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The Tinder Box

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

A soldier came marching away along the highroad. One! two! One! two! He had his knapsack on his back and a sword at his side, for he had been in the wars, and now he was off home. Well, he met an old witch on the highroad. She *was* ugly! Her lower lip hung right down on her chest. Said she, "Good evening, Soldier! What a fine sword, and what a big knapsack you've got! You *are* a proper soldier. Now you shall get as much money as you care to have."

"Much obliged to you, old Witch," said the soldier.

"Do you see that tree?" said the witch, pointing to the tree that stood just by them. "It's quite hollow inside. You climb up to the top of it, and you'll see a hole that you can let yourself slide down and get right to the bottom of the tree. I'll tie a rope round your waist so as I can hoist you up again when you call to me."

"Well, what am I to do at the bottom of the tree?" asked the soldier.

"Get money," said the witch. "You must know that when you get down to the bottom of the tree you'll be in a long passage. It's quite light, there are more than a hundred lamps burning. There you'll see three doors: you can open them, the keys are in them. If you go into the first room, there you'll see in the middle of the floor a big chest, and on it there sits a dog. He's got a pair of eyes as big as a couple of teacups, but you needn't mind that. I'll give you my blue check apron. You can spread it out on the floor, and then go straight up and pick up the dog and put him on the apron. Open the chest and take as many pence as you like. They're all copper; but if you'd rather have silver, you must go into the next room. There sits a dog who's got a pair of eyes as big as millwheels, but you needn't mind about that: put him on my apron and take the money. But, if on the other hand, you'd like gold, you can get that too, and as much of it as you can carry, if you go into the third room. Only the dog that sits on the chest there has two eyes, each of 'em as big as the Round Tower. He's a dog and a half, I can tell you. But you needn't mind that. Just put him on my apron, he'll do nothing to you, and take as much gold out of the chest as you like."

"That's not so bad," said the soldier, "but what am I to give you, old Witch? For of course you'll be wanting something too, I suppose?"

"No," said the witch, "I don't want a single penny. You need only bring me an old tinder box which my granny left behind by mistake the last time she was down there."

"Right! let's have the rope round me," said the soldier.

"Here you are!" said the witch, "and here's my blue check apron."

So the soldier climbed up the tree and let himself plump down into the hole, and there he was, as the witch had said, down in the big passage where all the hundreds of lamps were burning.

Then he opened the first door. Lor! there sat the dog with eyes as big as teacups, and stared at him.

"You're a nice sort of chap!" said the soldier, and put him on the apron and took as many copper pence as he could carry in his pocket, shut the chest, put the dog on the top again and went into the second room. Gracious! there sat the dog with eyes as big as millwheels.

"You shouldn't look at me so hard!" said the soldier. "You might injure your eyesight!" Then he put the dog on the witch's apron; but when he saw the heaps of silver money in the chest, he threw away all the copper money he had got and filled

his pocket and his knapsack with nothing but silver. Then he went into the third room. No, now, that was awful! The dog there really had two eyes as big as the Round Tower, and they went round and round in his head like wheels.

"Good evening!" said the soldier, and saluted, for such a dog he never had seen before. But after looking at him for a bit he thought perhaps that would do, and lifted him down on to the floor and opened the chest. Mercy on me, what a lot of gold there was! Enough to pay for all Copenhagen and the cakewomen's sugar pigs, and all the tin soldiers and whips and rocking-horses there were in the whole world. There was money there right enough! So the soldier threw away all the silver shillings he had filled his pockets and his knapsack with, and took gold instead; till all his pockets and his knapsack and his cap and his boots got filled up so that he could hardly walk. Now he had got some money! He put the dog back on the chest, slammed the door and then shouted up through the tree:

"Pull me up now, old Witch!"

"Have you got the tinder box?" asked the witch.

"That's true!" said the soldier. "I'd clean forgotten it." So he went and got it. The witch pulled him up and there he was back again on the highroad with his pockets and boots and knapsack and cap full of money.

