

HUDGEON TALES

By Eleanor Goodman

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

Something was the matter with Mr. Joe and people were talking. Mr. Joe, as JJ once said, was the last of the good guys. He was kind and helpful, with not a mean bone in his body. He fixed things and he made things for people, and if they paid him, that was fine, and if they didn't, well, that was fine, too. Sometimes payment was a newly baked loaf of bread or a pitcher of fresh milk, sometimes just a grateful smile and a hug.

When JJ, whose real name was Jimmy Jake, brought him his bike that had gotten smashed, Mr. Joe fixed it for nothing. When little Maryanne handed him a doll with a broken head, he made a new head-

-much prettier than the old one-- and she paid him with her doll's old tea set. When Mrs. Flummery needed a new dress for her daughter's wedding, Mr. Joe gathered shimmering silks and satins and stitched them into a gown of great beauty. After the wedding, Mrs. Flummery gave him a piece of wedding cake in payment and he thanked her most kindly. And no matter what, whenever Mr. Joe worked, he would whistle a merry tune.

At least, that's the way it used to be. But something had changed all that. Sounds of snoring now came from the workshop at odd times of the day. When a crying child arrived with a broken toy, he'd find Mr. Joe asleep at his bench. One Monday morning, when he was fitting a new dress on Greta Goslinger, he dozed off.

“Mr. Joe, Mr. Joe... wake up. Whatever is the matter?”

He mumbled something about not getting enough sleep at night.

“And why is that, may I ask?”

Greta settled herself on the bench next to him, preparing to listen.

“Well... it’s hard to explain. You see, every night, after a hard day’s work, I put on my nightshirt, fluff up the pillow, and hop into bed. Then just as my eyes are closing... suddenly there is a yank and a pull, and all the blankets and sheets have been taken off me and are on the other side of the bed. So I pull them back and cover myself, holding on tight. Over and over the same thing happens until, finally, I just come out here and try to sleep on my bench.”

“Oh my,” sighed Greta, “that sounds awful. Do you think you might be bewitched?”

Mr. Joe looked at her and pulled at his ear.

“Could be maybe,” he said. “Guess I’d best go ask the Wise Woman on Bare Mountain.”

Now, quite a ways out of town, on the tippy-top of Bare Mountain, there lived a woman who some believed to be a witch on account of her mysterious healing ways with animals and people. She lived alone except for the small birds and animals who came to her when they were ailing or hurt, or to get tasty bits of the gingered bread she baked in an outdoor oven of her own design. This Wise Woman rarely came to town, and then only to sell her gingered bread and buy supplies. She had been given a name at birth but nobody called her by it, if indeed they knew what it was.

Mr. Joe knew, of course, that she was no witch at all, but simply a person who preferred her own company and had learned through hard work and careful seeing the secrets of nature. He also knew her name, for truth to tell, she was his sister.

Early next morning, after still another sleepless night, Mr. Joe began the long, hard climb to the top of Bare Mountain, taking many naps along the way. The narrow, winding dirt road seemed to go on forever. Finally, a cool mountain breeze brought the scent of ginger mixed with pine smoke and he knew he was just about there.

“Ho there, Mathilda!” he called out when he saw the woman bending over her stove. She looked up and a delighted smile broke out on her face, for she did indeed love her younger brother.

“Welcome!” she called back, but when he came closer, her smile turned into a frown. “What ails you, my brother? You look a bit peaked. Come sit down and I’ll fix you some tea and tonic.”

“Simple weariness.” He grinned. “You can skip the tonic and give me a nice piece of that gingered bread I smell.”

So brother and sister sat around the oven chatting of this and that until Mathilda, noticing that her brother kept nodding off, finally spoke up.

“Come, come now, Brother Joe, tell me what problem it is that brings you here.”

So, he told her of his troubles, and then asked, “Do you think that I’m bewitched?”

Mathilda laughed heartily. “Well, you don’t show any of the usual symptoms. Your feet are on straight and

your eyes aren't rolling around in your head and your hair seems to be growing right-side-up."

She sat silently for awhile and then smiled at him.

"I do believe that a hudgeon has taken a fancy to you and come to stay. Perhaps if you let your guest have a bed of its own, it will leave yours and you'll be able to sleep soundly again. "

"A hudgeon? What in heaven's name is that? Or who?"

Mathilda said thoughtfully, "That, dear brother, is for me to know and for you to find out."

"I'll tell you one thing though," she added, so quietly he could barely hear her "hudgeons are kind of small, but don't be fooled... they are very, very powerful."

