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Comes the Tinker

by Karl G. Schlosser

As always, they heard the children first. Even in the strictest, most conservative towns, somehow, a few of the youngest or bravest managed to slip out to the road and wait for them. In other places, the whole of the population turned out, led by the mayor, or captain, or caliph, holding forth banners and flags and flowers to welcome the Tinker and his wagon, draw by the steel horses that never tired.

“The Tinker!”

“The Tinker’s come back!”

“Hey, ho, it’s a holiday!” they cried, as they ran alongside his wagon, keeping pace with the beautiful, shiny beasts that were taller than a man and moved their gleaming hooves in silent unison.

Tinker Tom, a big man with a curly red beard and a ready smile, laughed and waved, reaching into a bag at his feet. He tossed handfuls of candy in the air, and the children laughed and ran to catch the sweets that tasted of sunlight and forgotten fruits.

At his side rode his wife Mary, dressed in a modest white dress with big pockets, her black hair tied back in a long braid. On her lap she carried a kitten who appeared asleep, but in the manner of his kind, kept a wary eye on the impromptu parade.

They rounded the corner of the road and arrived in the town proper. Some of the children had run ahead, and adults were drifting into the town square, raising their

hands in greeting and talking among themselves. One greybeard leaned heavily on his cane and said in a reedy voice, "Is it really the Tinker?"

"Aye, grandfather, 'tis the Tinker and his wagon, just like the stories you tell at Christmas."

"Well, what are you waiting for, boy?" said the older man. He gestured with his cane. "Run and ask if he has any port!"

The young man flew like an arrow toward the growing crowd.

"And tobacco! Ask if he has any tobacco!"

The boy turned and called something back, which was lost in the general commotion. The old man smiled a wrinkled smile, remembering a winter night and warm, comforting smoke as it curled from his glowing pipe.

Some minutes later, the Tinker had brought his wagon into the square, near the statue of community's founder. A short man, dressed in a dapper suit and a tall blue silk hat, pushed his way through the crowd. "Let me through, good people. Let me through I say!" His large, droopy mustache quivered when he spoke. Reluctantly, people moved aside. One of the Tinker's horses turned its head to examine the hat, and its eyes gleamed bright red for a moment.

Tom stepped down from the wagon and took off his own broad sun hat. He held out a large hand, tanned and rough. "Good day to you, sir. Tinker Tom at your service!"

"Welcome to the town of Resolute, sir. I am Silas, the Mayor and Sheriff," said the other man, accepting the hand and tipping his hat.

"Of course you are!" Tom said, releasing Silas' hand. "And a beautiful town it is."

Silas puffed up his chest. "I cannot take credit, for the Lord has blessed us. Unlike my ancestor," and he turned toward the statue, "who traveled such a long and dangerous road—"

"Oh!" said Tom, interrupting what he knew would be a long and much-rehearsed speech. "Where are my manners?" He reached behind him and took his wife's hand. "This is Mary, who married me despite her own good sense and my poor purse. Mary, this is the Mayor of Resolute."

"Mayor and Sheriff, Ma'am."

Mary stepped down and gave a little curtsy. Her cat yawned and snuggled into the crook of her arm. "I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance!" She turned and gave the town square a critical appraisal. "Such a welcome sight after so many weeks on the road. And so many beautiful children! Are they all yours?"

The Mayor and Sheriff blushed a mighty red as the crowd roared with laughter. Finally, he said, "No, ma'am. Only the two wild boys sitting in yonder tree."

"Hey, ho, boys!" Tom reached into his bag and threw several pieces of candy in a high arc that nearly reached the tree. Children dropped from branches and scrambled in the dirt for the brightly colored paper. "Don't worry, good sir," Mary said. "For the sweets will clean their teeth better than a stiff brush."

There were appreciative murmurs in the crowd at that. Some of the older people remembered other visits by the Tinker, and his wondrous foods.

"Now, then." Tom clapped a hand on Silas' shoulder, nearly knocking him over. "To business. Have you a place where I can park my wagon?"

"Right this way." Silas turned and pressed his way through the crowd again, leading the Tinker to a plot of reasonably clear land under two good shade trees, not fifty paces from a clear, cold stream. Tom drove the team forward between the trees,

then unhitched the horses, which positioned themselves near the back of the wagon. Mary busied herself unfolding doors and panels from the wagon, displaying many small and precious items. She put out two stools and a low table in the shade, for the day was becoming hot. On the table, she set a tall silver pitcher that sweated with condensation, and glasses the color of cobalt.

