

Luke and Molly are guided on the adventure of their lives by a talking owl. Help comes in many forms, a knight, a dragon, a dwarf, and a magic golden ring.

A RING OF PROTECTION

By Carol Stout

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A Ring of Protection



An owl leads a brother and sister
into a dangerous, magical world

Carol Stout

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CHAPTER 3

Owl was getting ready to fly into the forest to talk with Wally. She needed to warn him that he would have company for dinner tonight. Owl had known Wally for at least 40 years; she'd first spotted him collecting rocks and piling them up to build the walls of his future house. They had become friends right away.

Wally was a hermit. Therefore, as far as Owl knew, he never had visitors, except for her, of course. She wondered, *Doesn't everyone need time to prepare for guests, especially uninvited guests?* It didn't enter her mind that Wally might not welcome strangers into his home or that he might be shy. Maybe he just wanted to stay away from other people.

"Molly, keep walking north 'til you reach a clearing." Owl instructed, "Wally's shack is in the middle of that clearing. I've checked the forest for possible danger, and it's safe, so relax and enjoy the walk. We'll be expecting you to arrive early this afternoon. When you arrive, I'll introduce you to Wally." With a flap of her wings, soundlessly, the bird disappeared high in the treetops.

“Wow,” Luke murmured to his sister as they stepped into the forest. “This is a lot farther than I’ve ever been before. Anything could be hidden here; it’s so dense. Why even Father could be here, maybe injured or being held against his will.” He felt a tingle of excitement and new freedom, “I feel like an explorer in an unfamiliar world.”

He pictured himself the hero, a bold leader in each imagined skirmish he dreamed up. Now he pictured himself freeing Father, and he could hear the man’s voice in his head: “Son, you saved me! I would have been dinner for some wild beast if you hadn’t arrived and set me free. How can I ever repay you?” Luke’s daydream ended immediately when his overalls caught on a sharp branch poking out from a fallen tree limb. He twisted and pulled hard to free himself, tearing another hole in his already tattered overalls.

“Rags, Rags, Rags,” Molly squealed with glee. “No longer can we call you Patches, now it will always be Rags.” She bent over, laughing long and hard. He had been bossing her around for two days. It felt good to tease him and show him he wasn’t as special as he thought he was.

Luke hid his irritation and embarrassment well. “Rags it is then, if that makes you happy, Molly.”

The trees towered above the children, nearly blocking the sunlight. A thick layer of fallen leaves and pine needles carpeting the forest floor crackled with each step, releasing

a pleasant, dry, woodsy smell. “These trees are so tall and grow so closely together; I feel like a tadpole in a lake when it tries to swim to the surface. All it sees, feels, and smells is water,” Luke commented. The forest is like an endless, shadowy, green world, as the lake is to the tadpoles.”

“Let’s sing some of the songs Mom taught us. It will make the time pass faster,” Molly suggested. She was already homesick and yearned for the comforting sound of her mother’s voice. They continued walking to the cadence of their voices singing old family favorites.

As they traveled through the forest, Luke and Molly were unaware of possible danger lurked nearby. A dark form silently followed them, tracking their every move. The density of the forest concealed the creature.

After walking for close to three hours, they reached the clearing. The area was barren, no grass, plants, or even weeds, just hard-packed dirt around a tiny building.

Luke couldn’t believe his eyes. “This can’t be his home! It’s too small! I can’t imagine a grown man could live here. Maybe it’s a child’s playhouse.”

Piled up stones created the shack’s outer walls, and its roof was thatched straw, similar to the roofs on the cottages back in their village. Firewood had been neatly stacked against the back wall, and smoke was rising from the

chimney. Both were cheery signs someone did live here and was probably nearby.

Wally was sitting inside, uneasy at the prospect of strangers in his home. No one else had ever been inside his shack in all these years. He lived alone in the middle of a forest for a good reason; he was opening the door to who knows what. Owl had told him about Luke and Molly's plight. That they were traveling alone after their home and village had been burned to the ground. Their sad story didn't touch the dread in his heart. Still, Owl was an old and honorable friend. Wally put on his best smile, adjusted his animal skin clothing, and reached for the door.