"What do you want with the tinder box?" asked the soldier.

"That's got nothing to do with you!" said the witch. "You've got your money all right. Just give me the tinder box."

"Fiddlesticks!" said the soldier. "You tell me straight off what you mean to do with it, or I'll cut out with my sword and cut your head off."

"No!" said the witch.

So the soldier cut her head off. There she lay! But he tied up all his money in her apron and put it on his shoulder in a bundle, shoved the tinder box into his pocket and went straight to the town.

It was a splendid town, and into the finest hotel he went, and ordered the very best rooms and the dishes he liked best, for he was rich, now that he had all that money.

The servant who had to clean his boots certainly thought they were very funny old boots for such a rich gentleman to have; but he hadn't bought any new ones yet. Next day he got boots to walk in and clothes of the smartest. The soldier was now become a fine gentleman, and they told him about all the splendid things that were in their town, and about their King, and what a pretty princess his daughter was.

"Where can one get a sight of her?" the soldier asked.

"Oh, she can't be seen at all," they all said. "She lives in a big copper castle with lots of walls and towers round it. Nobody but the King dares go in and out to her, for it's been foretold that she'll be married to a quite common soldier, and the King can't have that!"

"Well, I'd like enough to see her," thought the soldier; but he couldn't anyhow get leave to do so.

Well, he lived a very merry life, went to the play, drove in the royal gardens, and gave a lot of money to the poor, and that was a nice thing to do; he knew well enough from old times how horrid it was not to have a penny-piece. He was well off now, and had smart clothes and made a number of friends, who all said he was a good sort and a real gentleman, which pleased the soldier very much. But as every day he laid out money and got none at all back, the end of it was that he had no more than twopence left, and so he had to shift out of the nice rooms where he had lodged, up into a tiny little garret right under the roof, and clean his boots for himself and mend them with a darning needle; and none of his friends came to see him, because there were so many stairs to climb.

One evening it was quite dark, and he couldn't even buy himself a candle. But just then he remembered that there was a little stump of one in the tinder box he had got from the hollow tree where the witch had helped him down. He got out the

tinder box and the stump of candle, and just as he struck it and the spark flew out of the flint, the door sprang open, and the dog that had eyes as big as teacups, whom he had seen down under the tree, stood before him and said: "What are my lord's orders?" "What's this?" said the soldier, "why, this is a jolly tinder box. Can I get whatever I want like this? Get me some money," said he to the dog, and pop! he was back again with a big bag full of coppers in his mouth. Now the soldier saw what a lovely tinder box this was. If he struck once, the dog came that sat on the chest with the copper money, if he struck twice the one that had the silver came, and if he struck three times the one that had the gold. The soldier moved back now into the nice rooms, got into the smart clothes, and at once all his friends recognized him, and were very fond of him indeed.

Well, once upon a time he thought to himself: "It's a rum thing, so it is, that one can't get a sight of the Princess. They all say she's very pretty, but what's the use of that if she's got to stay all the time inside that big copper castle with all the towers? Can't I anyhow get a sight of her? Where's that tinder box?" So he struck a light, and pop! here comes the dog with the eyes as big as teacups. "I know it's the middle of the night," said the soldier, "all the same, I should dearly like to see the Princess, if it was only for a minute." The dog was off through the door at once, and before the soldier had time to think, here he was again with the Princess: she was sitting on the dog's back, asleep, and she was so pretty, anybody could see she was a real Princess. The soldier couldn't help it, he had to kiss her, for he was a genuine soldier. Then the dog ran back again with the Princess. But when it was morning, and the King and Queen were pouring out their tea, the Princess said she had had such a funny dream that night about a dog and a soldier! She had ridden on the dog, and the soldier had kissed her.

"Upon my word, that's a nice story!" said the Queen.

One of the old Court ladies had to watch at the Princess's bedside the next night, to see if it really was a dream, or what else it might be.

