

# **The Three Little Princesses**

## **Part I of The History of Delfinhaem**

A long time ago—longer ago than humans can remember and farther than a trip around the world, stood a kingdom called Delfinhaem. It wasn't a large kingdom. It was about the size of the city we call Baltimore. The hills and valleys of Delfinhaem were beautiful. They were covered with huge trees that made thick, dark forests and streams and rivers that sparkled in the sun and splashed with fishes. The largest river even had small silvery dolphins that jumped and splashed as they chased each other up and down the deep pools.

No houses or barns or taverns or shops stood along the one road that ran through Delfinhaem. All the people lived inside Castle Delfinhaem. When they traveled the road, they did so quickly for fear that a goblin might be hiding in the woods. They were safe so long as they were in the castle. It was strong, with high walls and heavy, unbreakable gates. It had warm houses for the people, shops stuffed with bright clothes, noisy toys, and loaves of mouth-watering bread hot from an oven.

In fact, the great castle was more than just a castle: it was a whole city.

The castle sat at the base of a cliff that went straight up, and this enormous cliff could be seen from the rear gate of the castle. It was really, really straight up. Nobody could climb up or down it without a rope to hang onto. Very few cracks could be found even in which to fasten a rope. So nobody climbed up or down the cliff. And that was a good thing.

The cliff rose so high that it disappeared into the clouds, but it didn't go up forever. At the top it suddenly changed from a straight up cliff to almost flat ground, and only a few yards from the edge began a dense forest like the forests of Delfinhaem. Well, it was almost like the forests down below except—this forest was the home to goblins, trolls, and wolves. No humans lived here.

Delfinhaem Castle had been built to keep the people safe from these monstrous creatures. It had once been packed with people. Long ago the king had an army of brave, loyal soldiers that patrolled the whole kingdom day and night. They kept all the kingdom safe—even the forests and fields outside the castle. Never, never were the goblins or any of the creatures that lived at the top of the cliff allowed to enter the kingdom.

But after King Hiram I died, the kingdom slowly fell into a sad state. Goblins and their packs of wolves crept into the kingdom. The people had to move inside the castle to be safe. Then fewer and fewer people lived there at all, and much of the castle was abandoned, and almost no one entered the abandoned parts for years and years, and if it were not for the magnificent towers and high meandering walls, people would have forgotten that those parts of the castle were there at all.

One part of the castle—about the size of a small village—on the west side overlooking the forests was still occupied on the bright sunny day that this story begins. That part of the castle was well kept, safe, warm, and a friendly home to the king, his family and his people. The king's palace occupied three floors overlooking the main square, the west wall and the main gate to the castle.

The reigning king now was Hiram X, the tenth king to take the name Hiram. He was a good king. As was the custom in Delfinhaem, the king did not travel to a distant land to find a royal lady for his wife. He found a beautiful and clever young woman from Delfinhaem and worked to win her heart. Sometimes it was hard work because the Queen of Delfinhaem would not sit idly all day being served and entertained by maids and princesses. She had work to do. She ruled the kingdom just as much as did the king. The royal seal of Delfinhaem showed a dragon with two heads. One head wore the crown of the king and the other wore the crown of the queen.

On the day of this story, Queen Barbara had awakened her three daughters, supervised their dressing, joined them for breakfast, herded them into the washroom to clean the jam and crumbs from their hands, faces, and teeth, and handed them over to their governesses. They had to study and practice their lessons until noon, and then they were free to play in the large halls of Delfinhaem until dinner time.

The three young princesses were named Mathilde, the oldest, Brunhilde, in the middle, and the youngest one was Clementine. Mathilde was perfectly suited to be the oldest. She was always in charge. She had great ideas for games to play. She watched over the younger ones like a little mother, holding a handkerchief when a nose needed blowing or being sure they dressed warmly. Brunhilde was a ball of mischief. Sometimes she got them all in trouble, but mostly she just made them laugh and laugh. Clementine was quiet most of the time, but it was never quiet inside her head. It was as if about three people all occupied the same head. Ideas popped out of nowhere. The governesses couldn't explain the lessons fast enough for Clementine. And when the bedtime story was read, Clementine was writing her own ending in her head before the story was half finished.