With that, she bade her brother farewell.

CHAPTER 2

Mr. Joe started back down the hill, thinking and planning in his head as folks are wont to do. He began to plan a bed for the hudgeon, and as soon as he arrived home he built it. And an elegant piece of work it was, made from the finest wood and with a nice firm mattress. He carried the new bed into the house and set it next to his and said in a loud voice to no one he could see, "There now, I hope you enjoy your new bed."

When night came, he settled down into his own bed and pulled the covers around himself, sure he would finally have a good night's rest. Suddenly, he thought he heard a wee, small voice grumbling and mumbling, "*too big and too hard,*" and then, off came the covers on Mr. Joe's bed.

Undaunted, the next day he set about making a new bed. This one had a goose down comforter and was a bit smaller than the other one.

"Too puffy and much too fluffy!" was what the wee complaining voice muttered, and, once again, Mr. Joe found himself uncovered. He tried one thing after another, but nothing suited his fussy, uninvited guest.

Next morning, JJ found him fast asleep in the garden. "Wake up Mr. Joe! I want you to fix my wagon."

JJ was ten years old and very persistent.

Mr. Joe slept on. JJ shook him.

"Hey Mr. Joe, what is the matter with you? Are you dead?"

Jimmy Jake's parents had died in an accident when he was a baby and he worried about people dying.

At that, Mr. Joe woke up and hugged the boy.

“Nope, I’m just the victim of a dissatisfied Hudgeon.”

He told JJ the whole story.

The boy listened thoughtfully and said, “The wise woman told you the hudgeon was small. Did she tell you how small? I think that hudgeon is much smaller than you think. Much. Like Tom Thumb, or Thumbelina.” He knew lots of stories about the little people and he believed them to be true.

While they were talking, Mr. Joe had been absent-mindedly cracking open walnuts from the old walnut tree in the yard, and eating them.

JJ picked up half a walnut shell, looked inside it and yelled. “That’s it! This is the perfect size for a hudgeon’s bed. I just know it.”

Mr. Joe was doubtful that anyone that small could be so strong, but he didn't want to discourage his young friend, so he found some fluff from a cottonwood tree and carefully lined the shell with it then laid a leaf on top.

"Let me do it. Let me carry it into the house." said JJ eagerly. Mr. Joe nodded and gave the little bed to him.

Ever so carefully, the boy went into the bedroom and placed it on the window ledge, announcing to someone neither of them could see but both knew was there, "O.K. little hudgeon... here's a bed we made for you. Please leave Mr. Joe's bed alone. He really needs some rest."

So that night, when Mr. Joe went to bed and braced himself for his covers being yanked off,

nothing of the sort happened. After awhile he thought he heard a purring noise and a soft voice saying:

"Oh yes indeed, yes this is fine.

I really like this bed of mine."

And Mr. Joe got a good night's sleep.

Chapter 3

Next morning, when it was just barely light enough to see, Mr. Joe heard a knocking at the back door, and a child's voice.

"Mr. Joe, Mr. Joe. Let me in. It's me... Jimmy Jake."

"I know who it is." Mr. Joe groaned and opened the door. "And what can I do for you so early in the morning?"

"I want to see the hudgeon."

Mr. Joe put on his bathrobe and slippers and opened the door. JJ came in and tiptoed to the window ledge in the bedroom to peek into the walnut shell. "Oooooooooo," he sighed. "Isn't it beautiful?" And indeed it was, breathing lightly--no bigger than the fingernail on Jimmy Jake's finger, but perfect in every feature.

Putting his finger to his lips, Mr. Joe whispered, "Shh... let's let it sleep."

The boy nodded and they quietly left the room.

Mr. Joe began to fix Jimmy Jake's wagon, whistling as he worked. Suddenly, he looked at the boy. "Didn't I fix this the other day? And the day before that?"

JJ's face turned red.

"Guess you did. Guess it just keeps breaking."

"On purpose maybe?" asked Mr. Joe.

JJ smiled sheepishly. "Guess so."

"That sure is a lot of trouble for both of us. There must be an easier way. How about I take you on as a helper, if that would be O.K. with your folks."

Jimmy Jake's eyes grew big. "Really? You really mean that?"

Then he added, "Aunt Janine and Uncle Nedrick want to go away next week, and they've been looking for someone to take care of me. Do you think I could stay here with you?"

His eyes sparkled. "Could I please, could I please? I won't be any trouble. I promise."

