

The
Legend of
Tom
Hickathrift

As told by
master
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The Legend of Tom Hickathrift

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Chapter One

If you look at a map of England, you'll see that there is a hump on the right. We call this part of the country East Anglia. If you look at it in enough detail today, you would see green bits and brown bits. The green bits would be fields, and the brown bits would be towns and cities. The brown areas would probably be bigger, connected to each other by roads that are so straight it is as if they were marked out by a giant ruler. However, if you were able to look into the past and see a map of East Anglia, say, a thousand years ago, the towns of King's Lynn, Wisbech and Downham Market would be mostly green. The brown parts would be sprinkled here and there like rabbit droppings.

If you joined up where those three towns are on the map, you would see it made a rough sort of triangle laid across the border between Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. If the map was a grassy green, the area inside the triangle was a dark, murky green – the colour of moss or a scummy pond. It was mostly pasture-land dotted with villages, but its name seemed to grow from the ground itself. It was called Marshland Fen and it was a misty hinterland between the natural and the supernatural.

Along Marshland Fen's western edge lay an area called the Smeeth. Within the Smeeth lived honest men, women and children, but if you think the name sounds slimy

and creepy, you might be right. It was a harshly beautiful place where, in dark corners, there lurked things forgotten and lost.

The land was flat, just like it is today. People of the Smeeth would be born, live their lives, and die having never seen a mountain. There were some low hills, but they were often places of fear and darkness, best avoided by ordinary people. There was plenty of pasture though, and farmers toiled hard to bring food up from the ground. In daylight, the land was farmed by the fine men of the fens, one of whom was a poor labourer named Thomas Hickathrift.

One day, Thomas Hickathrift was tending the plough of a local farmer with his young son, also named Tom. Young Tom was little more than five summers old, but he was already the size of an eight year old and big enough to help his father move the cattle and hitch the plough to the farmer's horse. Being big for his age, he had a big appetite and was always hungry. It was rare that he was seen without a hunk of bread or a turnip in his hand.

As his father strained to line the blades of the plough up with the last furrow, young Tom munched down on his bread, leaning his elbows on the horse's head. He was astride the poor creature's neck, his bare feet sticking out, toes brushing its ears.

"Me so hungry, me could eat the hinderpart of this hobby, Father!" called Tom to the hardworking man behind him.

"That's a cow, son. Not a horse," said old Thomas.

As a confused Tom spluttered on his bread, his father

staggered ahead of him into the ripped lines of the ploughed field. He stumbled over the clumped earth, clutching his chest. Old Thomas grimaced, as if hooks were pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“Father?” said Tom.

“I... think my heart is.... hampered, son...” said old Thomas, as he sank to his knees in the cold mud.

For almost an hour, young Tom Hickathrift stayed by his father’s side, unsure what to do. He tried to share his bread, but his father just drooled. He tried to pinch him awake, but his father just groaned. After a while, he stopped groaning and lay still, his face half buried in the furrow. Tom stayed until the sun began to yawn and stretch its redness like a bedspread across the lowest clouds.

With all his might, he hoisted his dead father’s feet under his arms and dragged him across the fen to his mother. By the time he reached the hovel, it was nearly dark and his father’s head was green with grass stains from the dragging. From the moment his mother opened the door with a shriek, Tom became the man of the house. And she never stopped reminding him. Ever. From the cock-crow of the morning to the whisper of the setting sun, all that Tom ever seemed to hear was his mother’s nagging voice.

And so it was for many years. The pressure was always on Tom to work the land to bring home enough money to feed his growing appetite as well as his mother’s. Fortunately, she ate like a pigeon and moved like a crow, so most of the bread ended up in Tom’s stomach anyway.

One summer, when Tom was nineteen years old,

seven feet tall and as wide as a wall, he was ploughing the same farmer's field in which his father had fallen so many years before. Taking a pause to think about it, Tom laid himself on the back of the ploughing cow, his feet propped up on the animal's horns. Farmer Gidding had long since sold his horses and now only used cows for ploughing. It suited Tom, as he had a ready supply of fresh, warm milk to wash down the loaves that he brought with him each day. Tom had grown, and grown, and now ploughed the same field that his father once did. Sometimes.

"Tom Hickathrift!" called a voice. It was Farmer Gidding, a knobbly, balding man whose only hair clumped about his ears like two bird's nests. His nose was as long as his spindly fingers and his eyes bulged like two boiled eggs as he stomped across the field towards the relaxing Tom.