One of the princesses' favorite places to play was in a great hall on the west side of the palace. The hall was so long that the princesses could not run the entire length without stopping to catch their breaths. It had a very high ceiling that was painted to look like the sky and walls trimmed with gilded carvings. Very tall windows stood side by side on one wall for the entire length of the hall. In the afternoon, the sun shone in the windows and lit up the floor in a pattern outlined by the elegant bronze window frames.

Sometimes the princesses would organize ant races. In the long-ago past a hole had been drilled in the wooden floor for some unknown reason. Then later the hole had been patched with a perfectly fitted round plug. Mathilde had decreed that the round floor patch was the starting place for the ants. Each of the girls would search along the walls of the hallway until she had found an ant and carefully carried it to the starting place. Each ant would be given a name. Mathilde might anoint her ant as Horse Collar. Brunhilde might chose Soap Suds, and Clementine's ant might become Pointy Shoes.

When the sun had moved until the round floor patch was in the center of the light coming through a large round section of the window, the ants would be released. The first ant to crawl to the shadow of the window frame was the winner. Clementine would announce some fantastic honor to be conferred upon the winning ant.

At other times the princesses would carefully study the bronze statues that stood along the window wall. One statue stood in front of each column separating two of the tall windows. One day their father had explained that each of the statues was a king who had ruled Delfinhaem. At the south end of the hall where the princesses entered from the part of the palace where they lived stood the

first king of Delfinhaem, Hiram I. He was tall, strong, and looked wise and determined.

The second statue bore a resemblance to the first one. The name at its base was Hiram II. The face was the same as Hiram I. The armor he wore was in the same style as the first king. Something was, however, not quite right about him. After looking at him for a while, one might note that if you stared at his eyes, an empty space could be seen behind them. You and I are at home just behind our eyes. We sit there day after day looking out at the world. Our eyes are like windows through which we look out at the world. Our eyelids are like shutters that we roll down at night and open the next morning. If you stared into the windows of Hiram II, it seemed simply as if no one were at home.

The third statue bore the name Snerdlov I. He was short and broad. His face looked as if he had just smelled something that was very bad. The princesses would often play a game of trying to decide what he had just smelled. Maybe it was a rotten fish guessed Mathilde. No, it was last Thursday's turnip soup thought Clementine. No, no, it was Baron Kruffen's dirty socks after he stepped on the dead fish said Brunhilde, and they all collapsed on the floor in giggles.

After Snerdlov I came three more kings named Hiram—Hiram III, IV, and V—and then came Hiram IX. Why were there no statues for kings Hiram VI, VII, and VIII? The princesses had asked their mother, and she said simply that nobody knew why. Hiram IX was, of course, their grandfather. He had died before the little princesses had been born, but their father had told them stories about him. Then the row of statues ended where someday a statue of their father, Hiram X would stand.

Today the little princesses were restless and full of energy. They ran, they played tag with King Snerdlov I as home base, and then they played scuffle ball. The object of scuffle ball was to see who could be the last one to kick the small rag-stuffed ball before it hit the wall at the end of the long hallway. After a few rounds of scuffle ball they tired of kicking it. When it hit the wall, Brunhilde yelled out, "I win this round," and in spite, Clementine kicked the ball down a hallway that turned right and led off into the interior of the castle.

This hallway was lit only by a few candles, and the princesses only once had gone down it even a short way. Their mother had taken them down there to a storeroom with her so that they could carry some boxes full of papers back to the Queen's office.