A dwarf, about Molly's size, shuffled out to greet the children. His face was wrinkled and brown from years in the sun like one of Molly's apple faced dolls. The man's eyes twinkled with good humor beneath heavy, bushy brows. In his right hand, he was holding a strange-looking stick.

"Come in, come in, Molly and Luke. Owl tells me you've not eaten a real meal for two days. We'll fix that right now. My name is Waldo, but please call me Wally. That's the name I answer to."

Owl swooped in at the sound of her name, landing on Wally's roof. "Sorry I'm late. However, I see that my introductions weren't needed after all," she hooted. Fluffing

her feathers, she adjusted her wings and flicked her tail as she settled onto her perch.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Luke replied, respectfully to Wally. “We’ve been traveling all day, so your kindness is much appreciated.” He hoped he sounded more like his father and less like a young boy.

“Is that stick your holding for protection?” Molly asked. “Why does it have strings attached to it?”

“It’s not just a plain old stick,” laughed Wally. “This is the bow for my fiddle.”

Although neither of them knew what a fiddle was, they weren’t about to ask. *We’ll find out soon enough*, thought Luke.

As they approached Wally’s house, they could smell baked bread and stew cooking. Their mouths watered, and stomachs rumbled. “Owl guided us to the right place just in time, didn’t she?” Molly whispered. “I’m so hungry.”

Luke nodded silently. He was always hungry, but this afternoon it felt like he hadn’t eaten for a week.

Once they were inside, the shack seemed even smaller. It was just one room with one door and one window. The room seemed crowded, even though there was barely any furniture. Wally had placed a low table with a bench under the window. In one corner of the room sat his bed; they could see that he had created it by piling up dry grass then covering the grass with animal skins. Light from the

fireplace reflected and glowed on the smooth, shiny surface of a violin in the shadows. Next to the violin, a flute, a drum, and musical pipes were placed. Except for the violin, the rest of the instruments looked handmade.

Wally enjoyed whittling and had placed many of his carvings of local animals on the mantle. A hook inside the fireplace held a large pot, and it hung steaming over the glowing coals. That pot was filled to the brim with delicious smelling stew. Four small loaves of freshly baked bread sat cooling on the hearth.

“I eat out of bread bowls every day. My edible bowls save me time and work. No dishes to wash, plus they’re tasty, even if I do say so myself!” Wally boasted with a chuckle. “Take a seat, and I’ll serve you some rabbit stew.”

Luke spoke up: “Sir, I hope you like peaches. We’ve brought at least a dozen just picked yesterday. They’d make a nice dessert after supper tonight. There will be plenty left tomorrow for breakfast as well.” He took a peach out of his backpack to show Wally.

Luke filled his bread bowl twice and ate everything, including the bowl. He leaned over and whispered to his sister, “I swear, I’m so full I’ll never need to eat again.” Molly giggled, nodding in agreement.

Wally told Luke and Molly he liked to play a little music after supper, once they finished supper. “Do you

know any songs? We can sing them together while I play the melodies on my fiddle and flute.”

Molly quickly called out the titles of her favorite songs. “My very favorite is “*Greensleeves*,” it’s kind of sad but so beautiful,” Wally played “*Greensleeves*” for her three times. Then the three of them continued singing many other country songs. They were laughing, joking, forgetting the words, then mixing up the words to the songs. It was so much fun; all their worries and sadness seemed a thing of the past.

Owl had hoped for this when she guided the children here. In her wisdom, she knew there was nothing more healing than laughter and music. *I hope they’ll forget for a while what happened to their home and village. Wally can learn something as well. Not to be so afraid of outsiders. Only good can come out of this time for the three of them,* she thought.

