

Winter Short Stories

The Fire That Would Not Burn

There was great trouble in the white castle that stood at the top of the hill. The huge fire that had burned in the castle kitchen for years had suddenly gone out, and no one seemed to be able to light it again.

It was deep winter outside. The hill was white with snow, and the fountains in the castle garden looked like tall ladies dressed in white cloaks. From all the castle turrets there hung long icicles, and inside the castle, where the walls and the floor were made all of stone, it was so cold that every one was blowing on his fingers and saying that something must be done at once about starting the fire in the kitchen.

It had been the warmest and the most useful fire in the castle, always bright and glowing and cheerful. It made the big kettle sing, and it cooked the food, and painted pictures in the fireplace for the little Prince, who always sat in front of it before he went to bed. Some said that the fire needed a special kind of fuel to keep it burning, and others said that it had gone out because it was such a hard, cold winter. Still others said that the castle folk were quarreling so over matters of state that they made the castle too cold for any

fire to burn. The King blew the bellows, and the Queen wrapped up the little Prince in a fur coat, and the Cook piled on more logs, but still the fire would not burn.

"Go down the hill road," the King at last commanded the Court Messenger, "and wherever you see a bright fire burning in one of the houses, go inside and ask for some coals to bring back to the castle. It may be that we can light our fire in this way."

So the Messenger, with a great iron lantern for holding the coals, started out in the bitter cold.

"A light for the castle fire!" he called as he went. "Who will give me some coals with which to light the castle fire?"

As the Messenger went on his way, a great many people heard him and they all wanted to have a share in lighting the fire at the castle. Some thought that to do this would bring them riches.

"Here are glowing coals for you," said Gerald, whose father kept the forest; "and tell the King that we want as many gold pieces as there are lumps of coal in return, and some extra ones if he will add them."

So the Messenger put Gerald's red coals with the tongs inside his lantern, and he started back to the castle. He had gone only a few steps, though, when he saw that the coals had turned cold and gray, so he had to throw them beside the road and search farther.

A bright light shone from the fire in Gilda's house. Gilda's father was one of the King's guards and when she heard the Messenger's call, "A light for the castle fire!" she opened the door and asked him to come in.

"Fill your lantern with our coals," Gilda said, "and they will surely light the fire in the castle. Tell the King, though, that in return for the coals he must make my father Captain of the guards."

The Messenger took the coals and started back to the castle. He had gone but a little way, though, when he saw that the coals from Gilda's fire were no longer burning but had turned to gray ashes. So he emptied them out in the snow and went on down the hill. But his search was a hard one. So few of the coals that he was given would burn, and so few people wanted to give them freely.

At last he came to a tiny house on a bleak side of the hill.

The wind blew down through the old chimney, and the frost had crept in through the cracks in the wall. The door opened at once when he knocked, though, and inside he found a little girl, stirring porridge over a small fire.

"A light for the castle fire?" she repeated when the Messenger had told her what he wanted. "You may have as many coals as you like, although we have few large ones. I am my father's housewife and I tend this small fire so that the kitchen may be comfortable for him when he comes home from work. I am cooking his supper, too," she said. "But do you sit down and warm yourself, and have a bowl of warm supper before you start out in the cold again. Then you may have half of our fire if the King needs it."

The Messenger did as the little girl bade him, and then he lifted one small, bright coal from the fire, and put it in his lantern.

"It will never burn all the way back to the castle," he said to himself, but with each step the coal grew brighter. It cast pink shadows on the snow as if the spring were sending wild roses up through the ground. It made the dark road in front of the Messenger as bright as if the sun were shining, and it warmed him like the summer time. When he came to the

castle, the coal still burned and glowed. As soon as he touched it to the gray logs in the fireplace they burst into flames, and the castle fire was kindled again.

They wondered why the new fire made the kettle sing so much more sweetly than it had ever sung before, and warmed the hearts of the castle folk so that they forgot to quarrel. At last, when they talked it over with the Messenger, they decided that it was because love had come from the cottage with the coal, and was kindled and burning now in the castle fire.