

The Tinder Box

Characters:

1. James (A Soldier)
2. Brendan (A Friend of James)
3. King Alfred
4. Queen Eleanor
5. Princess Rose
6. The Dog with the eyes the size of teacups (the dog with the copper)

Scenes:

1. Street of Village
2. James' House
3. The Throne Room
4. The Throne Room the next Day
5. The Throne Room two days After

Note:

This play is set in Medieval Times. The costumes should also be set in this period.

Scene #1: A Village Street

At Rise: Brendan (wearing armor) enters stage right, reading a book, and sits down on a bench at stage right. James (wearing fine clothes and a hooded cloak) enters whistling and carrying over his shoulder a bag with a checked apron and tinder box in it. He sees Brendan.

James: Brendan! How are you?

Brendan: (*startled*) James! It is so great to see you! How has life with the army been?

James: (*shaking his head*) Difficult. We had a hard time of it that's for sure. For the first several weeks of the conflict we were beaten mercilessly.

Brendan: Did you have very many casualties?

James: Yeah. They were butchers. To lose the number of men that we did was horrid. Well, we beat them at last. And it's good to be away from the scene of battle and to be able to rest.

Brendan: I should say! I'm glad that you are settling down again.

James: Speaking of settling down, I was thinking that I would move here.

Brendan: Splendid!

James: But there is something that I wanted you to clear something up for me first. I was at a smithy in January having my horse's hooves checked because he was limping. The men were talking about the princess of Ireland. One of them was saying that she was really pretty according to rumor. So I said I want to meet the princess. But the man looked at me and said, "Not if you want to keep your head upon your shoulders." I didn't know what he meant.

Brendan: You first have to know the princess' background, and then it's all clear. Have I ever told you about the princess Rose and the prophecy?

James: What prophecy?

Brendan: That practically means that I haven't told you.

James: You never even brought up the subject.

Brendan: Then I will tell you. King Alfred, our portly Irish monarch, and Queen Eleanor, his slender wife, have a beautiful daughter named Rose. I know that she is lovely to behold, but that is because I am one of the king's bodyguard, but no one but a guard has ever seen her because of her father, who has hidden her from the world. It came about when she was little, for an old seer visited the palace, asking to see the princess. When brought into the presence of the child, the seer sighed and said that the princess was destined to become the bride of a common soldier. I see nothing wrong with that prophecy, but the king was furious. He said that he would not have a common soldier as his heir. He said that it was below his dignity, and that soldiers are always poor and stupid. I think of it otherwise, but who am I to correct the King of Ireland? Well, the poor princess is doomed to spend all her days either in the tower that he had erected for her, or in the palace after being escorted there by me and other bodyguards in a covered litter, hidden from the public. Therefore, there is no way she can marry anyone whom the king does not want her to marry.

James: Why does the king allow you guards to see her, but no one else may?

Brendan: Because his definition of common soldiers says that we aren't common soldiers, as we are honored enough to stand at his right side. He says that he has no reason to think that one of us could possibly be the soldier of whom the seer spoke.

James: Does she like living in the tower?

Brendan: No. I have often heard her beg her father never to make her go there again. Her mother, the queen, is sympathetic to her, as all mothers are, but she can get very stern and unyielding at other times. She, like the king, errs in believing that the lowest and most ignorant and stupid person is a soldier.

James: That's too bad.

Brendan: Oh, well. We can't do any thing about it. Anyway, how was the return trip?

James: Well, something very strange happened to my good fortune, yet it tried my nerves every now and then. I was walking along down the high road and there was suddenly an old crone in the road before me. I was nervous when I saw her because of her dark glance. *(He imitates the witch he is speaking about by taking his cloak and covering up his head and hunching over whenever he quotes her. Every now and then, James pokes out his finger like a witch and pokes Brendan, and Brendan acts startled every time he is poked. He gets more and more frightened as*

James' tale progresses.) She stared at me and said, "Hello. You are a fine soldier. You are just what I need. Have you ever dreamed of being wealthy?" I didn't know what to say. But the crone continued. "Do as I say and you will be rich. See, there is a large tree over yonder." I looked and saw a huge oak tree in the field, the biggest tree that I had ever seen in my life. The old hag kept talking. *(He places the hood over his head again.)* "I have a rope with me and you are to tie the rope around your waist. The tree is hollow. Climb the tree and drop down the hole in the trunk. You will find yourself in a large magical room lit by a thousand torches. In the side of the room are three doors leading to three rooms. In each room is a chest of precious metal. The first room contains a chest with copper in it, the second contains one with silver in it, and the third contains one with gold in it. On each chest is a dog that guards his particular chest. The first has eyes the size of teacups, the second has eyes the size of cartwheels, and the third has eyes the size of mill wheels! I hate it when he stares at me. Anyway, here is my apron. *(Here he pulls the apron out of bag, spreads it on the ground and pantomimes putting something rather large on it as he speaks.)* Spread it out on the floor, then place the dog on the apron and he will become as gentle as a lamb." *(James drops hood from his head)* I agreed, thinking that it was an easy way to become rich. So she handed me her apron, and we headed off toward the tree. I thought that it was strange that she would help me gain a fortune without wanting anything in return. So I asked, "Surely you want something in return, do you not?" But she smiled and said, "No young man. I don't even want the smallest penny. I only would like you to fetch me the tinder box that my grandmother left down there the last time she visited the place."