It was twilight when the singing ended. “How did you learn to play all these musical instruments? Did you make them all yourself? Maybe you could teach me how to make a flute.” Luke’s thoughts were running together in his excitement.

“My father was a minstrel,” Wally replied. “We traveled from town to town. He played his music for food, a place to sleep, and sometimes even money. He taught me how to play some of the instruments. The violin, I call it a fiddle,

was a gift for my twelfth birthday. I learned all the songs that my father played and sang while we traveled. Sometimes he let me join him and entertain the villagers.”

“You’ve been so kind to us, Wally, and singing along with your music was great fun. Thank you so much for letting us stay here tonight. We had to sleep on cold, rocky ground last night, so this will be heavenly. The stew and bread bowls were so delicious; you’re a really good cook.” Molly felt at home and comfortable sitting at Wally’s table visiting. “Do you ever get frightened alone out here in the forest? I’d be terrified! Luke says I’m a scaredy-cat.”

“I was frightened at first. I was only sixteen when I first came here to live. I’m used to the forest now. All the sounds, smells, the seasonal changes, are familiar, like old friends.”

Luke and Molly took the stew pot, ladle, and eating utensils to a nearby creek to wash them. Washing up after supper was one of their chores at home, so it seemed natural to do it here.

As he was gathering the cookware, Luke thought he saw a large form moving in the bushes. Because the sunlight was gone, and the moon hadn’t risen yet, it was very dark. The many tall trees and the dense shrubbery created shadows everywhere so that he couldn’t see clearly. *My mind is playing tricks on me. Too much excitement and not enough sleep*, he tried convincing himself. “Molly, let’s

hurry back, so Wally doesn't worry about us being gone too long," Luke said hurriedly, as he jumped up and headed back to the shack. Knowing his sister was nervous enough about this trip, Luke decided not to mention anything about what he believed he saw.

Wally showed them where he kept the dry grass he used to create his bed. Luke and Molly built their two beds near the fireplace. Wally placed deer skins over the grass. Once satisfied that the beds were exactly right, he handed each of the children a blanket made of rabbit hide with the fur side facing down. "These should keep you cozy all night." He grinned, glowing with pride.

Old Man Moon had risen above the treetops by the time Luke and Molly finally tumbled into their new beds. After the event-filled last couple of days, they were both ready for a good night's sleep. Once their eyes closed, they didn't open them again all night.

They were eating pancakes with sliced peaches in the morning when Wally let out a loud sigh, "All these years I convinced myself I didn't need anyone or that I didn't miss the company of others. I won't be able to hide from loneliness any longer. I'll miss you when you leave. Now my door and heart are open, and I'm looking forward to new friends. I understand you have a mission to warn others about the destruction and pain caused by those marauders. I

truly hope you track down what happened to your father and can bring him home safely.”

“The path you’re going to follow starts at the base of that tree where Owl’s perched. Take these hard-boiled quail eggs and some of my home-made venison jerky. Don’t forget this loaf of bread, too. These items will travel well and give you the strength to complete your journey. You’ll come to a fork in the path after a short walk. Be sure to take the left fork, not the one on the right. The left-hand path is the safest one to travel.”

Owl spoke up. “Don’t worry, Wally. I’ll guide them from here.”

Wally started waving his stubby arms as he ran after them. “Wait, wait! – With this morning’s excitement, I almost forgot, the most important thing of all.” Out of breath, Wally bent forward with his hands on his knee, then he continued, “Luke, I have a gift for you. It’s a ring of protection. Your sister has Owl to assist her, so I thought you should have this amulet. I’m too old to be of any help to you on your coming adventure. This ring may provide even more help than I could have on my best day.”

The ring appeared to be solid gold; its top was shaped like a warrior’s shield. Still breathing heavily, Wally continued, “Twist the ring to the right to heal any wound, injury, or sickness. Twist it left, and an ally will arrive to

assist you. Remember Luke; this will not be your last or only adventure. Life itself is an adventure, you know.”

