

CINDERS

By Katherine Gibson

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ONCE upon a time, a tiny little man stood all alone before the closed gates of a great castle. He wore a gray velvet suit and a high gray velvet hat. Under its wide brim his long twitching nose stuck out in a point. The ends of his long coat blew behind him in the wind and twisted and wagged like a tail.

The little man clasped his thin, clawlike fingers together and looked about him in fear. He was all alone. It was dark. He did not know who he was or where he was, from what place he had come or to what place he was going. He heard a clock strike one; it was really the last stroke of midnight. He saw an empty pumpkin shell and watched some rats and two mice go scampering. Through the shadows he could see a girl who cried bitterly as she ran down the high road, her tattered rags blowing behind her. The little man felt, somehow, that he was in a dream which he could not remember.

He really was sure of nothing except that the breeze was chill and that beneath his velvet coat his little bones were rattling with cold. He began to walk down the wide road. On one side was the high, high wall that guarded the castle. On the other was a wood, dangerous-looking in the dark. After a long time he came to a small gate in the wall. It had been left unlatched and when the wind leaned against it, it opened wide, and the little man scuttled inside.

At the end of the path he noticed a light and, as he drew near, he could clearly see three men, so large they looked like giants. They were sitting around a barrel on which stood a lighted lantern. Above the lantern their faces looked very broad and as brown as tanned leather. Behind them was the wide door of the King's stables. The three were smoking long-stemmed pipes. Suddenly one of them peered over the barrel and pointed with his pipestem at the tiny man.

"Bless my whips and straps!" he said. "Bless my whips and straps! What's that?"

The tiny man bowed low and took off his hat. His little pointed face was gray with terror, but his eyes were keen and bright.

"Where'd you come from and what's your name?"

Now where had he come from? The tiny man did not know. He could recall nothing beyond the moment when he found himself before the castle gates. As for a name, he hadn't any. He shut his eyes and counted five and said the first thing that came into his head.

"My name, sir, is Cinders."

Two of the giants roared, but the one who had spoken first did not. He was only the head stable groom, and no one had ever called him *sir*, before. He spoke not quite so gruffly now.

"And what do you do for your living?"

Cinders did not know. He still felt as though he had just fallen headlong out of a dream. As far as he could tell, he had never done anything. Just then he heard a loud whinny and a neigh and the restless stamping of hoofs from within the King's stables. The sound was a friendly one and he said quickly, almost as if he remembered, "Well, sir, I'm a good hand with horses." Cinders bowed.

Again the two men roared. "A good hand with horses, a good hand with horses, a tiny mite of a man like you; you're no bigger 'an a ten-year-old. A good hand with horses!" They slapped their great thighs and laughed and laughed.

Now the first groom was thinking of Cinders' bow. No one had ever bowed to him before.

"Can you polish harness?" he asked.

Just then Cinders looked up and saw what seemed like a pumpkin, a golden coach in the sky. His lips twitched into a timid smile.

"Sir, I can polish harness until it shines like the moon up there." Cinders pointed to the pumpkin moon with his little finger, as thin as a claw.

Again the two bellowed. "Polish harness as bright as the moon! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"What'd you ask for a wage?"

"Oh, sir," said Cinders, "I'd work just for a place to sleep and some food and a few coppers, now and then."

"He'll eat up all your wages, Tim," said one of the men, blowing a great cloud of smoke from his pipe.

"Oh, no, sir, no! I'm not big enough for that."

"'Tis true you're no bigger than a cock wren, but it's the small ones that always eat."

"I suppose," said Tim, "I suppose you'd want your rations of ale and beef?"

"Oh, no, sir," Cinders sighed. "If you please, I'd like some CHEESE!"

"Cheese, cheese!" cried Tim. "If there's one thing that I can't eat, it's cheese. And Cook serves it for breakfast, dinner, and supper three times a week as regular as

Monday, Thursday, and Saturday come round.” Tim was silent for a moment. If he could get his share of the harness polished for a few coppers, and for some bits of cheese that he couldn’t bear the taste of, why, it wouldn’t be a bad bargain. Tim was the laziest man in the King’s stables and that meant that he was very lazy indeed.

