

# THE LITTLE MATCHGIRL

Once upon a time . . . a little girl tried to make a living by selling matches in the street.

It was New Year's Eve and the snowclad streets were deserted. From brightly lit windows came the tinkle of laughter and the sound of singing. People were getting ready to bring in the New Year. But the poor little matchseller sat sadly beside the fountain. Her ragged dress and worn shawl did not keep out the cold and she tried to keep her bare feet from touching the frozen ground. She hadn't sold one box of matches all day and she was frightened to go home, for her father would certainly be angry. It wouldn't be much warmer anyway, in the draughty attic that was her home. The little girl's fingers were stiff with cold. If only she could light a match! But what would her father say at such a waste! Falteringly she took out a match and lit it. What a nice warm flame! The little matchseller cupped her hand over it, and as she did so, she magically saw in its light a big brightly burning stove.

She held out her hands to the heat, but just then the match went out and the vision faded. The night seemed blacker than before and it was getting colder. A shiver ran through the little girl's thin body.

After hesitating for a long time, she struck another match on the wall, and this time, the glimmer turned the wall into a great sheet of crystal. Beyond that stood a fine table laden with food and lit by a candlestick. Holding out her arms towards the plates, the little matchseller seemed to pass through the glass, but then the match went out and the magic faded. Poor thing: in just a few seconds she had caught a glimpse of everything that life had denied her: warmth and good things to eat. Her eyes filled with tears and she lifted her gaze to the lit windows, praying that she too might know a little of such happiness.

She lit the third match and an even more wonderful thing happened. There stood a Christmas tree hung with hundreds of candles, glittering with tinsel and coloured balls. "Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed the little matchseller, holding up the match. Then, the match burned her finger and flickered out. The light from the Christmas candles rose higher and higher, then one of the lights fell, leaving a trail behind it. "Someone is dying," murmured the little girl, as she remembered her beloved Granny who used to say: "When a star falls, a heart stops beating!"

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, the little matchseller lit another match. This time, she saw her grandmother.

"Granny, stay with me!" she pleaded, as she lit one match after the other, so that her grandmother could not disappear like all the other visions. However, Granny did not vanish, but gazed smilingly at her. Then she opened her arms and the little girl hugged her crying: "Granny, take me away with you!"

A cold day dawned and a pale sun shone on the fountain and the icy road. Close by lay the lifeless body of a little girl surrounded by spent matches. "

Poor little thing!" exclaimed the passersby. "She was trying to keep warm!"

But by that time, the little matchseller was far away where there is neither cold, hunger nor pain.