“Care for some lemonade, Mayor Silas?”

Tom and Mary spent the rest of the afternoon meeting the townspeople, making note of their needs, and showing them some of their goods. They refilled the lemonade pitcher a dozen times, and as the day cooled and the shadows lengthened, Tom brought out a stove plate, set it up on its tripod, and heated water for coffee, much to the appreciation of the elders. Recent troubles on the border had stopped most of the merchants, and coffee beans had grown dear.

At dusk, Silas returned and, in his capacity as Sheriff, gently reminded people of the curfew and heavens, let the poor Tinker and his wife turn in, for they’ve had a long day and a longer journey. Everyone bid farewell and made their way home, promising to return the next day.

The next morning, everyone rose early, and the Sabbath meeting began promptly and ended a few minutes early, for Pastor Winthrop kept his sermon short and to the point. A dignified procession ensued, terminating at the Tinker’s cottage.

A cottage! The children whooped and broke ranks, running pell-mell in their Sunday clothes toward the tidy building that now stood under the shade of a single oak tree. The cottage itself was painted a jaunty yellow, with bright white shutters and a big front door with fine brass hinges. The windows were thrown open, and smells of

freshly baked bread emerged from within. The Tinker's cart and steel horses were tied up around the back. The kitten lay curled up on a blanket on a porch swing.

Tom perched on his stool in front of a large table, on which lay piles of many useful things: tools and needles, bolts of fabric, spices (and more miraculous candy), bottles of port wine, wooden toys, tins of coffee and tea, and even a pile of sturdy boots.

One young girl named Amy caught sight of a music box, then paused and looked up at the house. A frown crossed her freckled face. "Mr. Tinker, sir?"

"Yes, my dear," he said, bending down. "Do you like the music box?"

"Very much, sir," she answered promptly. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course, little lady. Ask away."

"Did you build that house all by yourself?"

"Well, the Good Lord gave me many things, including two left thumbs," Tom said. "Putting up a cottage is beyond my talents. The horses did most of the work." He winked at her.

She dimpled. "Sir, what happened to the other tree?"

Tom looked at his boots and brought a convincing blush to his already ruddy face. "Well, now you've gone and found out my secret, little lady. It's one thing to make a new dress or a skillet from my stock, but a house, that's a tall order even for a Tinker. I needed the horses' help with that one." He gave his display table an affectionate pat. "Besides, the poor thing was blighted with tiny black beetles. Eating it from the inside, they were. So I figured that it would make a fine new temporary house for Mary and me."

"Do you intend on taking it with you, then?" asked Mayor Silas, who had pushed his way to the front of the line.

“Well, Mayor Silas, I was hoping to leave the cottage with someone, since it’s rather difficult to get it back in the box!” He laughed until his belly shook. “Perhaps you could look after it after we go. It has a proper sitting room and a fine kitchen, as Mary will attest.” Tom turned and called toward the house. “Mary, come and show the Mayor and Sheriff how the stove works!”

Mary appeared on the porch, wiping her hands on a spotless apron. “I’m getting ready to fry up some eggs, sir. Perhaps you would be so kind as to join me.”

“Gladly ma’am,” he said, removing his hat and ascending the stairs to the kitchen.

Amy’s father, a man of middle years named Thankful, came up and put his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Morning, Tinker. How much for that hatchet?”

The Tinker rubbed his hands together. “Well, good neighbor, this hatchet will never rust and keep its edge as long as you keep it clean and wrapped. In fact, your grandson will probably use it to build his first house.” He picked up a piece of writing paper from a box and used the hatchet to slice the paper into tiny strips. Then he plucked a hair from his beard and laid it across the blade, where it fell in two. “Now, what’s that worth to you?”

Thankful leaned back on one foot and crossed his arms, not wanting to appear too eager. “My wife is a fine hand with a needle. She just finished a quilt that’ll keep you warm all winter.”

Tom nodded and took a drink of coffee from a heavy mug. “That sounds like a promising start.” He looked at the girl. “And your daughter, does she have any talents?”

Amy looked at her shoes for a moment, then raised her eyes to the Tinker. "I can sing, sir," she said in a quiet voice. "Not as well as Beulah, but I led the hymns for a whole month when she was laid up with the fever."