Taken by surprise, Tom fell off the cow, landing with a thump on the ground. The cow stepped away, shrugging with relief.

"Whuph?" said Tom.

"I knowed you'd be no good at the ploughing! You've done nothing but a hen's nose-full! Look at them rigs between the furrows! Narrower than an erriwiggle's leg!" said Farmer Gidding.

Tom got to his feet. Standing beside the cow, now quaking with the expectation that she would have to hold Tom's weight again, Tom looked down at Farmer Gidding. The old man had to straighten his bent back and crane his neck just to look Tom in the face. To make himself feel better about the discomfort, he poked Tom with the point of his

walking stick as he spoke.

“Sorry, Farmer Mister Gidding Sir. Bein’ as it were nice abroad, I thought I’d have a rest...”

“On my cow? You’re as shay-brained as your father was!”

Tom just looked at him.

Farmer Gidding became so red in the face he looked like a boiled beetroot, which made Tom chuckle without him realising it. But the old farmer noticed. “Get off my land!” he said. “And don’t never come back!”

Embarrassed, Tom bowed his head. Without a word, he turned and started to trudge off, forgetting the basket of loaves he had brought with him for his lunch. One of the stalest loaves bounced off his head, as hard as a stone.

“And use your loaf!” said Farmer Gidding as he aimed another one at Tom.

Crestfallen, Tom made his way out of the field and along a rough path, its direction laid out with stones embedded in the ground. On one side was a low stone wall bordering another flat field, where two or three sparse trees stood in the distance. On the other, a steep slope led down to a long narrow ditch, used to divert flood water from the marshes and fens. Tom briefly wondered whether he would be better off sitting in the shallow water until it filled up to claim him. Anything rather than go home to his mother without any pay. Or bread. And so began the legend of Tom Hickathrift – as tall as a tree, as wide as a barrel, as thick as a post and as lazy as a slug. And that’s just what his mother said about him.

Home was a wooden shack made from logs and rough bits of tree that Tom had pulled out of the ground and nailed together. Tom paused outside, leaning against a pile of stones that was all that remained of a wall he had accidentally knocked over when playing football with a stuffed pig's bladder.

"I ain't going in. Mum'll kill me," he said to himself.

At least, he thought he was talking to himself. She may have eaten like a pigeon, but Mrs Hickathrift had the ears of a hawk. Wiry and wrinkled, holding a broom and scowling, she appeared at the door.

"Stop talking to yarself! I'm right here! I could hear you lumbering a mile away!"

"Sorry, Mum."

"Don't 'sorry' me, you big dardledumdew!" she said, wrenching his earlobe between her bony pincer fingers. Tom winced as she dragged him through the door. Like always, he had to bend to avoid cracking the lintel with his forehead.

"Sorry, Mum."

Inside the hovel, Tom sat on the floor, his knees under his chin. He was so big that if he sat on his mother's only chair, his knees would knock the table over. Washing hung dripping from a line strung across the one downstairs room. Steam rose up into it from Mrs Hickathrift's cooking pot. Tom stared at the empty plate on the table. His bottom lip wobbled.

"Don't blar about it!" said Mum. "You can't keep a job more'n five minutes!"

"What's for tea?"

“Nettle broth! You took the bread!” Mum whacked Tom on the knee with her wooden spoon.

Tom winced. Inside, he knew he deserved it. Really, he was heartbroken that he kept upsetting his mother but he couldn't help his uselessness. Like a big baby, Tom burst into tears. He banged his fist on the table, sending his plate spinning.

“I hate nettle broth!”

The next thing he knew, his mother grabbed Tom by the ear again, her pinch leading him off the floor and out of the door.

“Well, you won't even be eatin' the corns off my feet if you don't get a job! I don't want you comin' home til you've got one!” she said, dragging her huge son by the ear.

“Aw, Mum!”

“I mean it,” she said, putting Tom out on the road. “Don't come back 'til you can make me rich! Your bed can be a ditch and your blanket the sky!” And, with that, she slammed the door to go back to her nettle broth bubbling in the pot.

“I will, Mum. I'll make you proud. I promise,” Tom said, his shoulders stooped, as he looked down the long straight road ahead.

And so the great lummoX that was Tom Hickathrift, at the age of nineteen, was thrown out on his ear by his poverty-stricken mother. She sent him to earn a crust, but this time he had to make sure he didn't eat it first.