Poor Cinders was so anxious to find a place in the world that his teeth jarred together just from the beating of his heart. At last Tim spoke:

“Well, I’ll take you on for a spell. But see to it that you work hard.”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Cinders bowed with gratitude. And terrified as he was, he managed to ask, “If you had any cheese left from supper, I’d be grateful. I haven’t had anything to eat since . . .” Cinders didn’t know just how long. As a matter of fact, he couldn’t remember ever having had a bite in his life.

The two big men rose; they towered above Cinders until he felt smaller than ever. They growled something about going to the village inn and went thumping down the path. Tim got up slowly and beckoned to Cinders. By the dim light of the lantern, Cinders saw the King’s stable. It was the longest, widest, highest place he had ever dreamed of. But somehow he felt at home. He could smell dried clover and hear the pleasant whickering and munching noises made by the horses as they took a late snack of hay or oats.

Tim led Cinders to an empty stall, lighted a second lantern and hung it on a hook above Cinders’ head. By its glow the stall, filled with straw, shone like gold. Tim brought a blanket, rough and torn, but clean. Then he gave Cinders a plate on which was a small mug of ale, a quarter loaf of bread, and a piece of cheese almost as large as Cinders’ head.

Cinders bowed and thanked him. He nibbled away at the cheese and bread and drank his ale. Then, making himself a warm nest in the fragrant hay, he prepared for bed. Daintily he washed in a freshly filled basin of water he found nearby; hung up his velvet coat and hat; put out his lantern and curled up into a light ball beneath his blanket. He felt snug and comforted. He had found a corner in the world.

Cinders lay listening to the sleepy sounds night makes, the sound of frogs and the tiny crackling voices of insects. He had a home now, but where, where had he come from? Who was he? Where did he belong? Try as he could, he couldn’t remember.

What Cinders longed to know was something that everybody knew, everybody but himself. The reason he couldn’t remember was because he had been a part of it; and it had all seemed to happen in a wink. Cinders had belonged in that dream that has become the story of Cinderella, yet he had never heard of her.

No one had ever told him that Cinderella had two sisters, proud, selfish, and not at all handsome. He did not know that the sisters, dressed in their best, went to the

Prince's ball. Cinderella was left to clean the pots and pans. As she worked she wept so hard that the kettle she was scrubbing was half filled with her tears.

Cinders did not know that a Fairy Godmother came and waved a wand. A pumpkin was changed into a golden coach; six fat black rats were changed into six prancing horses. Two gray mice were changed into footmen, one into a coachman. As for Cinderella, her rags became a silken gown, her old worn shoes became glass slippers.

Everybody except Cinders knew that the Fairy Godmother spoke tartly: "If you do not leave the ball at twelve o'clock, you will be but a poor cinder wench again, all in tatters and covered with ashes." So saying, the Godmother was off on her broomstick.

Because Cinderella was so beautiful, the Prince would look at no one else. Because the Prince was so tall and danced with such grace, Cinderella forgot all that her Godmother had said. The whole world has known that as long as it has known anything—all except Cinders.

The town clock struck twelve; Cinderella rushed from the ball, leaving her tiny glass slipper on the wide palace steps. She found no golden coach, only an empty pumpkin shell; no horses, only six rats scampering; no footmen, only *two* mice and a shadow that she hardly noticed. Cinderella was all in rags and she ran quickly lest the Prince should find her.

Everybody has always known that the Prince sent messengers far and wide to hunt for the owner of the glass slipper and at last found Cinderella. He married her, the wedding feast lasted for ten days and ten nights, and they lived happily ever after. Everybody had heard that but Cinders.

At the stroke of twelve the Godmother touched the six black horses and turned them into rats, touched the two footmen and turned them into mice. But the coachman she did not touch. He dodged behind a cabbage leaf and she forgot all about him. A little mouse had been changed into Cinderella's coachman; Cinderella's coachman became Cinders the exact moment that the Fairy Godmother forgot to change him back into a mouse. Everything happened in a wink.