Right past the door to the storeroom they ran a new game of tag with no home base. As Brunhilde tagged Clementine, she and Mathilde ran to stay away from being tagged back. Then when Clementine tagged Mathilde, she and Brunhilde raced ahead to avoid the dreaded tag. On and on they went until none of them could run any more. They just stopped and collapsed on the floor and laughed and argued.

"Mathilde, you missed me that last time. You didn't come even close."

"Yes I did. I got your hair."

"Hair doesn't count."

"Yes, it does count. Why not?"

Mathilde didn't answer, and then they all fell silent for a long time. Finally Brunhilde said, "Mathilde, do you know where we are?"

"Do you know how to get back to the palace, Mathilde?" asked Clementine.

Mathilde sat quietly and looked very sad.

"Do you know how to get back home?" asked Clementine again.

"No," Mathilde said very softly, and then as tears filled up her eyes she whispered, "I don't know how. I don't know where we are. I don't....," and then the tears and sobs kept her from saying anything else.

Both Clementine and Brunhilde began to cry. Mathilde moved closer and wrapped her arms around the others. "It'll be okay," she tried to say, but the sobs made it impossible to understand.

Exhausted by the running and afraid to think about what might happen to them, they fell asleep in a huddle on the cold stone floor.

If they had been awake, they would have looked around themselves at an enormous hall, probably a banquet hall at one time long ago. The only light was provided by two candles, one on each side of the hall. A heavy dining table and two chairs sat against one wall. Dark wooden boards covered each wall up as high as the table top and then red cloth ran up to the ceiling. At least the cloth had once stretched to the ceiling, bright red with a shiny pattern woven into it, but now in many places it had fallen down or torn so that rags hung loose here and there.

The little princesses slept perhaps a half an hour. Clementine was the first to awake. Without lifting her head, she opened her eyes and slowly focussed them in the dim candle light. Then she raised her head and sat halfway up and blinked to be sure she really was seeing what she thought she saw.

There, maybe two yards away from her and staring directly at her was a mouse. Clementine had seen mice often enough that she knew a mouse's face with great certainty. But this mouse was so much larger than any other she had ever seen before. If it were to stand on its hind legs, it would be about half as tall as she was. And this was no idle comparison, because the mouse actually was standing on his hind legs, his body as erect and straight as any of the king's soldiers.

His way of standing wasn't the only thing about him that seemed like a soldier. Clementine blinked her eyes several more times to see better in the dim candlelight, and as hard as it was to believe her eyes, she saw that the mouse was wearing a uniform—a uniform just like her father's human soldiers, only about one fourth as tall. His coat was red with shiny brass buttons. A gold braided rope crossed his chest, and deep blue pants were tucked into his black boots. A small sword hung from his belt and he carried a roll of paper under his left arm.

Clementine was too surprised to say anything, but she began to poke at her sisters to wake them up.

The mouse also was surprised to find the princesses here on the floor, but he felt his duty to speak and reassure the small girl who stared at him with just a small bit of fear and a large bit of disbelief in her eyes.

"Please don't be afraid. I....uhh. You don't....ummmm It seems that...oh my." Several times he tried to form what he wanted to say, but so far it wasn't coming out as he wanted it to. Finally he took a deep breath and began again.

"I am Hiram, Captain of His Majesty's Castle Scouts, maker of the official maps of Delfinhaem."

He turned almost halfway away from Clementine and raised his right arm, or his leg, or whatever one is supposed to call the front leg of a mouse who stands on his hind legs and uses his front paws just like humans use their hands. Let's just say it was his arm.

He extended his arm out to call Clementine's attention to seven more mice standing in a formation about another two yards behind Captain Hiram. They also stood erect and wore uniforms. Their pants and boots were just like Captain Hiram's, but their coats were brown with wooden buttons and no gold braid.

"These are my brave and able scouts, mapmakers every one, and faithful servants of the king."

Clementine finally was able to speak.