The soldier longed dreadfully to see the beautiful Princess again: so the dog came in the night and took her and raced off as hard as he could. But the old lady-in-waiting put on water boots and ran after him just as fast, and when she saw them disappear into a big house she thought: "Now I know where it is," and she drew a large cross on the door with a bit of chalk. Then she went home and got into bed, and the dog came back too, with the Princess. But when he saw there was a cross drawn on the door where the soldier lived, he too took a bit of chalk and put crosses on all the doors in the whole town; and that was clever of him, for now the lady-in-waiting couldn't find the right door, since there was a cross on everyone of them.

Early in the morning the King and Queen and the old lady-in-waiting and all the officials came out to see where it was that the Princess had been. "Here it is!" said the King, when he saw the first door with a cross on it. "No, it's here, my darling husband," said the Queen who spied the next door with a cross on it.

"But here's one, and there's one!" said everybody. Wherever they looked there were crosses on the doors, so they could see it was no use searching.

The Queen, however, was a very clever woman who knew more than how to drive in a coach. She took her large gold scissors and clipped a big piece of silk into bits, and then made a pretty little bag; this she filled with fine buckwheat flour, tied it to the Princess's back, and when that was done, she cut a little hole in the bag so that the flour could run out all along the way where the Princess went.

At night the dog came again and took the Princess on his back and ran off with her to the soldier, who was very fond of her and would dearly have liked to be a prince, so as to have her for his wife.

The dog never noticed the flour running out all the way from the castle to the soldier's window, where he used to run up the wall with the Princess. So in the morning the King and Queen could see plain enough where their daughter had disappeared to, and they took the soldier and put him in the lock-up.

There he sat. Ugh! how dark and dismal it was; and then they said to him: "To-morrow you're to be hung." It wasn't amusing to be told that; and he'd left his tinder box behind at the hotel. Next morning he could see, through the iron bars of the little window, the people hurrying out of the town to see him hung. He heard the drums and saw the soldiers march

off. Everybody was on the move; among them a shoemaker's boy with a leather apron and slippers, going at such a galloping pace that one of his slippers flew off right against the wall where the soldier sat peering out between the iron bars.

"Hi! you shoemaker's boy, you needn't be in such a hurry," said the soldier to him; "nothing'll happen before I come there, but if you don't mind running to the place I lived at and fetching me my tinder box, you shall have fourpence; only you must put your best foot foremost." The shoemaker's boy wanted the fourpence, so he darted off to get the tinder box, and gave it to the soldier, and—now we shall hear what happened!

Outside the town a great gallows had been built, and around it stood the soldiers and many hundred thousands of people. The King and Queen sat on a splendid throne straight opposite the Judge and the whole Privy Council.

The soldier was already on the ladder, but just as they were going to put the rope round his neck, he said that as a criminal was always allowed, before he underwent his punishment, to have one innocent wish granted him, he would dearly like to smoke one pipe of tobacco: it would be the last pipe he smoked in this world. The King wouldn't say no to this, so the soldier took out his tinder box and struck a light. One! two! three! and there were all the dogs; the one with eyes as big as teacups, the one with eyes like millwheels, and the one with eyes as big as the Round Tower.

"Help me now, so as I shan't be hung," said the soldier; and the dogs dashed at the judges, and all the council; took one by the legs and another by the nose and threw them yards and yards up in the air, so that they tumbled down and were broken all to bits.

"I won't!" said the King; but the biggest dog took him and the Queen too, and threw them after all the rest. Then the soldiers took fright, and all the people called out: "Dear good soldier, you shall be our King and have the lovely Princess." So they put the soldier into the King's coach, and all three dogs danced in front and shouted "hurrah!" and the boys whistled on their fingers, and the soldiers presented arms. The Princess was brought out of the copper castle and made Queen, and very much pleased she was. The wedding lasted eight days, and the dogs sat at table and made great eyes.

[End of *The Tinder Box* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]