Name: _____ Date: _____

Tuppence Delivers

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1164 words

Tuppence Barley was exactly one teaspoon tall. This is not an exaggeration. On the day she was born, she was measured against a teaspoon, and the teaspoon was, if anything, slightly too large. Her father, Mr. Barley, baked bread for a living and was six feet tall. He was the first to admit that he could not explain it. For the rest of his life, he checked the bread bin before he sat down.

By the age of eight, Tuppence had a job. The Pennyfold Post Office had been trying for months to deliver a single postcard to a single door, and had failed eleven times. Every postman was too big for the small hatch in the glasshouse on the roof. "What we need," said the Postmaster, Mr. Pym, "is a courier who can cross a market, a canal and a roof without anybody noticing." Tuppence put up her hand. It was a very small hand, and a very small thing to notice, but Mr. Pym noticed it.

The postcard was addressed to Mrs. Larkin-Finch, at the top of Number Nine, Crooked Row. It had a stamp on it as big as a barn door, which Tuppence did not mind, because it made her feel official. It was four inches wide and six inches tall, which made it slightly taller than the courier. Tuppence strapped it to her back with two bootlaces, and tested the knots twice. From a distance, she looked like a postcard walking on its own, and nobody stops a postcard.

Her father packed her lunch. It was a single crumb of bread, with a caraway seed on top. To her, it was the size of a small loaf, and she was to carry it in a matchbox. He measured her against the bread knife twice, in case anything had changed since breakfast. "Straight there," he said. "Straight back." "Dad," said Tuppence, "I am eight, and I am a teaspoon. I know exactly what I am doing."

The market in Pennyfold Square, to a person of normal size, is a pleasant place with a fountain. To Tuppence, it was a forest of boots. Each one was as big as a cottage, and they arrived without warning, and they were never in any hurry to see who was underneath. She learned to move in the shadows between the stalls. She learned that the safest place in any crowd is the middle of a shopping basket.

She hopped into the first basket that came past, between a cabbage and a very large leek, and was carried across Market Square at a steady three miles an hour. She could smell cheese and fish and warm cinnamon. At the far side, a spaniel stuck its nose into the basket. The nose was as big as a wheelbarrow. "Good morning," said Tuppence, firmly, and the spaniel sat down at once.

The canal at the end of the market was thirty feet wide. Measured in Tuppences, that is about seventy-two, which is a very long way indeed to swim, and she did not want to swim. The

bridge was half a mile off, and Mrs. Larkin-Finch's birthday, as it happened, was today. At the water's edge, a thick rope, as stout as Tuppence's own arm, ran across the water from a post on this bank to a post on the far bank.

It was the longest tightrope in Pennyfold. Tuppence walked it in her stockinged feet, with the postcard on her back and her arms held out for balance. A breeze lifted the card like a sail. Halfway across, a family of ducks paddled underneath and looked up, and a man on the towpath, who was eating a sandwich, put it down and rubbed his eyes, and then ate it anyway. She reached the post. She did not look back.

On the roof of the bookshop, a pigeon was waiting. He was a large gray bird with a chest like a barrel, and he stood on the ridge tiles with it stuck out, as if somebody were about to paint him. His name was Cuthbert. "I am not a pigeon," he said, before she could ask. "I am a Feathered Courier. I will take you to Crooked Row, but I require payment in advance."

Tuppence thought about the matchbox. She thought about her lunch, and about the caraway seed on top. Then she took out the crumb and set it down in front of Cuthbert, who looked at it for a long time with one orange eye. "That," he said, "is very small." "So am I," said Tuppence. He put the crumb into his beak. "Climb on," he said, and gave a small, stiff bow.

Cuthbert took off from the gutter with a clatter of wings. Tuppence lay flat on his back, clinging to the feathers, while the postcard on her own back rippled like a flag. The whole of Pennyfold lay beneath them, chimney pots and washing lines and the silver thread of the canal. "You are no heavier than an egg," said Cuthbert, over his shoulder. "A large egg, though. Do not wriggle."

Number Nine, Crooked Row, had the tallest chimney on the street and a glasshouse on top of the roof. Inside the glass, a very old lady was watering tomatoes. Cuthbert landed on the sill with great ceremony. Tuppence climbed down his wing, unstrapped the postcard from her back and walked up to the glass. She knocked three times, with all her might. The old lady looked up and dropped her watering can.

The glass door slid open. "Special delivery," said Tuppence, as clearly as she could, "for Mrs. Larkin-Finch." The old lady, who had waited all her birthday week for a postman who never fit, crouched until her nose was level with the courier. She took the postcard in two fingers. She read the front, then the back. Forty-one grandchildren had signed it, in forty-one colors, and it said, in the biggest letters on the card, HAPPY NINETIETH.

"How extraordinary," said Mrs. Larkin-Finch. She fetched a teaspoon from her pocket, for no reason that she could explain, and held it up beside Tuppence. Tuppence held perfectly still, which is harder than it sounds. They matched exactly. "A perfect fit," said Mrs. Larkin-Finch. She made tea in a thimble and cut a crumb from the birthday cake, which was too big for Tuppence to finish, and a great deal too big for Cuthbert, who tried anyway.

She wrote a reply on the back of a clean envelope of very good paper, which was twice as big as the courier, and tied it on with a ribbon. There was no way for Tuppence to carry it home, so Cuthbert had an idea. He spread his wings, with the envelope pulled out wide behind him like a sail, and Tuppence sat on the top with her feet over the edge. They went home that way across the rooftops, like a very small, very well-addressed kite.

Questions

1. How tall was Tuppence Barley?

A. As tall as a pencil
B. As tall as a bread knife
C. As tall as a teaspoon

2. What did Tuppence carry on her back?

A. A matchbox
B. A postcard
C. A loaf

3. What does "courier" mean in "the smallest courier in Pennyfold"?

A. A person who delivers things
B. A baker
C. A sailor

4. Why did Tuppence give Cuthbert her lunch?

A. He asked to be paid before he flew
B. He was hungry and begged
C. She did not like caraway

5. How did Tuppence cross the canal?

A. She walked a rope
B. She swam
C. She took a boat

6. What did the card say on the front?

A. Come to tea
B. Happy Ninetieth
C. Special Delivery

Words to know

courier: a delivery person
ceremony: a grand show
tightrope: a high rope
exaggeration: stretching the truth

glasshouse: a plant room

Answer key: Tuppence Delivers

1. C. As tall as a teaspoon
2. B. A postcard
3. A. A person who delivers things
4. A. He asked to be paid before he flew
5. A. She walked a rope
6. B. Happy Ninetieth