Mr. Joe couldn't resist. "All right. I'll go talk to your aunt and uncle now, and you can stay here and mind the shop." The boy could hardly keep from jumping up and down with excitement, but he nodded and tried to look grown-up and responsible.

Mr. Joe put down his tools and left. He knew Jimmy Jake's aunt and uncle, who'd been caring for the boy since the death of his parents. They were nice people who saw to it that Jimmy Jake was fed and clothed and went to church and did his lessons. But they were busy people, very busy people, who had not the time or energy to keep up with an energetic boy. Mr. Joe was sure they would be more than happy to let Jimmy Jake stay with him. And they were. Especially since their trip was going to be a long one.

Meanwhile, when he was sure that Mr. Joe was out of hearing, JJ let out a triumphant yell. He walked around the shop, opening drawers and cupboards to see what was in them and then closing them carefully. He knew that Mr. Joe liked things neat and tidy.

Suddenly, he heard a noise in the house.

“Burglars?” he thought. “Not at this time of day.”

Then he remembered. The hudgeon!

JJ dashed up the stairs, through the back door and into the kitchen. Stunned by what he saw there, he let his mouth fall open.

What a total mess! There was flour on the floor, beans on the counters and butter looking like someone or something had been sliding on it. Every drawer and cupboard door was open, with jars overturned and their contents spilling over. Who could have done this?

“Won’t Mr. Joe be mad! Sure hope he doesn’t think I did it.”

The hudgeon? He shook his head... couldn’t be. But maybe it could. JJ went over to the windowsill in the bedroom and peeked into the walnut shell. There

was the hudgeon, sound asleep. He looked closely at the innocent little face and right at the tip of the nose was the tiniest smudge of flour.

JJ heard the back door open and an astonished voice say, "What happened to my clean kitchen? Jimmy Jake, where are you? What have you been doing?"

JJ rushed to the kitchen. "I didn't do it...honest I didn't."

"Then who did?"

He answered his own question. "That hudgeon."

JJ nodded, and led him by the hand to the bedroom.

They both looked down at the little creature's flour

smudged nose. Just then the eyes opened and

focused on Jimmy Jake. Dark brown and flecked

with gold they were. The boy stared into those eyes

and stood silently for a long, long time without moving.

"JJ, are you all right?" asked Mr. Joe.

"She says she's hungry. That's what she was doing in the kitchen; looking for food. She didn't find anything she could eat"

"How do you know? I didn't hear anything. And how do you know it's a she?"

"I just know."

There was deep understanding in JJ's voice. "We have to find something she can eat."

So back to the kitchen they went. Mr. Joe cut a tiny slice of bread and poured a thimbleful of milk, and a bottle cap of soup, a baby spoon of ice cream and some Jell-O. JJ took it all to the hudgeon.

"*Too crumbly,*" she said about the bread. "*Too slurpy,*" about the soup. The ice cream was too cold

and the Jell-O too "*shimmy-shaky.*" Milk was just plain "*blah.*"

"Let's go out in the garden. That's where we found her bed," Mr. Joe suggested.

They looked for fruit, but all the trees and bushes were bare.

JJ looked around the yard and headed for the honeysuckle bush and picked a few blossoms. Then he very gently pulled out the center pistil of one of them in such a way that a tiny droplet of nectar formed at the bottom of the blossom. He did this to four blossoms, then, ever so carefully, brought them to the hudgeon.

Mr. Joe followed him and heard a faint, pleased purring of satisfaction and a soft voice saying... "*Oh yes indeed, this suits me fine*

I really like this food of mine."

CHAPTER 4

So, every morning, before school, Jimmy Jake would pick honeysuckle blossoms, squeeze out the nectar and bring them to the hudgeon on a small leaf from the honeysuckle bush. He coaxed her into eating other food as well and gradually she began to like regular people food, especially buttered toast. Every day after school he'd help Mr. Joe in the workshop and then come in and play with her and teach her more than the few word she already knew in human language. Jimmy Jake and the hudgeon could easily read the pictures in each other's minds, but others couldn't.

One morning JJ came out to the workshop and solemnly announced, "She wants us to call her by her name."

"That's reasonable. What is her name?"

"Lilly Rose."

"That's a pretty name," said Mr. Joe and went back to working.

JJ kept standing there. "Something else."

"What is it?"

"She's getting bored lying in bed all the time. She wants to get out and about. And she says she needs clothes."