It is hard to remember what a Fairy Godmother forgets. So Cinders alone of all the world did not know the dream, the beautiful dream of which he had been a part. Only bits of it came back to him like the scattered notes of a forgotten tune. He lay warm in the straw of his stall and he wondered and he wondered and he wondered about something that everybody knows.

Then he sat up and nibbled at his cheese for a little while. After that he didn't wonder anymore. "If only you have cheese," said Cinders, "what's there to worry about?" So he went to sleep.

As soon as he breakfasted on bread and milk and cheese, Cinders started to work. The harness was hung on long racks. There was a great deal of it, and each piece had

an endless number of buckles and plates that had to be polished. The harness itself had to be washed and oiled. As Cinders couldn't come anywhere near reaching the harness racks, he looked about him for something to stand on. At last he found an old three-legged stool. Up he climbed and began to rub and rub and rub with his tiny, quick hands.

He had been at work an hour by the time the stableboys, with straw in their hair and sleep in their eyes, went yawning and stretching toward the stalls. It was another hour before Tim came growling in, looking very cross. He had lost a great deal of money at dice the night before. As he ordered the boys about, his words cracked like whips. Catching sight of Cinders, he stamped over to him. Tim looked at all the harness Cinders had cleaned, hoping to find fault, but the straps were smooth and black; the buckles as bright as day.

"Please, sir," said Cinders, "how many racks am I to clean for you?"

"Three."

"Just three, sir?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, sir," said Cinders, looking at the long racks. "Yes, sir, it's enough."

"See that you do it well."

"Oh, yes, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"No." Tim turned in time to give one of the lads a cuffing for being late in feeding the horses. Cinders worked until two hours past noon and, by that time, all his harness was polished and neatly arranged on the racks. He put his pail, soaps, and brushes away. Then he washed himself, combed his fine brown-gray hair, pulled on his long-tailed coat, and went toward the kitchen.

"And what do *you* want?" barked the fat, red-faced Cook, her voice loud and raw.

Cinders almost jumped out of his soft boots, but he managed to bow and whisper, "Why, whatever you have, ma'am."

Cook was so startled she dropped her spoon into the soup with a splash.

"Whoever heard of that? 'Whatever I have'! With all those stable louts a-asking for this and hollerin' for that, as if they was the Chef himself. And the little gray man'll take what I've got."

Cook was so pleased that she heaped his plate and gave him a bit of jam and some gooseberry tart. Cinders bowed again and started out of the kitchen.

"Where're you a-goin'?"

"To eat on the steps, ma'am. You've just swept up."

"My carrots! Carrots and fish!" cried the Cook. "And those lazy, no-account, good-for-nothing stable-boys muddying my kitchen from sunup to dark. Oh, my hambones and cucumber!"

Her wide face broke into a smile. Cinders plucked up his courage and went back to the big fireplace where Cook was stirring stew for supper.

“Ma’am, if you please, have you a crumb of CHEESE?”

Now if there was one thing that Cook liked to serve, it was cheese. “Cheese,” she always said, “is fillin’ and don’t have to be kneaded, baked, fried, or boiled.” She gave Cinders a piece, round and solid as a cauliflower. He sat on the steps and nibbled and nibbled. After he had finished, he washed his plate under the pump and dried it with a clean cabbage leaf. When he took it back to Cook, she almost dropped it.

“Washed his plate! Oh, my bowls, platters, and pans! And those dirty lumps of stableboys bringin’ me dishes smeared with harness blacking and tobacky ashes. Oh, my pots and pans!”

Cinders thanked Cook, bowed, and went back to his stall. There he laid his tired bones on the straw and curled up for a nap. He had not been sleeping long when he felt a rough hand on his shoulders. He was jerked to his feet. Four stableboys stood before him, one of them twisted his arm.

“What do you mean?” they shouted. “Sleeping in the afternoon and your work not done?”

Cinders winced with the pain in his arm, but he answered quickly, “I *have* finished my work, and I was taking a nap.”