Brendan: Was she lying?

James: No. I found everything the way she had told me it would be. I filled the apron with gold, picked up the old tinder box of which she had told me, and called up to her. She drew me up, but even before I had completely emerged from the hole in the trunk she hastily demanded, "Where is the tinder box?" Because she seemed in a hurry to receive the tinder box, my suspicions were aroused and I feared that she might use the tinder box to do something that might be harmful to me. I therefore asked her why she wanted it. "That, Young Man, is none of your business," she said in a snappy tone. I was now very suspicious and refused. At this she became exceedingly angry and again told me to hand it over. "You will not like what I will do to you if you continue to refuse me! Now, hand it over!" "Not unless you tell me what you intend to do with it," I replied as calmly as I could, which wasn't very calm, as I was terrified.

Brendan: She must've been mad!

James: She was! There's no question about it! She shouted, "Why should I? It is none of your business. You have your money, so give me my tinder box!" I simply said, "No." *(Quickly flips hood up on his head and yells out angrily like a witch, startling Brendan, who jumps back, as terrified as the audience knows James was.)* The crone sent up a cry of anger and started to mutter fierce words and curses under her breath and started to wave her hands in a violent way. I, to save myself from her wrath, *(flings off his cape and whips out his sword and slices through the air. The cloak falls to the ground)* severed her neck and put an end to her. But I still have her apron here. *(displays apron)* and this is the tinder box. *(pulls out and displays tinder box)*

Brendan: *(shuddering)* At least she is dead and you've gained a fortune.

James: I should say!

Brendan: Well, I must report to King Alfred and he mustn't be kept waiting. I'll see you soon! Bye! *(Starts to walk away. Then, he suddenly turns around.)* Oh, James, one more thing. I'll

meet you at the marketplace tonight at about five. We'll try to get together soon! And so I bid you, "good-bye."

They bow with their hats off and exit at opposite sides of stage.

Curtain

Scene #2: James' house

At Rise: Room is empty but for a pile of rags in one corner and a pile of sticks and rocks in the other. James enters in ragged clothes, and acting very weary. Sits down at center stage.

James: Gosh! After one whole year I still have no job! I can't believe it! (*shivers*) Br, r, r, r, r. It's cold. And I don't have anything to keep me warm. But wait! I have that tinder box! I'll make a fire! (*fumbles around in pile of rags, and pulls out tinder box.*) Me, the rich and handsome veteran—all gone! Me, the man with a thousand friends—all gone! I can't believe it! (*Walks over to pile of sticks and rocks, picks some out of the pile, returns to center stage, and builds them into a fire. Stops working*) Every day, trying to get a decent job and not anyone who would hire a nice guy like me! Brendan, my only Irish friend, has been promoted to the rank of Head Bodyguard and never has any time to spare. (*Then he returns to pile and picks up several rocks.*) I've used up all the gold that I got in the tree. I'm broke! I have not even a shilling left, not even a tiny copper penny! (*He then returns to center stage where he uses them to form a fire ring around his fire. Then he takes a piece of bark out of tinder box, along with the flint and steel. He strikes the flint and steel together. Clap of thunder, and the lights flicker. Simultaneously, Dog bounds in doorway and barks. James is startled*) Who are y-! Oh My Gosh! Where did you come from? Am I seeing things? You look like dog that was on the chest of copper in the huge tree?

Dog: Roof. It is indeed I. What is your wish, Master?

James: What! You speak! A dog that talks! Incredible! What do you mean by saying "Master"?

Dog: Do you not possess the tinder box of which the old crone spoke?

James: Yes, I do.

Dog: The tinder box is magical. (*James acts surprised.*) All you have to do is strike the flint on the steel **once**, and I will be immediately summoned to wherever the tinder box is. Likewise, if you strike the flint and steel together **twice**, my brother the dog with the cart wheel-size eyes will appear, and if you strike the flint and steel together **three** times, my eldest, biggest and strongest brother will appear. However, they are slower than I am. It is therefore wiser of you to summon me to do normal errands than to summon them.

