

The Steadfast Tin Soldier

Once upon a time there were twenty-five tin soldiers, all brothers born of the same mother—an old tin spoon; each had a rifle on his shoulder, held his head straight, and wore a red uniform with blue trim—truly, what splendid soldiers! The first words they heard when their box-house was opened were: "Ah, tin soldiers!" This was shouted by a little boy clapping his hands, to whom the tin soldiers had been given as a birthday present. He immediately began arranging them on the table. All the soldiers were exactly alike, except for one who stood on only one leg. He had been cast last, and there had been just a little too little tin left, yet he stood firmly on his single leg just as the others did on two; and indeed, he turned out to be the most remarkable of them all.

On the table where the soldiers found themselves there were many different toys, but most striking of all was a wonderful palace made of cardboard. Through its tiny windows one could see the palace chambers; right in front of the palace, around a small mirror that represented a lake, stood little trees, and upon the lake swam waxen swans admiring their own reflections. All this was marvelously charming, but most charming of all was the young lady standing on the very threshold of the palace. She was cut out of paper and dressed in a skirt of the finest batiste; across her shoulder ran a narrow blue ribbon like a scarf, and on her breast sparkled a rosette as large as the young lady's own face.

The young lady stood on one leg with her arms extended—she was a dancer—and had raised her other leg so high that our soldier could not see it at all, and he thought the beauty must also be one-legged, just like himself.

"What a wife she would make for me!" he thought. "Only she, evidently, is of noble birth, lives in a palace, while I have nothing but a box, and even in that we are packed twenty-five strong: there is no room for her there! Still, it would do no harm to make her acquaintance."

So he hid behind a snuffbox that stood nearby on the table; from there he could see the lovely dancer perfectly well, still standing on one leg without losing her balance.

Late in the evening all the other tin soldiers were put back into their box, and everyone in the house went to bed. Now the toys began playing "visiting," "war," and "ball" among themselves. The tin soldiers started knocking against the sides of their box—they too wanted to play, but could not lift the lid. The Nutcracker

tumbled about, the slate pencil danced upon the board; such noise and clamor arose that the canary woke up and began speaking too, and even in verse! Only the dancer and the tin soldier did not move from their places: she continued balancing on her extended toe with arms stretched forward, he stood bravely under arms, never taking his eyes off her.

Twelve o'clock struck. Click!—the snuffbox sprang open.

There was no tobacco inside, but a little black goblin—what a trick!

"Tin soldier," said the goblin, "stop your staring!"

The tin soldier pretended not to hear.

"Well, just you wait!" said the goblin.

In the morning the children got up, and the tin soldier was placed on the windowsill.

Suddenly—whether by the goblin's doing or because of a draft—the window flew open, and our soldier fell headfirst from the third story—only a whistling in his ears! In an instant he was standing upside down on the pavement: his helmeted head and rifle were stuck between the cobblestones.

The boy and the maid immediately ran out to search, but however hard they tried, they could not find the soldier; they nearly stepped on him with their feet and still did not notice him. Had he cried out to them, "I am here!" they would certainly have found him at once, but he considered it improper to shout in the street: after all, he wore a uniform!

Rain began to drizzle; harder, harder, until finally a real downpour came. When the sky cleared again, two street urchins arrived.

"Hey!" said one. "There's a tin soldier! Let's send him sailing!"

So they made a boat out of newspaper, put the tin soldier inside, and launched it into the gutter. The boys themselves ran alongside, clapping their hands. Oh my! What waves rolled through the gutter! The current carried them along—no wonder after such a downpour!

The boat was tossed and spun in every direction, so that the tin soldier trembled all over, yet he held firm: rifle on shoulder, head straight, chest forward!

The boat was swept beneath some long planks: it became so dark that it seemed as if the soldier were back inside his box.

"Where am I being carried?" he thought. "Yes, this is all the work of that nasty goblin! Ah, if only that beauty were sitting with me in the boat, I wouldn't mind if it were twice as dark!"

At that moment a large rat darted out from under the planks.

"Do you have a passport?" she asked. "Show me your passport!"

But the tin soldier remained silent and gripped his rifle tightly. The boat sped on, and the rat ran after it in pursuit. Ugh! How she gnashed her teeth and cried out to the chips and straws floating toward her:

"Stop him, stop him! He hasn't paid the toll, he hasn't shown his passport!" But the current carried the boat faster and faster, and already the tin soldier saw light ahead, when suddenly he heard such a terrible roar that even the bravest heart would have quailed. Imagine—at the end of the planks the gutter emptied into a great canal! For the soldier this was as terrifying as for us to rush in a boat toward a mighty waterfall.

But stopping was now impossible. The boat with the soldier slid downward; the poor fellow held himself as stiffly as ever and did not even blink. The boat spun round... One, two—it filled to the brim with water and began to sink. The tin soldier found himself submerged up to his neck; further—more... the water covered him completely! Then he thought of his beauty: he would never see her again. In his ears rang:

Press forward, oh warrior,
And meet death calmly!

The paper tore apart, and the tin soldier began sinking to the bottom, but at that very moment a fish swallowed him.

What darkness! Worse than under the planks, and terribly narrow besides! Yet the tin soldier held firm and lay at full length, pressing his rifle tightly against himself.

The fish darted here and there, performing the most astonishing leaps, but suddenly froze as if struck by lightning. Light flashed, and someone cried: "A tin soldier!" The fact was, the fish had been caught, taken to market, then brought into the kitchen, where the cook slit its belly with a large knife. The cook picked up the tin soldier by the waist with two fingers and carried him into the room, where all the household gathered to look at this remarkable traveler. But the tin soldier did not grow proud. They set him upon the table, and—what wonders happen in this world!—he saw himself in the very same room, saw the same children, the same toys, and the wonderful palace with the beautiful dancer! She still stood on

one leg, holding the other raised high. What steadfastness! The tin soldier was moved and almost wept tears of tin, but that would have been improper, so he restrained himself. He looked at her, she looked at him, but they exchanged not a single word.

Suddenly one of the boys seized the tin soldier and, for no reason at all, threw him straight into the stove. Surely this was all the goblin's doing! The tin soldier stood engulfed in flames. It was terribly hot for him, whether from the fire or from love—he himself did not know. The colors faded completely from him, he grew entirely pale; who knows why—from the journey or from sorrow? He gazed at the dancer, she at him, and he felt himself melting, yet still he held firm, rifle on shoulder. Suddenly the room door flew open, the wind caught the dancer, and she, like a sylph, fluttered straight into the stove to the tin soldier, flared up instantly, and—was gone! And the tin soldier melted and fused into a little lump. The next day the maid, raking ashes from the stove, found him in the form of a small tin heart; while from the dancer nothing remained but her rosette, and even that was entirely scorched and blackened like coal.