“Finished your work? Look at that!” and they pointed to six racks of muddy harness that they themselves had left, thinking to frighten Cinders into cleaning it for them.

Cinders looked up at them with his little bright eyes wide open. Though only boys, they were taller and much heavier than he was.

“Master Tim said I was to clean the harness on those three racks, and I did. I thought you’d be doing this, so I asked him.”

“Tee, hee, hee, Master Tim,
He said just three.”

They mimicked Cinders’ small, squeaky voice, and the biggest boy dug his fingers into Cinders’ shoulder.

“We’ll show you. You clean all those, those six racks full, or we’ll thrash the wits out of you—if you have any!”

“Yes,” said Cinders, “I have wits. I don’t want a thrashing, but it won’t hurt me as much as you’ll be hurt if Master Tim finds me doing your work and lashes your shoulders with a bit of harness because you’re so lazy...”

Cinders was all out of breath with this long speech; but when he had finished, the biggest boy let go of Cinders' shoulder and began rubbing his own ear. Tim had boxed it last night. The second biggest boy felt of his legs; Tim had tickled them often with the end of his whip. The third boy and the fourth put their hands behind them. Tim had dusted the seat of their breeches with his hard-soled slipper that very morning. All this Cinders had seen and remembered.

"Old Tim'll be sure to catch us," they said. "He could see a mud spot on a chin strap; he could see it even through a stone wall!"

"You can't miss a bit-buckle without his cuffing you!"

Grumbling, they all started toward the harness racks, calling over their shoulders:

"You'll be sorry for this! You'll catch it. Just you wait..."

Cinders fell back on the straw, trembling from head to foot and nursing his aching arm. But somehow he felt that the stableboys wouldn't bother him anymore. He had just barely managed not to show how frightened he had been. "And that," said Cinders to himself, "is almost as good as being really brave."

He went to sleep again and when he woke he felt much better, though still a little lame in his shoulder. He put on his coat and his tall, wide-brimmed gray hat and went for a walk. The sun was low and its rays came slanting over the hills like long golden ladders to join green fields with blue sky. The air was cool. Cinders felt a flutter underneath his neat gray vest; he was almost happy.

He reached the village and came to an old shop, brown and strange-smelling. On the counter were large china bowls of snuff and rows and rows of pipes. Behind the counter was a little man, brown, too, and dried and dusty as a fallen leaf.

"Please, sir," said Cinders, "I want a pipe, a long-stemmed one like Master Tim's, and some 'backy in a pouch."

The dusty shopkeeper handed him a small, but long-stemmed pipe and a tiny pouch of tobacco.

"Thank you, sir," said Cinders and turned to leave.

"Where's your money?"

Cinders stopped suddenly. Money, money? Why, he hadn't any. He never had had. In dreams you don't need money. He hardly knew what it was. Tim said something about coppers, but hadn't given him a single one as yet. Cinders looked at the buttons on his suit; they were silver. There were two on his vest that didn't show when his coat was fastened.

"Would one of these buttons do? Perhaps you'd keep it for me until Tim gives me my wage. Then I'll buy it back."

The musty old shopkeeper smiled a bit of a smile that made his wrinkles seem deeper than ever and more like the veins on a dead leaf.

“Keep your buttons,” he said, “and pay me Saturday night.”

Again Cinders thanked him. And with silver buttons that never left his vest, he bought a bright blue work apron in one shop and a warm gray flannel nightshirt in another. And then he walked home through the early dusk, feeling a man of the world.

After supper, when all was dark, Cinders slipped out into the big kitchen garden. He sat down on a pile of dry grass and leaned up against a giant pumpkin, one of the many in a row. As the world grew drowsy, Cinders grew wider and wider awake. He smoked his long-stemmed pipe and watched the harvest moon rise and hang in the branches of an apple tree, like a round and magic fruit. He dreamed a dream he could not remember, but it was beautiful in his mind.