James: Do you mean that you can bring me anything that I want?

Dog: That is true.

James: So I could say, "Get me a bag of gold", and you would bring it in an instant?

Dog: Yes.

James: Get me a bag of gold pieces and some fancy new clothes.

Dog: Yes, Master. (*Dog walks over to the doorway. Clap of thunder, lights flicker, and the dog jumps out.*)

James: How strange! A magical tinder box that can cause all my wishes to be granted! No wonder the old crone wanted it! I'll make myself back into a wealthy gentleman. Boy, won't I surprise Brendan when he sees me. Talking about Brendan reminds me of the first conversation we had since I came back from the wars, when he was talking about the princess. He said that she was very beautiful to behold and I want to see if she really is beautiful. But how? (*He lies back on pile of rags, then after a moment's thought jumps up*) I know! Where is my tinder box?

Quick curtain

Scene #3: The Throne Room

At Rise: King Alfred, Queen Eleanor are on stage. The King is a rather large man, who should be in expensive clothes. The Queen is slender and kind. The whole royal family should be dressed in rich garments. Brendan (who is in armor) enters escorting Princess Rose.

Brendan: Your Majesties, we have escorted the princess here. It was much easier to keep back the mobs of townspeople who always flock after us, attempting to catch a glance at her—

King Alfred: But no one saw her I hope.

Brendan: No one saw her. As I was saying, it was easy to keep back the mobs because there wasn't a soul on the road so there was absolutely no one who could see her. We tried to avoid them by coming earlier in the morning and it was as we thought, they must've been in bed still.

King Alfred: Good. You may be dismissed.

Brendan: Yes, Your Majesty. (*He bows then turns to go*)

King Alfred: Sir Brendan.

Brendan: Yes, Your Majesty?

King Alfred: I shall send for you presently to escort my daughter back to the tower.

Brendan: Yes, Your Majesty.

Exits

Princess Rose: Father.

King Alfred: Yes, my dear?

Princess Rose: (*pleading*) Please do not shut me up in the tower again. I never have anything to do and it's terribly boring.

Queen Eleanor: (*in dismay*) But I have made sure that the maids give you everything that you would like to do. How can you possibly be bored?

Princess Rose: Well, I'm getting tired of seeing nothing but the stone walls of the palace and the tower, and the scarlet draperies of the litter. And the windows of the castle are always covered when I enter. I want to see what the world that my maids speak of is like. I know that a whole different world is so near, especially when I'm in the litter, for I know that whenever I'm in the litter, only a piece of scarlet cloth is between me and that world. I've never seen the things of which they speak, like horses, buildings, and dogs, save for the drawings that my maids show me. And the only men that I've ever seen are you and the guards and the suitors that you have picked for me, and the maids are always saying that it's a pity that I am fourteen and haven't even seen real bird.

King Alfred: But, what's wrong with the suitors that you don't seem to care for them?

Princess Rose: They are so arrogant that I have no love for any of them. They may pretend to love me but they all seem to want nothing of me and just want to become heir to the throne. They're all way to old for me and I don't like them.

King Alfred: There is a reason that you have never seen the world. I don't want to have you to fall in love with a common soldier as the seer said, because I want to pick a husband for you and I'm trying to see if I can hold my ground against your fate.

Queen Eleanor: *(to king)* Dear, don't you think you might be being too harsh to her? She's just a girl.

King Alfred: Eleanor, I have told you over and over again. I don't want my heir to be a lowly, common, penniless, ordinary soldier! I want Rose to marry someone wealthy.

Princess Rose: *(to king)* Father, I had the weirdest dream last night, or, at least, I thought it was a dream, but I have had the exact dream three times this week, starting Monday. I thought it was really peculiar. I was in bed and the windows started opening of their own accord. Then a dog with eyes as big as saucers came in the window and picked me up and carried me out the window and I gave a scream and he landed gently in the grass at the foot of the tower walls. He then carried me down a street, like the drawing that one of my nurses drew for me, and took me into a house. There was inside the house a man who was so handsome and young and kind. He asked me to dance. I said yes and we danced for a little bit and he told me wondrous tales about France, England, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Poland, and even China. Oh, they were fabulous tales and he told them so well and each night he would tell me a different story. Some of them were about knights and battles and some were about great people and their adventures. Oh they were the best tales and then when he finished telling stories to me, the dog came and brought me back.

King Alfred: How strange! And you say that happened three times? Why did you not tell me, Rose?

Princess Rose: It was a dream. But it was so real and it has started to make me more and more curious about it and I've been wondering if it really was dream after all.

