the boy's meals

inside an old sea chest. If Peter wanted to eat, he had to pick the lock with his bare fingers. This not only taught him valuable burgling skills but also saved Mr. Seamus a great deal in expenses. The boy went hungry for over two weeks before getting a first meal in his new home. When he did finally manage to unlock the chest (by stumbling across the “McNeery Twist” maneuver), the scraps were long spoiled. But eventually he grew more adept at picking locks, until at last he had gone through every one in his master’s collection.

Mr. Seamus also trained Peter in the fine art of sneakery—how to creep over floorboards, rooftops, and even gravel so as not to make a single sound. The boy proved a fast learner and soon mastered the gamut of thieving crafts, from window-cutting to advanced ropework. By the age of ten, Peter Nimble had become the greatest thief the town had ever seen. But of course no one actually *saw* him: they only saw the open safes and empty jewelry boxes that he left behind.

Every night Mr. Seamus sent Peter into the town to steal. And every sunrise Peter returned to Mr. Seamus with a burgle-sack full of loot. “Worm!”—which is what the man had taken to calling him—“you done ruddy well. Now get out of my sight!” With that, he would lock the boy inside the cellar, leaving Killer to stand guard.

Peter didn’t actually mind the cellar all that much. Being blind, he didn’t care about the lack of light, and sitting down there was far better than looting honest people’s houses. Whatever wrongs he may have committed (and stealing things *is* wrong), Peter was still a good child who wanted nothing to do with burgling. Every morning

as he curled up to sleep on the damp cellar floor, he would pretend that he could sneak past Killer, break into Mr. Seamus's great treasure room, and return all of the stolen goods to their rightful owners. He would imagine thankful townsfolk rescuing him from cruel Mr. Seamus and inviting him to live forever in a big, warm house full of food and singing and other joyous children. In short, he would dream of being happy. But this was only a dream, and every sunset he would wake once again to the shouts of Mr. Seamus and be kicked back outside for another evening of pilfering the possessions of honest citizens.

And so it went for Peter Nimble. He was miserable, mistreated, and forced to commit misdemeanors—day after day, season after season, year after year—until one very special, very rainy afternoon, when he met a stranger who would change his life forever.