"You can talk. You act just like humans," she said. "Oh, I'm so rude. Forgive me. I am Clementine, daughter of King Hiram X of Delfinhaem. These are my two sisters, Brunhilde and Mathilde,"

"Yes," Hiram replied with a small mouse smile on his face. "We are not ordinary mice like the ones who pick up crumbs and drops of food to keep your palace clean, but we do not act exactly like humans." He placed a clear emphasis on exactly.

"Please excuse me for just a moment," said Captain Hiram. He stepped quickly back to where the other mice stood. He placed his arm on the shoulder of one of the mice and spoke to him so softly that Clementine could not understand what he said. Immediately, that mouse soldier snapped his head up, clicked the heels of his boots together and ran off down a hallway.

Captain Hiram returned and smiled at the young girls.

The other girls had raised themselves up, and they stared at Captain Hiram along with Clementine. She was now encouraged by Captain Hiram's friendly official manner and his claim to serve her father, the king.

"We are lost," she said. "We were running in the halls, playing tag, and we ran so far that we don't know where we are. Can you help us find our way back to the castle?"

Even though Captain Hiram had stood straight and tall throughout his conversation with Clementine, he now lifted his head even higher and pushed out his chest.

"Princess Clementine, my scouts and I would be most pleased to escort you back to your palace," he continued. Then, turning to the other mice, he crisply ordered, "Scouts! Double file! Make room for our royal troupe between your columns."

The six mice quickly formed two lines; three mice in each line. They faced away from the princesses with just enough room for the three princesses to walk between the columns.

"Please, Princess Clementine, could you persuade your sisters to rise and fill in our formation?"

He stood just behind one line of the mice and waved his arm to indicate that the princesses should march in a line between the two lines of mice. Clementine nudged her sisters up to their feet. She hopped up and skipped into the formation. Then, without waiting for the other two princesses to join, Captain Hiram clicked his heels together, turned, and marched to the front of the three lines of marchers.

"Forward, march," he called back, and the two columns of mice stepped forward in unison and began to march after Captain Hiram. Clementine was a bit slow to start since she wasn't accustomed to the order to "march." One skip and two quick steps brought her back even with the front mouse in each column. She giggled a little in spite of thinking it wasn't appropriate. Then she turned her head and called out to Mathilde and Brunhilde, "Come on! We're going home."

Now Mathilde and Brunhilde ran and caught up with the marchers and filled in the ranks behind Clementine.

Captain Hiram gave a quick, very soft order. Clementine didn't really understand what he said. It seemed something like, "Now hum."

It was clear in any case to the marching scouts. They joined Captain Hiram and began to sing the song printed here.

# The Delfin Thing

Wendell Wiggins

The musical score is written on three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a tempo marking of 120. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics 'We are mice, and we're ex - plo - rers. We can march, and we can sing as we search the halls to - geth - er, look - ing for the Del-' are placed below the notes. The second staff starts with a rest followed by a melodic line marked 'Whistled'. The lyrics '- fin Thing.' are below. The third staff begins with a treble clef and a tempo marking of 60, with the instruction 'Very slow and stately' above it. The melody is composed of quarter and eighth notes, ending with a double bar line.

They sang the song through several times. All the mice grinned and most ostentatiously slowed down at the part of the song where "Very Slow and Stately" is marked. Their steps were not only slow, but they stretched out their legs and took steps as long as they could. The first time they came to this part of the song, it surprised the princesses, and they stopped in their tracks and stared at the mice. Then seeing the smiles and winks the mice gave each other as they resumed their formal marching, the princesses laughed out loud, joined back in the marching and began to sing along as best they knew how. After a couple more times through the song, they were doing pretty well. Pretty well, that is, except for the whistling. None of them could whistle. They tried. They tried very hard, but all that came out was the sound of lots of air.

Even the scouts began to laugh at the pathetic attempts to whistle. Captain Hiram turned his head and simply stared at the scouts with a frown. They instantly fell quiet and turned their heads straight forward. Then Captain Hiram's frown turned into a big smile, and everyone began a new verse of the song.

