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THE STORY OF HARLEQUIN'S LOVE AND THE MAGICIAN WITHOUT A NAME

In a dark and quiet room, the walls of which were covered with blue velvet embroidered with golden stars, sat one night a very extraordinary magician who was so old that no one knew his name. From his lofty shoulders hung a black cloak full of cobwebs, and on his head a wondrous diamond crown glistened. With long, expectant fingers he turned the pages of an old, yellowed book of magic.

At last he found what he was looking for and in his dark eyes an inscrutable flame was ignited. The magician closed the book. He smiled and, arising from his throne, he lit the candles in the golden candelabra. Then he took his magic wand and, with the sleeves of his black cloak flapping, he began to write mysterious signs in the air as he whispered some magic words.

A heavy marble clock, which up until that moment had stood on the table without making a sound, started to tick and joyfully tinkled its delicate silver bells; and the flowers that had been asleep exhaled their wonderful fragrances.

And then everything in the room came to life.

A big, golden-haired doll who had been silently sleeping in her chair opened her beautiful blue eyes and looked around in astonishment. She timidly jumped off onto the soft carpet and skipped across it in her bright shoes.

She stopped in the middle of the room and glanced at the colorful flowers woven in the carpet.

"What a lovely meadow!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. She began to dance, her yellow hair fluttered in the air and the different colored glass beads on her dress glittered like stars.

The comical harlequin, who was sewn from cloth patches of many colors, also came to life. He crawled out of the corner on all fours, stepped onto the carpet and gazed at the dancing doll with his glass eyes. When he beheld her he was so astounded that he fell backwards against the paper toy box.

"What a beautiful princess!" he exclaimed, completely enraptured. With his first glance the harlequin's cloth heart became enflamed with such an intense love that his whole body, being made out of velvet, just escaped being consumed in the blaze.

Meanwhile, small tin soldiers began scrambling out of the toy box. Their bright armor shone like silver.

"Our princess is dancing!" the long-nosed soldier who was their commander cried out and, with a click of his heels, saluted.



The multicolored harlequin, delirious with joy, picked a pink chrysanthemum and approached the dancing doll.

"Here is my gift for your wonderful dance," he said and made a clumsy bow.

The doll hugged the harlequin's huge flower in her arms and held it against her blushing cheek.

At that moment came a stange and unpleasant babbling from the table that stood quietly in the shadow of the palm. Everybody was surprised and looked up, full of fear. There on the table a heavy lead inkwell bubbled so loudly and with such fierceness that its rusty cover jumped up and down.

Suddenly the cover flew open with a loud clang. A big, angry frog, as black as ink, jumped out of the inkwell and leapt across the table. Wherever his black feet touched they left ugly inky blotches. He hopped to the edge of the table and glared down with angry eyes that burned like two green coals.

"Croak!" he exclaimed. "What a beautiful doll! You will be my wife. Just wait till I get down from this table." And he hurried across the tablecloth, looking for a place to slide down.

"Oh, Harlequin, save me from that terrible frog," the frightened doll whispered. Her blue eyes were full of tears.

"Fear not—we will defend you!" the harlequin replied with a wave on his hand.

The faithful tin soldiers obediently drew their swords from their scabbards, and their brave commander ordered in a thundering voice:

"Build a fortress with the blocks! Quickly! We will defend the princess until the last drop of blood is shed!"

Everybody got busy immediately, and the work commenced with great haste and excitement. The soldiers divided up in groups and pushed and pulled at the blocks, building row on row, higher and higher, to construct an impenetrable fortress: and when there was a task to be performed for which they had not the strength, then they called upon the rubber elephant who was inflated full of air which made him very strong.

At last they finished. And just in time, too, because the frog was shinnying down the table leg and was no long in reaching the floor.

The doll and the harlequin jumped into the fortress, and the soldiers crowded in right behind them. They hid themselves among the blocks and stuck their tin heads out to have a look around.

The frog cautiously flapped up to the fortress on his big web feet, leaving on the carpet his inky tracks from which a cold dampness arose.

When he beheld the block fortress he let out a mocking laugh and began to blow with all his might. He blew up such a strong, cold wind that even the impenetrable fortress began to totter. The blocks started tumbling down in one place and an opening appeared in the wall. The fair-haired doll gasped with fright and huddled closer to the harlequin, but the frog just laughed and got ready to jump through the gap in the castle wall.

It was then that the harlequin's brave heart leaped!

"A sword!" he shouted, swinging the tassel of his cap. "Give me a sword!" And grabbing a tin sword, he plunged forward full of insane courage. Close behind him came the faithful soldiers, bursting out through the gap in the castle wall, unafraid to lose even their heads for their princess.

But the frog just laughed and knocked down several soldiers with a wave of his slimy foot — and there they lay on the flowery carpet with upraised swords, ink — splattered and motionless. However, fresh soldiers swarmed from the fortress in glistening silver armor. The harlequin himself marched before them in his colorful attire, fearlessly waving his sword. The frog croaked angrily and charged the harlequin, but the harlequin chopped off one of the frog's legs with his flashing sword.

