Name: _____ Date: _____

The Little Match Girl

Reading level 13 · 1012 words

It was bitterly cold on the last evening of the year, and snow was falling steadily through the dusk. Along a deserted street walked a little girl with nothing on her head and nothing on her feet. She had left home in a pair of slippers, it is true, but they had belonged to her mother and were far too large, and she had lost them while hurrying across the road to avoid two carriages that came rattling past. One slipper had vanished altogether, and a boy had run off with the other, declaring that it would make an excellent cradle when he had children of his own. So the child went on barefoot, and her small feet were red and blue with cold.

In her old apron she carried a great number of matches, and she held a bundle of them in her hand. Nobody had bought a single one all day, and nobody had given her so much as a penny. Shivering and hungry, she crept along, the very picture of misery. Snowflakes settled on her long fair hair, which curled prettily over her neck, but she never gave it a thought. Candles were shining in every window, and the street smelled deliciously of roast goose, because it was New Year's Eve, and that, indeed, was all she was thinking about, while the cold crept up through her bare feet and into her bones.

In a corner between two houses, one of which stood out a little farther than the other, she sat down and drew her feet beneath her. She grew colder and colder, but she did not dare to go home, since she had sold no matches and had not earned a single coin, and her father would certainly beat her. Besides, it was nearly as cold at home, where the roof was all that sheltered them from the wind, even though the worst of the cracks had been stuffed with straw and rags. Her hands were almost dead with cold. How much good a single little match might do, if only she dared to draw it from the bundle and strike it on the wall to warm her fingers!

At last she pulled one out. How it sparkled, and how brightly it burned! It gave off a warm, clear flame, like a tiny candle, and as she held her hands around it, the light seemed truly wonderful. It seemed to the little girl that she was sitting in front of a great iron stove, with polished brass feet and a gleaming brass top. The fire burned so beautifully and warmed her so well that she stretched out her feet to warm them too. But then the little flame went out, the stove disappeared, and there she sat with the burnt end of the match in her hand.

She struck a second match, and where its light fell on the wall, the wall became as thin as a veil, so that she could see right into the room. A snow-white cloth lay on the table, set with delicate china, and a roast goose stood steaming there, stuffed with apples and plums. And then something even more wonderful happened, for the goose jumped down from the dish with a knife and fork still stuck in its breast, and waddled across the floor straight toward the

poor child. At that moment the match went out, and nothing remained but the thick, damp, cold wall.

She lit a third, and suddenly she was sitting beneath the most splendid Christmas tree she had ever seen, even larger and more beautifully decorated than the one she had glimpsed through the glass door of a rich merchant's house. Thousands of candles glowed upon its green branches, and colourful pictures, such as hung in the shop windows, looked down at her. The child stretched out both hands toward them, and the match went out. The Christmas lights rose higher and higher, until she saw that they were stars in the sky, and one of them fell, drawing a long trail of fire behind it.

"Someone is dying," said the little girl softly, for her grandmother, the only person who had ever been kind to her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star falls, a soul is going up to God. She struck another match against the wall, and in the glow she saw her grandmother, standing there so bright and clear, so gentle and full of love. "Grandmother!" cried the child. "Oh, take me with you! I know you will vanish when the match goes out, just like the warm stove, and the roast goose, and the splendid Christmas tree!" And she hastily struck the whole bundle of matches, because she wanted to keep her grandmother with her.

The matches blazed with such a brilliant light that it was brighter than day, and her grandmother had never seemed so beautiful or so tall. She lifted the little girl in her arms, and together they flew upward, in brightness and joy, higher and higher, to where there was no cold and no hunger and no fear, because they were with God. But in the cold light of the morning, the child sat in the corner between the houses, with red cheeks and a smile on her lips, leaning against the wall. She had frozen to death on the last evening of the old year.

The first sun of the new year rose upon her small body, which sat there stiff and still among her matches, nearly a whole bundle of which had been burned. "She wanted to warm herself," said the people who found her, and they shook their heads, for it seemed a pity. Then they went on with their holiday, because the street was waking up, and children ran laughing through the fresh snow without looking into the corner. Nobody had the slightest idea of the lovely things she had seen, or of the glory in which she and her grandmother had entered the happiness of the new year.

Questions

1. Why did the little girl not go home?

A. She had sold no matches and feared her father's anger

B. She had lost her way

C. She wanted to see the snow

2. What did she see in the light of the first match?

A. A great iron stove
B. A roast goose
C. Her grandmother

3. Why did she strike the whole bundle of matches at once?

A. She wanted to keep her grandmother from vanishing
B. She wanted to warm the whole street
C. She was angry

4. In this story, "deserted" means —

A. full of noise
B. empty of people
C. very bright

5. What did the people say when they found her in the morning?

A. That she had wanted to warm herself
B. That she had run away
C. That she was dreaming

6. What does this story ask a reader to notice?

A. How easily people overlook a child who is suffering
B. That matches are dangerous
C. That winter is always cruel

Words to know

deserted: empty of people
misery: great unhappiness
splendid: grand and lovely
veil: thin cloth cover
glimpsed: saw briefly
brilliant: very bright

Answer key: The Little Match Girl

1. A. She had sold no matches and feared her father's anger
2. A. A great iron stove
3. A. She wanted to keep her grandmother from vanishing
4. B. empty of people
5. A. That she had wanted to warm herself
6. A. How easily people overlook a child who is suffering