King Alfred: Nonsense. Just an exceptionally strange dream *(Deep in thought)* Brendan!
(Brendan enters) Escort my daughter back to the tower. Tell my adviser to come here also.

Brendan: Yes, Your Majesty.

Exits with Princess Rose

King Alfred: *(to Queen, as soon as Rose and Brendan exit the stage)* This dream disturbs me.

Queen Eleanor: Her dream? Why?

King Alfred: *(pacing)* I don't know. We have got to find out if it is real or only a dream.

Queen Eleanor: *(after a moment's thought)* I have an idea! The tailor is supposed to have an appointment with me today. I'll have him make a small pouch, which I can hang around Rose's neck tonight before she goes to bed. I'll fill the pouch with buckwheat and snip a hole in a corner so that the buckwheat can dribble out on the ground if the dog actually comes and takes her. Then we will send a strong guard of soldiers led by our trusty Head Bodyguard to follow the trail of buckwheat, if there is one, and arrest this arrogant young man!

King Alfred: *(stops pacing)* I am glad that I have married a brilliant woman like you! If he's real, we'll catch him and **hang him!**

Quick curtain

Scene # 4: The Throne Room the next Day

At Rise: King Alfred and Queen Eleanor are sitting on thrones. There are gallows erected at center stage. Brendan comes in leading James who is bound. James is carrying his bag (from scene 1), which Brendan takes from him and tosses on the ground in such a way that the audience sees the tinder box in it.

Brendan: *(sighing, to king)* Your Majesty, the prisoner is here according to your wish. Do not have him hanged, I beg you, because he and I were best friends.

King Alfred: I am extremely angry with him for seeing my daughter against my will! He has committed treason and as consequence, is to die on the gallows.

Brendan: My friend, how would I ever forgive myself if I killed you?

James: Brendan, I did something that I was not supposed to do, and deserve to die by Irish law.

King Alfred: Take him to the gallows.

Brendan: *(sadly)* Yes, your Majesty.

(Brendan puts rope around James' neck, and begins to slowly lead James off-stage. James, as he passes bag, sees the tinder box, brightens, halts and turns around.)

James: Wait! It is a custom that the man about to be executed is given one last harmless request.

King Alfred: *(Hesitating)* That is true. Very well. Make your wish, then say your final prayers and prepare to die!

James: I have been fond of tobacco throughout my life. I therefore would, as a last request, ask that I be given my pipe and tinder box, that I might smoke one last time. *(Brendan unbinds him and hands him the tinder box and pipe. James opens the tinder box calmly and takes out flint and*

steel. Then he sets down the tinder box and pipe and strikes the flint and steel together one time, then two more times, then three more times. Yells...) Come to my aid now! Bring a large chest of gold!

Quick curtain

Scene 5: The Throne Room

At Rise: James and Rose are sitting in thrones wearing crowns when lights turn on. Brendan enters with a scroll behind his back.

Brendan: King James, it's one beautiful day, isn't it?

James: Indeed it is, Sir Brendan of the Noble Heart.

Brendan: You were and are the first person that I have seen with a rope around his neck one day, and the next day be wearing the crown and sitting on the throne. How do you like being king?

James: About as much as you appear to like your new position.

Brendan: I hadn't known you were so rich.

James: Well, it was just a portion of the money that I own. You should have seen the look on His Majesty's face when he saw all that gold.

Brendan: I saw it. His mouth probably dropped six inches when he saw it. I think he was very surprised and was more than willing to have such a wealthy man for his son-in-law.

James: Where is he now?

Brendan: They are going to visit friends in Germany. Anyway, is it okay if I read something to you?

James: Go ahead.

Brendan: It's a poem that I made up. It goes like this...*(displays scroll that was behind his back and reads...)*

Unless you are to come so far,

As Dublin, Ireland;

You would never believe it, till you come and see it,

I tell you it's ever so grand.

Dublin is fair; you will love it there,

And the land is verdant and green;

In the castle of stones, on gold and ivory thrones

Are Ireland's great King and Queen.

King James is unerring, intelligent and daring,

He's the man on whom Ireland must rest;

He is gentle strong, just, and never wrong,

And I know that of kings he's the best.

The greatest Queen, whom we have seen

The loving and lovely Rose,

Gains our loyalty by using her royalty

To soothe the citizens' woes.

Three great dogs and a tinder box

Made the King's wealth easily stored.

King James was as poor as a rotten door,

But now is the greatest lord.

And so you see, how wonderfully

Our future is surely planned.

We're never oppressed; surely the best

Of countries is Ireland.

Curtain

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The End!