Like bits of shining glass, broken pieces of his dream danced before his eyes. He seemed to see an old woman up against the moon riding on a broomstick. He thought he saw a tiny slipper left alone on a wide, wide stair. Thin and far away, a sound like the stroke of a clock came through the silence. He nearly smelled a perfume and almost heard a light laugh and the rustle of a silken gown. But *whose* laugh, and *whose* silken gown? With all his heart, Cinders longed to know.

When Cinders awoke from his nap the next afternoon, the stable was all astir. Tim was shouting orders; stableboys were running back and forth. A great trouble had come upon the place. Flash, the King’s favorite horse, had gone lame. No one knew how it had happened but on his left hind leg a great raw, red place was plainly to be seen. The leg was swelling more and more. Tim had ointments ready, but neither he nor anybody else could get near Flash. The horse would kick out with his well leg, rear and plunge and hurt himself more. Finally the King’s own surgeon was called. With him came pages in green and silver livery.

The surgeon was very tall and thin and looked very sour indeed. A great man like him to be called in to care for a horse! He walked boldly up to the stall where Flash was snorting with pain and fury. Out flew Flash’s hoof. Back jumped the surgeon, stumbled against a tub of water in which blankets were soaking, and fell in with a great splash! Dripping, scolding, and sputtering he stalked out of the stable while the two little pages held his dripping cloak at arm’s length.

After that, no sounds came from Flash’s stall.

“He’s too far gone to make any more trouble,” groaned Tim.

That evening, when all the stableboys had gone to bed and Tim, sitting on a stool near Flash’s stall, was dozing, Cinders slipped out into the cabbage patch and beyond the fields to the woods. The moon shone brightly. Trees, bushes, and little plants gleamed as if turned to silver by a witch’s wand.

Cinders stood still; his nostrils winked back and forth like a rabbit’s. Then light and quick as a shadow, he moved from place to place, picking here a leaf and there a

berry until his high-crowned hat was filled. He hurried back to Flash's stall, and very softly he entered it. He held his breath. Never, he knew, had there been a more beautiful horse.

Flash was a delicate smoky gray, dappled with white spots, each spot ringed with a darker gray. His long mane and tail were gleaming white. Now his proud head hung heavily forward; his weight rested on three small hoofs; his fourth leg, swollen and fevered, was bent stiffly. Cinders spoke in a low voice. Flash turned his head and looked with sad eyes at the little man.

"Now, Flash," said Cinders, stroking the horse's silky head, "don't be afraid. I'm going to help you."

Very gently Cinders touched the horse's flank above the hurt leg. It was dry and hot.

"Easy, Flash. Easy, boy." Speaking in a tone hardly louder than a whisper, Cinders comforted Flash. From the fresh, dewy leaves he had gathered, he made a cool poultice and quickly and firmly bound it to the red, sore leg. Flash stood still and whinnied a little. It was plain that Flash understood Cinders knew what he was about. Cinders sat down. He could see the underpart of the horse, smooth and white and marked with little dark rings. Like a pond dotted with raindrops, thought Cinders.

He watched Flash's leg; whenever the leaves were dry and wilted from the fever, Cinders put on cool, damp ones. At each change, the swelling seemed less. Ten times that night Cinders went to the woods for fresh leaves.

When the sun rose, the swelling was almost gone. Flash now rested his hoof firmly on the floor of his stall. Cinders saw his eyes close. The pain was almost gone. Flash was asleep. Cinders climbed up into Flash's feedbox. Small though it was, he curled himself into it and slept lightly, with his tiny, clawlike fingers on Flash's head.

When Tim woke, after napping much longer and harder than he meant to, he looked into Flash's stall. He almost let out a howl of fury as his heavy eyes took in the leaf bandage on Flash's leg. But when he looked more closely, even he could see that the swelling had gone down and that Flash was standing easily and sleeping as usual.

"Now who and what's done this?"

Tim scratched his ear and looked and wondered. Then he caught sight of Cinders asleep in the feedbox with his hand on Flash's nose. "Switching mares' tails!" said Tim. "But why wasn't he killed, and kicked to powder? Flash wouldn't let me or the boys come near him. And the King's doctor," Tim chuckled to himself, "he was lucky to get out with only a ducking."

