Name: _____ Date: _____

The Gift at the Gate

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 637 words

For ten long years, a thousand Greek ships lay on the beach outside the city of Troy. Every spring the Greeks tried to get in. Every autumn they went back to their tents, tired and sad. The walls of Troy were the highest and thickest in the world.

Among the Greek kings was a man named Odysseus. He was not the strongest or the tallest, but he was the cleverest. One evening he said, "We have tried to break the walls for ten years. Let us stop trying. Let the Trojans open the gates for us themselves."

The kings stared at him. Then he explained his plan, and the kings began to grin, one after another. A quiet carpenter named Epeius was asked to build a huge wooden horse. It was said that the goddess Athena guided his hands.

When it was done, the horse was taller than a house. It had a long neck and a mane of wood. It was beautiful, and it was hollow. Hidden in its side was a secret door. On the last night, Odysseus and about thirty brave men climbed inside, and the door clicked shut.

The other Greeks packed up their camp and loaded their ships. They sailed away, but only as far as a little island nearby, where no one could see them. By sunrise the long beach was empty, except for one huge wooden horse.

The Trojans on the walls rubbed their eyes. Could it be a trick? Had the Greeks gone home? Slowly the gates of Troy creaked open. The people hurried onto the sand. They laughed and danced for the first time in ten years.

A crowd gathered around the horse. Some wanted to drag it into the city as a prize. Then the priest Laocoon came running, shouting. "Are you all mad?" he cried. "Would the Greeks leave a gift behind? I do not trust the Greeks, not even when they bring gifts!"

He knocked on the wooden side of the horse, and a hollow sound came from deep inside. Inside the horse, thirty men did not move. A girl named Cassandra, the king's daughter, could see the future, and she warned them, too. But the Trojans only smiled, because nobody ever believed her.

So the Trojans tied ropes to the horse's neck and legs. Hundreds of people heaved and sang as they pulled it across the plain. It was too tall for the gate, so the Trojans had to widen it. At last the horse stood in the middle of the city.

That night Troy held the biggest party in ten years. Lanterns hung from every window, and music and dancing filled every square. Late in the evening the music stopped. All over the city, tired people fell into a deep, happy sleep.

In the quiet after midnight, a secret door in the horse's side slid open. A rope ladder dropped to the ground. One by one, the Greek soldiers climbed out into the moonlight, stiff and silent. Out on the dark water, the Greek ships were already sailing back.

The soldiers crept through the sleeping streets. They lifted the heavy bar from the great gates and swung them wide open. The Greek army was through the gates, and by the time the sun rose, the long war was over.

The Greeks had won with a plan, and not with a sword. Odysseus, who had thought of the horse, set sail for his own island. He thought the trip would take a few weeks. But that is another story, and a long one.

And ever since, when a present seems a little too good to be true, people remember the wooden horse. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts," they say. It means that you should look carefully at a present before you pull it inside.

Questions

1. What did the Greeks build?

A. A big ship
B. A new wall
C. A giant wooden horse

2. Who warned the Trojans about the gift?

A. Epeius
B. Laocoon
C. Athena

3. Where did the Greek ships wait?

A. Behind a little island
B. In the city
C. At the gate

4. Why did the Trojans pull the horse into the city?

A. They thought it was a prize and the war was over
B. Athena told them to
C. They wanted to build a house

5. In this story, what does "hollow" mean?

A. Very heavy
B. Made of gold
C. Empty inside

6. What lesson does the story give?

A. Never go to a party

B. Look carefully at a gift that seems too good to be true

C. Always listen to Cassandra

Words to know

carpenter: wood builder

priest: temple leader

beware: be careful

prize: something won

hollow: empty inside

Answer key: The Gift at the Gate

1. C. A giant wooden horse
2. B. Laocoon
3. A. Behind a little island
4. A. They thought it was a prize and the war was over
5. C. Empty inside
6. B. Look carefully at a gift that seems too good to be true