"Hurrah!" shouted the soldiers and advanced, braver than ever.

The frog started to retreat slowly. First he hid himself behind the flower pot, then in the shadow of the table leg; next he jumped into the toy box. but they finally trapped him in a corner of the room.



"Surround him! Surround the frog!" the harlequin shouted triumphantly. "Take him dead or alive!"

The frog looked around with his angry eyes, trying to find a way out, but there was not a single opening through which he could escape. He suddenly noticed that in the corner of the room there was a dark mouse hole. He quickly swished inside the hole and disappeared in its black depths — only his green eyes could be seen as they glared out forbiddingly and his hoarse, angry laugh was heard.

"He's only waiting for a chance to sneak out again. I know," said one soldier who wore glasses and so was very smart. "We have to shut him in there for good."

They immediately brought the thickest fairy tale book they could find in the room and covered the mouse hole with it, and on top of the book they put a flower pot.

"The battle is over!" proclaimed the commander of the soldiers and put his sword back into its scabbard. "Bugler, blow the triumphal march."

The soldiers got busy and lined themselves up two by two, and their commander mounted the rubber elephant. The bugler blew his horn and a marvelous parade began, from the corner of the room, past the princess and the harlequin, and on to the castle.

Here, among the scattered blocks, lay their fellow warriors, their bright armor reflecting the candle light with a legendary gleam.

Here the procession stopped.

"Glory is yours, brave men," the commander said in a solemn voice and took off his cap. "You are truly worthy of the name of tin soldiers, you who were not afraid to die for your princess. We salute you."

The drummer beat his drum and the soldiers raised their swords on high. The princess approached the dead heroes and covered them with her flowery handkerchief as though it were a thin flag, and one sad tear fell from her blue eyes.

"And the valiant harlequin shall be our king!" shouted the commander again, and all of the soldiers yelled, "Hurrah!" They took off their tin hats and threw them into the air; and some of the hats flew so high that they stuck in the shadowy ceiling of the room and will remain there for eternity to glisten like stars. Some of the soldiers had to go around with bare heads from that day on.

The harlequin kneeled before the fair-haired princess and asked her if she would consent to take his hand in marriage.

The doll blushed and bent over the harlequin, trembling, and her long, beautiful hair gently cascaded down around his shoulders.

"There will be a wedding ... a wedding!" the soldiers began to whisper among themselves, and those who were without hats scratched their heads.

"I know!" the wisest among them finally said. "I know what has to be done! In the next room just across the dark hall, there is a banquet table loaded with glasses of wine and all sorts of pastries — we'll just climb up and have the wedding celebration there. The old priest who is carved out of black wood also lives there, — he'll be able to marry the harlequin and the princess."

Everyone was in favor of the suggestion.

Then the harlequin took the doll by the arm and, taking majestic strides with his cloth legs, escorted her toward the door.

After them marched the faithful soldiers, who were the bravest ever seen in the room of stars.

"We'll have a place built with cookies and cards in the shadows of the glasses of red wine, and in it our happiness will last forever and forever," harlequin told his love, and bold dreams blazed in his glass eyes.

The procession crossed the threshold and entered the cold, draughty hall. Not a single ray of light could be seen here, nor could the ticking of the clock be heard.

But from here the rich banquet table in the next room could be seen. There were heaps of chocolate cookies and many glasses of red wine; the good - hearted priest was there too, standing on the candy plate and waving at them with his hand of black wood.

Suddenly, in that cold and shadowy silence, the princess felt her arms and legs stiffen, the darkness began to extinguish her gentle heart. She became terribly frightened and began to weep:

"I can't move, Harlequin . . . and I'm beginning to feel nothing in my heart . . . oh, God, how awful it is!"

Frightened, the harlequin jumped to her side. All the soldiers gathered around; they drew their sharp swords and made ready to defend the princess with their last breath from any kind of foe. But no enemy appeared.

And besides, nobody could help the princess: she slowly became stiffer and stiffer until she was an extraordinarily beautiful and lifeless doll.

The harlequin thought that his heart would break from sorrow. He fell on his knees and lifted the cold hand of the princess to his cheek .

"The princess is dead," he said tearfully. "And we fought for nothing ..."

Meanwhile, the coldness of the night touched the princess's followers and the soldier's shining armor faded into the endless darkness. The clock's silver bells became silent and, instead of their joyous tinkling, a mournful stillness filled the room of stars.

And the harlequin became rigid also, with his face touching the hand of the doll, and the tin soldiers died, and the sad tears in their eyes froze into ice.

Then the strange magician lifted his dark eyes from the book of magic and strode across the room with silent steps — past the princess's flowery handkerchief, past the ruins of block fortress — and his large black cloak floated above the carpet like a veil of cobwebs.

He blew out the candles in the golden candelabra, and the room was once more submerged in darkness. Only the tin hats of soldiers still glimmered in the ceiling. They cast a faint light on this strange magician's face which was very wrinkled and as old as time itself.

And only the undying longing of the harlequin lived on in that room of stars . . .

Translated by Aldona and Robert Page