

The Tinderbox

A soldier came marching along the high road. One, two! One, two! He had been to the wars and he was on his way home now. He met an old witch on the road; she was so ugly, her lower lip hung right down on to her chin.

She said, "Good evening, soldier! What a nice sword you've got, and such a big knapsack! You shall have as much money as ever you like!"

"Thank you kindly, you old witch!" said the soldier.

"Do you see that big tree?" said the witch. "It is hollow inside! Climb up to the top and you can let yourself down! I will tie a rope round your waist so that I can haul you up again when you call!"

"What am I to do down under the tree?" asked the soldier.

"Fetch money!" said the witch. "When you get down to the bottom of the tree you will find yourself in a wide passage. You will see three doors. If you go into the first room, you will see a big box. A dog is sitting on the top of it, and he has eyes as big as saucers. I will give you my blue checked apron, which you can spread out on the floor; then take up the dog and put him on my apron, open the box and take out as much money as ever you like. It is all copper, but if you like silver better, go into the next room. There you will find a dog with eyes as big as millstones; put him on my apron and take the money. If you prefer gold, you go into the third room. But the dog sitting on that box has eyes each as big as the Round Tower. You only have to put him on to my apron, and you can take as much gold out of the box as you like!"

"That's not so bad!" said the soldier. "But what am I to give you, old witch?"

"I only want you to bring me an old tinderbox that my grandmother forgot the last time she was down there!"

"Well! Tie the rope round my waist!" said the soldier.

"Here it is," said the witch.

Then the soldier climbed up the tree, let himself slide down the hollow trunk, and found himself in the wide passage. Now he opened the first door. Ugh! There sat the dog with eyes as big as saucers staring at him.

He put the dog on to the witch's apron and took out as many pennies as he could cram into his pockets. Then he shut the box, put the dog on the top of it again, and went into the next room. Hallo! There sat the dog with eyes as big as millstones.

Then he put the dog on the apron, but when he saw all the silver in the box, he threw away all the coppers and stuffed his knapsack with silver. Then he went on into the third room. That dog really had two eyes as big as the Round Tower, and they rolled round and round like wheels.

He had never seen such a dog in his life; but then he lifted him down on to the apron and opened the chest. What a lot of gold! He could buy the whole of Copenhagen with it, and all the sugar pigs from the cake-women, all the tin soldiers, whips, and rocking-horses in the world! Now, he really had got a lot of money. He put the dog back on to the box, shut the door, and shouted up through the tree, "Haul me up, you old witch!"

"Have you got the tinderbox?"

"Oh!" said the soldier. "I had quite forgotten it." And he went back to fetch it. Then the witch hauled him up.

"What do you want the tinderbox for?" asked the soldier.

"That's no business of yours," said the witch.

"Rubbish!" said the soldier. "Tell me directly, or I will draw my sword and cut off your head."

"I won't!" said the witch.



Then the soldier cut off her head! But he tied all the money up in her apron, slung it on his back like a pack, put the tinderbox in his pocket, and marched off to the town.

He went straight to the finest hotel, because he was a rich man now. The people told him all about the grand things in the town, and about their king, and what a lovely princess his daughter was.

“Where is she to be seen?” asked the soldier.

“You can’t see her at all!” they all said. “She lives in a great copper castle surrounded with walls. Nobody but the king dare go in and out, for it has been prophesied that she will marry a common soldier, and the king doesn’t like that!”

He now led a very merry life; now he was rich and had a great many friends, who all said what a nice fellow he was—and he liked to be told that.

He at last found himself with only two pence left. Then he was obliged to move out of his fine rooms. He had to take a tiny little attic up under the roof, clean his own boots, and mend them himself with a darning needle. None of his friends went to see him because there were far too many stairs.

One dark evening, he got out the tinderbox with the candle end in it and struck fire, but as the sparks flew out from the flint, the door burst open and the dog with eyes as big as saucers said, “What does my lord command?”

“Get me some money,” he said to the dog, and away it went.

It was back in a twinkling with a big bag full of pennies in its mouth. Now the soldier saw what a treasure he had in the tinderbox. If he struck once, the dog which sat on the box of copper came; if he struck twice, the dog on the silver box came, and if he struck three times, the one from the box of gold.

He now moved down to the grand rooms and got his fine clothes again, and then all his friends knew him once more and liked him as much as ever.

One day, he struck the flint, and, whisk, came the dog with eyes as big as saucers.

“I am very anxious to see the princess.”

The dog was out of the door in an instant, and before the soldier had time to think about it, he was back with the princess. She was fast asleep on the dog’s back, and she was so lovely that anybody could see that she must be a real princess! The soldier was obliged to kiss her.

Then the dog ran back again with the princess, but in the morning when the king and queen were having breakfast, the princess said that she had had such a wonderful dream about a dog and a soldier. She had ridden on the dog’s back, and the soldier had kissed her.

Now the queen was a very clever woman; she made a pretty little bag which she filled with buckwheat. She then tied it onto the back of the princess, and she cut a little hole in the bag, so that the grains could drop out all the way wherever the princess went.

At night the dog came again, took the princess on his back, and never noticed how the grain dropped out all along the road.

In the morning, the king and the queen easily saw where their daughter had been, and they seized the soldier and threw him into the dungeons.

And they said to him, “Tomorrow, you are to be hanged.” It was not amusing to be told that, especially as he had left his tinderbox behind him at the hotel.

In the morning, he could see through the bars in the little window that the people were hurrying to see him hanged.

“I say, you boy!” said the soldier. “If you will run to the house where I used to live, and fetch me my tinderbox, you shall have a penny!”

The boy was only too glad to have the penny, tore off to get the tinderbox, and gave it to the soldier.

Outside the town, a high scaffold had been raised, and the soldier mounted the ladder, but he said that a criminal was always allowed a harmless wish, and he wanted very much to smoke a pipe.

The king would not deny him this, so the soldier took out his tinderbox and struck fire, once, twice, three times, and there were all the dogs.

“Help me! Save me from being hanged!” cried the soldier.

And then the dogs rushed at the soldiers, and threw them up many fathoms into the air; and when they fell down, they were broken all to pieces.

The biggest dog took both the king and the queen and threw them after all the others. Then the people shouted, “Oh! good soldier, you shall be our king and marry the beautiful princess!”

The princess came out of the copper palace and became queen, which pleased her very much. The wedding took place in a week, and the dogs all had seats at the table, where they sat staring with all their eyes.