Luke spoke with a catch in his voice, “You’re too generous! I don’t have the right words to thank you for such a magnificent gift. All I can say is, thank you!” The boy’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. The very thought that a stranger would give him such a valuable gift filled him with emotion... He was thanking Wally for the gold ring, not the power the ring might provide. Luke didn’t believe for one minute that this ring, or any ring, possessed magical powers.

CHAPTER 4

Sun shining through the forest leaves created dappled light and dark patterns on the path. A gentle cool breeze tousled Luke's dark hair as it played with the folds of Molly's full skirt. "What a perfect day. As Father would have said, this day was made for a walk in the woods." Molly's voice clearly showed her high spirits as she skipped down the path.

"Thank you so much for leading us to Wally. The stew and bread bowls were yummy, and we slept all night in those warm cozy beds. He was so kind and generous to us. It surprised us when we saw that Wally was a dwarf. We had never seen a dwarf before. Why did you say a man lived in the forest, rather than telling us he was a dwarf?" Molly asked.

Owl flew down and landing on Molly's shoulder before she answered the question, "I don't see others as fat or thin, tall or short, old or young. I see only the difference between good or evil when considering humans. Most creatures in the animal kingdom see humans the way I do."

Molly strolled along, considering Owl's answer. "That makes sense."

Luke had no interest in his sister's one-sided conversations with Owl. He was enchanted with his new, magnificent ring. He felt much wiser and more capable as he admired it. After all, children did not own or wear gold rings, at least not the children he knew.

They'd walked for several hours when they came to the fork in the path. The two paths splitting at the fork looked exactly the same, so did the woods on either side of them. Wally had been clear that they should take the path to the left. Luke, however, decided it was time for him to take charge. "Molly, we'll travel on the path to the right."

Quickly, Owl warned Molly, "I can't travel with you on that path. Please go left so I can guide and protect you."

When Molly repeated Owl's request to Luke, he flippantly replied, "Mother told me to watch out for you and take care of you. I can make decisions without a bird or a dwarf telling me what to do!"

A loud rush of wind whooshed in at that moment, kicking up a flurry of dust. Clouds must have passed over the sun, for the daylight seemed to dim as well. Owl cocked her head and fluffed her feathers, then tried again. "To the right is too dangerous. Explain to your brother that the more companions traveling together, the better for all of them. Safety in numbers, as the saying goes."

Molly started repeating Owl's suggestion when Luke interrupted her, "I'm tired of you quoting Owl's ideas to

me. I don't need reminders or directions from her," Luke felt left out and unimportant when Molly and Owl conversed with each other. Resentment had been growing in him. Poor Luke had let the ring go to his head. He imagined himself an important young man, a leader, not a follower. Once shy and polite, now Luke was filled with unearned self-importance.

"Tell Owl I'll take care of my own sister. We appreciate her help up 'til now, but we can finish this trip without her." Luke hurried forward, taking the path to the right. "It's called the right path, so that's the one I choose. Come on, Molly, let's go."

Confused and unsure about his decision, Molly trailed behind him. "I-I want to go home." she stammered. "I know M-Mom is looking for us. Owl only wants to help us; she has been right up 'til now, hasn't she? This place doesn't feel s-safe."

"Don't be silly," Luke scolded her. "We can always turn around, but where is the fun in that? Remember what Owl told you; our home is gone. Let's give our mission a chance. It could be fun; if you'd let it."

"Is Mother gone, too? Are we orphans? Is that a secret you're not telling me?" Molly felt lost and alone, even though she was with Luke.

He laughed and scolded her, "Of course we're not orphans! What gave you that foolish idea anyway? Mother

will be waiting for us when we return home.” Luke wasn’t sure about what he’d just said. An icy sick feeling of fear started to grow inside him. *Was Molly, right? Were they alone in the world now? Could it be true that they were orphans?*

To help dispel the doubts forming in his mind, Luke began to whistle an imaginary tune as he strolled down the path. Glancing for the hundredth time at the ring, he thought, *This is how our adventure is supposed to be! I’m leading and taking care of my sister as an older brother should. Right path or left path, they both looked the same as far as I could see. Why all the fuss anyway?* Feeling in control again, he relaxed and put on his most confident grin.

