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THE STEADFAST TIN SOLDIER

Once upon a time, there was a box full of tin soldiers. They all looked very much alike: they wore uniforms, carried little rifles on their shoulders, and stared straight ahead with great firmness. But among them, there was one who was very special. He was brave, serious, and elegant, though he had only one leg, because there had not been enough tin to finish him like the others.

Even so, the little soldier stood tall with great pride.

—I am just as strong as the others, he seemed to say in silence.

One day, a little boy received that box of tin soldiers as a gift. He was very happy and placed them on a table beside other beautiful toys. There was a paper castle, a small bridge, several little animals, and also a lovely toy dancer.

The dancer was very beautiful. She wore a light and delicate dress, and one of her arms was raised gracefully. Because she was in a dancing pose, she held one leg high in the air, and the tin soldier, seeing her from far away, thought that she too had only one leg, just like him.

—How graceful she is, thought the little soldier. —She seems brave and delicate at the same time.

From that moment on, he could not stop looking at her.

When night came, the little boy went to sleep, and the room became silent. The moon came in through the window, softly lighting the toys. They all seemed to rest quietly, but suddenly an old box standing on the table began to move a little.

Out of it jumped a toy goblin with a strange face and very lively eyes.

The goblin looked at the tin soldier and said in an annoyed voice:

—Do not look so much at the dancer.

The little soldier did not answer. He stayed still, firm, and silent.

The goblin frowned.

—I told you not to look at her, he repeated.

But the tin soldier, who was brave and respectful, did not want to argue. He remained in his place, still looking at the dancer with admiration.

The next morning, something unexpected happened. When the window was opened, the tin soldier fell from above and landed out in the street.

—Oh no! cried the little boy when he noticed. —My tin soldier!

But the soldier was already down below, among the stones of the road. The sky was gray, and soon raindrops began to fall.

Two boys who were passing by saw him at once.

—Look! said one. —A tin soldier!

—Let's put him in a paper boat, answered the other.

They folded a sheet of paper, made a little boat, and placed the tin soldier in the middle. Then they set him loose in a stream of water running along the street after the rain.

The little boat began to move.

—Have a good trip, tin soldier, the boys said as they ran after it.

The tin soldier said nothing, but stayed firm, without showing fear. The water rushed faster and faster. The little boat passed by stones, wet leaves, and tiny whirlpools.

—I must stay strong, the soldier seemed to think.

Soon he came to a dark drain. There everything was gloomy, damp, and silent. The water pushed the little boat inside.

In that dark place, a great water rat appeared.

—Stop! said the rat. —Do you have permission to pass?

The tin soldier remained silent. He could not stop.

—You cannot pass without permission! shouted the rat again.

But the current was too strong, and the little boat kept going. The rat chased after it for a moment, showing its teeth, but soon it was left behind.

The water began to move even more fiercely. The little boat rose and fell in the stream until suddenly it started to break apart.

—Now I am truly in danger, the soldier seemed to think, though he did not lose his calm.

The paper slowly came apart, and the tin soldier fell into the water. Just then, a great fish swam by and swallowed him in one gulp.

Everything became dark again.

Inside the fish, the tin soldier remained still. He did not know where he was going, but he stayed brave. Some time passed, until one day the fish was caught by a fisherman.

Later, the fish came to a kitchen. When it was cut open, the cook found something strange inside.

—What a surprise! she exclaimed. —A tin soldier!

And to everyone's amazement, the little soldier returned to the very same house from which he had gone.

—It is my tin soldier! cried the little boy with joy.

He took him in his hands and placed him back on the table. There again were the paper castle, the toys, and the lovely dancer. Everything seemed just as before.

The tin soldier looked at her once more in silence.

—I have returned, he seemed to say in his heart.

The dancer was still as delicate and beautiful as ever. The little soldier felt happy to be near her again.

But at that very moment, something very sad and sudden happened. Without anyone understanding why, the little boy picked up the tin soldier and threw him into the fire in the fireplace.

The soldier fell into the flames.

The heat was very strong, but he remained upright, brave, and without moving. He looked at the dancer one last time while the fire shone all around him.

Then a gust of air lifted the dancer from her place and carried her too into the fire. She flew softly, as if she were dancing, until she fell beside the tin soldier.

For one moment, the two of them were together among the flames.

The next morning, when the fire had gone out, only a little ash remained. Among it they found a small heart of tin. And close by it, there was a dark little sequin that had belonged to the dancer.

No one said very much, but everyone understood that the little soldier had been very brave until the end.

And so remained forever the story of that steadfast tin soldier who, though he was small and had only one leg, showed that he had a loyal, steady, and loving heart.

THE END