The princesses were having such a good time that they forgot they had been lost. They forgot that they had been afraid. They forgot their tears. And they were completely surprised when they turned a corner and found themselves back in the big hall with the tall windows and the statues of all the kings of Delfinhaem.

Unable to march on because of their excitement at being home, they ran ahead of the scouts. Only Clementine remembered her manners—at least a little bit. When she was a few yards ahead of the scouts, she turned and called back, "Thank you! Thank you! I'll tell the King and Queen how you helped us, how you brought us home!"

And then as an afterthought she turned her head back again and called, "I hope you'll come to visit."

## Epilogue

Clementine and her sisters told her mother and father about how they got lost at dinner that night. The King and Queen said nothing except to ask a few small questions as they told the story. Then when they finished with how they marched back and sang and whistled, the Queen said simply, "I know."

"You know?" said Brunhilde.

"Yes, I already knew most of your story. Captain Hiram sent a messenger to me as soon as he found you. He told me where you were, in the old banquet hall, and said you all were safe." Then she began to softly sing the same marching song, "We are mice and we're explorers...."

"You know the song?" the three princesses all said at the same time.

"Of course. The mice always sing it when they march. I've heard it since I was even younger than you, Clementine." The Queen smiled at the puzzled look on the girls' faces. "I guess you all have to learn to whistle now."



About a week later on a very dark rainy day, Clementine was playing in her room. It was too dull to play by the tall windows and statues. She was talking to one of her dolls.

"Elizabeth, you simply must learn to drink your tea more neatly. You spill it all over..."

She stopped in the middle of the sentence to listen. She thought she had heard something. A soft knocking sound. Her mouth opened to resume her lecture to Elizabeth when she heard it again. The knocking was coming from inside the wall behind her. She put a finger up to her mouth to be sure Elizabeth would be quiet, and then turned around. Knock, knock, knock, three times. It seemed to come from about as high off the floor as Elizabeth stood. Clementine's room had lots of pictures painted on the walls. On one wall was trees, flowers, grassy meadows, and a clear blue stream. Another wall had a beautiful view of the ocean. Windows, doors, tables, chairs, shelves full of books, and other furnishings like the real ones in the castle were painted on the wall in front of Clementine. In fact, the knocking sound came from where a door was painted on the wall. For a doorknob, a large seashell button was sewn on the wall.

"Hello," called out Clementine. "Is someone there? I hear you knocking."

"It's me," said a small but clear voice. "Captain Hiram. Push the button on the door."

Feeling sort of silly because she was talking to a door painted on her bedroom wall, she pushed on the button, and it moved in toward the wall, and the door actually opened. Captain Hiram stepped out into her room. He lifted his hat and bowed to the princess.

"Captain Hiram at your service, Princess Clementine, and a very good but rainy day to you."

Clementine was so surprised to see Captain Hiram. She was also very, very surprised to find out that the door painted on her wall was actually painted right on top of a real door. Her surprise was so great that it was a moment before she could speak.

"My goodness. You pop up in the most unexpected places. I'm so glad to see you, Captain Hiram. I've been wanting to see you again. Can you teach me to whistle?"

"Of course I can," he said. "Please call me just Hiram. The Queen has given her approval for me to visit with you from time to time and to tell you some of the strange history of Delfinhaem. I will be happy to teach you the old stories, and I will gladly teach you to whistle."

And he did. Quite often on rainy days the soft knock would come. Clementine would push the button doorknob, and Hiram would spend the day with his new friend telling the old, old stories, about how it came to be that he and his family could walk and talk like humans, about the days when King Hiram I drove the goblins and trolls out of Delfinhaem and built the huge castle, and about how the Delfin Thing came to be, and how it was lost, and how Hiram and his scouts had been ordered by the King to map the entire castle and one day to find the Delfin Thing.