Molly, on the other hand, was not sure her brother had made the right decision, going against the advice of others, “Sometimes you could listen to those who know more than you do, Luke. We’ve never been here before, so why didn’t you pay attention to what Owl suggested and Wally’s warnings?”

Molly knew Owl and Wally had their best interests at heart. She missed Owl. Their talks reminded her of how she felt when she spent time with Mother. They were both so wise. Lagging reluctantly behind her brother, Molly slowly followed, scuffing her feet in the dust. Deep down inside,

she knew they were heading for trouble, but she believed she had no voice in the matter.

The breeze was more forceful now. The wind was gaining strength, rustling the leaves above their heads. Feeling as agitated as the leaves, Molly asked, "What do you say we find a protected place out of this wind? Where we can sit and eat some of those quail eggs and bread."

"Let's get some more distance behind us. I'm not that hungry yet," Luke replied. "A little wind never hurt anyone. In fact, it gives me energy!"

Increasing in intensity, the wind grabbed Molly's straw hat carrying it high into the treetops. The wind was stripping leaves off the branches exposing bare, black, gnarled limbs. They seemed to reach out for the children, catching on their clothes and pulling their hair. Gusts of wind whipping through the trees made a mournful moaning sound. The woods seemed alive and menacing.

"This is a creepy place. Please, Luke, let's find a protected spot, out of this wind," Molly begged.

Luke had to admit the quick changes around them were more than a little bit spooky. He spied some brush growing against a dirt embankment. They struggled over to what appeared to be a safe spot, then huddled together for protection against the wind. From his backpack, Luke removed the eggs and bread Wally had given them this morning. Small twigs were breaking loose and flying in

every direction. The wind was kicking up dust, and it was swirling in the air, irritating the children's eyes. They both started coughing.

Luke stood up quickly, feeling a prickling on the back of his neck. He thought he saw something move in a tangle of brush nearby. *Is that the same figure I saw down at the creek yesterday?* Silently he took several steps toward the bushes where he was sure the creature was lurking. "Is there someone there?" He called out.

Above their heads, at the top of the embankment, came a loud cracking sound. A massive branch had broken loose from an old oak tree. It plunged downward, landing across Molly's legs, knocking her flat. She let out a cry of pain, then fainted.

"Molly, Molly, wake up! Open your eyes, please, Molly!" Luke cried as he shook his sister, begging her to get up. *What have I done? Why didn't I listen to those with experience? How could I have thought my choices were the only ones?* Luke's flushed cheeks were wet with tears as he moaned. The confidence he'd felt only a few minutes ago crumbled. *What do I do now?* Luke fell to his knees, sobbing into his shaking hands. Fear and guilt took over his thoughts, *Oh!, how I wish Father were here. He'd know exactly what to do.*

The memory of an afternoon long ago came back to the boy. Father had been doing chores with little Luke, as

always, following closely behind him. He remembered Father's words and actions, 'Son, to move that boulder blocking the path, we'll need a lever. Anything can be moved with a lever if it's long enough.' Chuckling, he'd added, 'I've heard it might be possible to move the whole earth if you could find a lever long enough.' Now Luke knew what to do and how to do it.

He got up and searched the area for a long, firm limb. After some hunting, he found one that would work. Dragging it back to Molly's side, he placed one end under the fallen branch lying across her legs, as he'd seen Father place the bar under the boulder long ago. Moving a large rock a few feet away from the unconscious girl, he placed it under the limb. Now he had a lever.

After several tries, the branch started to lift. Slowly he moved it away from Molly's legs. Her skirt and blouse were dirty and torn in several places. Staring at her twisted bleeding legs, Luke knew immediately that they were broken. His heart ached for his injured sister. Worry and fear took over his thoughts and actions.