Tim sat down and watched. In a few moments Flash woke up. He shook his head. Cinders whisked out of the feedbox and onto the floor. From a shiny new pail, he lifted some leaves which he had kept cool by placing the pail in a tub of icy spring

water. Over these leaves he squeezed the juice from some dark-blue berries. Off came the old leaf bandage. Tim leaned forward. The sore was no longer red and angry as it had been. As Cinders put on the fresh leaves, Flash whickered with pleasure.

“What do you think you’re doing?” roared Tim. “who told you to touch that horse?”

“No one, sir,” said Cinders, “no one, but I knew I could make him well.”

“How’d you know it?”

“I’m not sure, sir, how I knew it; but I’m a good hand with horses.”

“What kind of leaves are those?”

“Oh, this kind and that kind, green leaves, green.”

“How’d you know what to pick? You might have poisoned him.”

Cinders thought a moment. How had he been sure which plants were right? Then he remembered.

“By the smell, sir. Some leaves smell like healing, some like eating some like death. You could never pick the wrong kind.”

“Bless my soul,” said Tim. “Bless my soul. It’s a mercy the horse hasn’t been killed and you kicked into pieces no bigger’n my thumb.

With that he clumped away to his breakfast. When he came back he called, “you can go to yours now.” But Cinders would not leave the stall. Tim caught one of the stableboys on the seat of his breeches and sent him running to Cook for Cinders’ breakfast. Cinders ate it, sitting in the feedbox. He hung a blanket over the open end of Flash’s stall so that no one could disturb the horse. In the soft half-light, Flash and Cinders spent many days. Cinders gently at first, and then more firmly, rubbed Flash’s leg. He fed Flash, patted and talked to him, cleaned his stall, and brought him cool water. And in return, Flash nosed him softly, whinnied many a welcome, or snorted angrily and tossed his head restlessly if Cinders was out of sight.

At last one morning when the sun was bright, the air cool, Cinders led Flash out of the stable, across the big stable yard and into a firm, frost-covered field. How the light streamed from Flash’s mane and tail and how proudly he arched his neck and lifted his strong delicate legs! Cinders walked him up and down, slowly, slowly. Tim caught sight of them. His face grew red; he swelled with anger as if he were about to burst.

“Who told you to take that horse out of the stable?” he shouted.

“It is time, sir,” answered Cinders in a clear but squeaky voice. He led Flash around the field to where Tim stood blowing clouds of smoke from his pipe, like an angry volcano. Tim leaned over the stone wall. There was not a scar on Flash’s leg, not a single mark on all his smoothness, nor did he limp even the slightest bit. Tim rubbed the side of his own nose and walked away.

The day came, bright and blue, when Cinders put Flash's fine brown saddle on his back. He had to make new stirrup straps in order to have them short enough. He seated himself firmly in the saddle, took the bridle in his thin, strong, small hands and rode Flash out in the stable yard. Some time before, one of the stableboys had tried to ride Flash. He had seen the world go past him very fast, had landed on his head in a pile of sweepings from the stalls. A second boy had tried. Flash had sent him over a stone wall and, luckily for the boy, onto a wagonload of hay. A third boy had fared no better.

Now Cinders rode Flash easily and quietly around the stable yard. First they walked, then trotted, then out on a smooth road they galloped. The wind sang past them. From under his wide hat, Cinders could see farms, churches, forests fly by as a ribbon unrolls in the breeze. It was like flying; it was like dreaming. When he rode back into the yard, the stableboys were popeyed with amazement. "No bigger, he ain't, than a monkey and on *that* horse!"

Flash, filled with the joy of running once more, shook his beautiful head, rose on his hind legs and waltzed. Cinders balanced himself and let Flash dance three times around the court. Then, tightening his rein, he led Flash, gentle and at ease, back into his stall. From that day on Cinders no longer cleaned harness. He cared for and lived with Flash.

But he never quite forgot that strange dream—a pumpkin and a tiny, shining slipper, a broomstick witch, the tolling of a clock twelve times.