Mr. Joe got a faraway look in his eyes. "Ah, clothes for a hudgeon.... That would be sturdy denim for every-day wear, perhaps purple silk for a party dress, and something white and diaphanous for very special occasions...."

“Diapha what? Hold on, Mr. Joe,” asked JJ.

“Remember the bed. Better not get too carried away until we find out what our little hudgeon would like.”

Mr. Joe pulled at his ear as he often did when thinking, “Hmmm... guess you’re right... she does have very strong opinions, doesn’t she?”

They brought an assortment of fabrics to Lilly Rose which she examined carefully. Sure enough, the denim was “too rough and scratchy,” the silk “too slinky,” and the diaphanous white fabric “too see-through.” Nothing pleased her.

Then, both Jimmy Jake and Mr. Joe looked at each other and said at the same time, “the garden.” And out they went, looking for clues outdoors.

“Flower petals, of course... that should do it.” Roses and lilies had just begun to bloom so JJ and Mr. Joe

gathered handfuls of red, pink, white, lavender and yellow blossoms and brought them in to Lilly Rose.

“Oooooooooo.... How lovely.” She felt them and smelled them and held each petal up to the light. “Yes these will make clothes that are just right.”

“A couple of problems,” Mr. Joe said. “These blossoms are too delicate for any needle. They would tear apart. So how will we put the clothes together? And flowers fade and disintegrate after awhile.

Would we have to start all over again?”

Mr. Joe and Jimmy Jake thought and thought.

“Spit.” The hudgeon announced firmly.

“Spit?” said Mr. Joe “That’s silly,” Lily Rose looked insulted and they were all silent for awhile.

“Not any old spit. Hudgeon spit. It’s magic, you know. It will hold the blossoms together and protect them.”

Mr. Joe and JJ were chagrined. They had become so involved with everyday matters of bed and food and clothing for the hudgeon, that they had forgotten the obvious: that this small delicate-seeming creature had powers beyond their imagination. A little bit of magic spit was only a hint of what was sure to come.

"Of course," said Mr. Joe, and the three of them set to work.

JJ went gathering blossoms while Lilly Rose put them together into clothes she designed-- lovely garments with flowing lines. "*These pretty dresses suit me fine. I really like these clothes of mine.*"

Jimmy Jake admired the dresses, thought for awhile, and then said, "You know, these dresses are all very pretty, but don't you think you might like something a little more practical to play in?" He

“Wait a minute. I’ll be right back.” He ran into the house and came out with the book opened to a page with colorful pictures of magical creatures, and showed it to her.

“How about something like that?” He pointed to a picture of a small creature dressed in green, with a floppy pointy hat.

floppy, pointy hat. Lilly Rose looked at it and tossed her head disdainfully.

“That is an Elf. A hudgeon is not an Elf!”

“O.K., O.K., but that outfit would be great for climbing trees and running and playing baseball and stuff. Maybe we can make a few changes and turn it into one that is just right for a hudgeon.”

But what could they use for fabric? Flower petals were certainly not strong enough, even with hudgeon spit.

“I know just the thing,” exclaimed JJ, “a pair of my old, faded blue jeans that I don’t wear anymore. We could ask Mr. Joe to cut it up for you, and stitch new clothes out of the material with his machine. Like regular kid’s clothes.”

“Hmm....” she said, looking intently at the boy. “Why doesn’t he make me an outfit like yours?”

“Now, that’s really a good idea.” Jimmy Jake went and got his old jeans and let Lilly feel the material.

“Strong, but not rough or scratchy,” she said. “Let’s take it to Mr. Joe.”

The man was delighted. He set about making a couple of miniature pairs of jeans and tee shirts exactly like JJ’s. He even was able to find a few scraps of soft leather for shoes.

Lilly Rose tried on her new clothes. Not the shoes though. "I have tough feet," she told them, "and my feet need to be free."

For some reason, seeing this tiny, barefoot, thumb-sized version of himself brought out a chuckle from Jimmy Jake, which, as he watched the hudgeon preen herself in front of a mirror, grew into uncontrollable belly laughter.

"Don't you dare laugh at me!"

She picked up a small piece of tailor's chalk and hurled it at JJ with such force that it knocked him right smack down.

Both Jimmy Jake and Mr. Joe, who had been watching, were awestruck.

"I'm sorry I laughed at you. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

"You didn't, really. I hope I didn't hurt you either."

“It’s O.K... but tell me... how did you do that?”

Lily Rose thought for a moment. “I don’t know...

I just did.”