"What a mess we're in! I'm not strong enough to carry Molly out of here, and I can't leave her here," Luke mumbled to himself as he trudged in circles. "I know there must be a way to help her, but I can't think what it could be." His thoughts were as confused and circular as his movements had become. Wringing his hands until his

fingertips were white, accidentally, he turned the golden ring.

Instantly, Molly's bruises and cuts began to disappear, then her legs slowly straightened. Luke stood, watching in awe. "I wish Father were here to see this miracle," he said to himself. As he continued to watch, the bones in her broken legs mended.

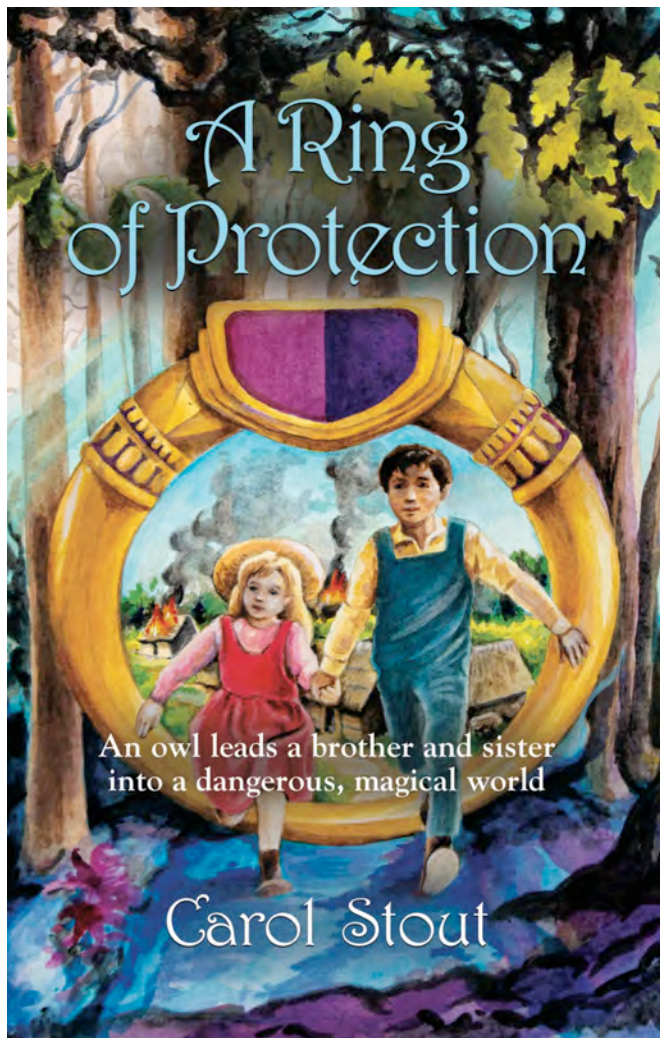
"What was that loud crash? Why're you crying, Luke?" Molly was conscious but confused. She had no memory of the branch falling and breaking her legs.

It took Luke some time to explain what'd happened. He told her about remembering their father creating a lever and how seriously injured she'd been. When he came to the part about twisting the ring and the incredible miracle that followed, Molly wasn't surprised.

"Now you know magic is everywhere. You've seen it with your own eyes." She exclaimed, "You'll be able to hear Owl yourself. I won't have to tell you what she's saying anymore."

The wind had calmed to short gusts. "From now on, I'll refer to these terrible woods as the Windy Woods," Luke declared. "Let's hurry out of here. I've experienced enough magic for one day." He quickly added, "I'm so grateful for that magic though, yessiree, I surely am!" His smile was wide as he gazed at the ring on his finger with new respect.

Then Luke did something entirely out of character. He put both his arms around his sister, hugging her tightly. “Thank goodness you’re okay, Molly,” he whispered, holding her like he never wanted to let go.



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