"True enough, dear," said her father, "but I'm not sure if the Tinker has much use for singing, pretty as yours is." He winked at Tom.

"Well, neighbor, there you're wrong," said Tom. "The days are long on the road, and I grow tired of hearing myself talk. I know my wife does! A fresh voice would make the miles easier." He reached into his pocket, and withdrew a brass disk the size of a pocket watch. "I won't ask you to sing for me now, but if you could take this home with you and give me your best Sunday hymns, I'll consider it a fair trade."

With a curtsy, Amy took the brass disk from Tom. She glanced at the music box again.

"Go on," Tom said, "Take it."

"May I, Father?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Nonsense! You run off and sing me some songs," said Tom. "If you see your friend Beulah, tell her I have another music box somewhere in this mess."

"Thank you, thank you!" Amy cradled her music box in the folds of her dress and walked away, humming.

"You're very kind, Tinker."

Tom wrapped up the hatchet in a silver cloth. "It's a trifle, good neighbor. Now, mind you hold this by the handle, and keep it dry and snug inside the cloth. If you drop it on your foot, you'll need a new pair of boots, and a doctor's care." He passed over the parcel.

"We don't have much in the way of doctor these days," Thankful said, handling the hatchet with respect. "Fever took Eleazer last winter when he was caring for everyone else. God rest his soul."

"That's a terrible loss," said the Tinker. "However, we may be able to help. Mary apprenticed as a nurse before we married, and we recently traded a case of lamps for some vaccines over in Medina. I'll ask her to give the children a once over and treat those that need it."

"We'd be in your debt," said Thankful. He looked up at the cottage. "That's a right fine structure you've got there. Better than the school the last Tinker built. Those seats were too soft to keep children awake during lessons."

Tom grinned. "I'll be sure to pass that along. Now don't forget that quilt." Then he raised his voice, "Who's next?"

After Tom had replaced a broken ax handle and traded two pairs of socks for some freshly smoked chicken, the Mayor and Sheriff came down the steps, wiping his mustache with a pocket kerchief.

"Most impressive, Tinker," he said. "I think my family will be very pleased. How long did you say you were staying here in Resolute?"

Tom smiled. "Just enough to do our business. We want to be over the mountains before the next month."

"Then I'll let you get on with it." He donned his hat. "Good day to you, Ira," he said to a stooped old man who leaned on a cane and clutched a slim leather book, much scuffed and worn.

"Good day to you, Silas," replied Ira, tipping his hat as the Mayor and Sheriff walked away. When Silas passed out of earshot, he added, "Politicians," and spat discretely to one side. Then he put the book on the table. "Can you fix this?"

“Perhaps,” said Tom, flipping open the cover. The pages were clean, white, and seemed to shimmer in the sun. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Wish I knew. I was listening to Hamlet a couple months back, and just when the ghost made his appearance, it just died. No pun intended.” Ira gave him a gap-toothed grin. “Wouldn’t be so bad, except it was the only copy in town.” He leaned on his cane.

Tom ran his fingers along the spine until he found a tiny catch. It opened up to reveal a dull silver wafer no larger than his thumbnail. “I might have just the thing. Let me check.” He turned and rummaged through some small boxes at his feet.

Mary came down the steps with a wooden tray full of small, brown bottles. “Tom, did I hear say that someone needed vaccine?”

“That you did,” he said, still on his knees. “Be so kind and ask after the family of Thankful. I’m sure they can tell who’s been sick.”

“I’ll be back by supper.” Mary tied on her bonnet and walked away, her bottles clinking.

With a grunt, Tom pushed himself upright. “Hey, ho, here we go!”

Between his large fingertips, he pinched a silver wafer that glowed faintly in the sun. He slid this into the book, sealed the cover and handed it back. “Try it now.”

Ira opened the cover and tapped the top page. Rows of text appeared. He flipped a few pages, and ran his fingers across the words. Voices emerged clear and bright between the men:

I am thy father’s spirit,  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.

Ira chuckled and closed the book. "Ah, that's better. No one says it quite like the Bard."

"True enough," said the Tinker, "but give me a bit of Mark Twain to lift the spirit."

"I suppose it depends on your mood," Ira said. He squinted and examined Tom's face. "Has anyone ever told you that you're the spitting image of your father?"

"All the time," replied Tom.

"Nothing to be ashamed of. He was a handsome enough fellow." He reached for his purse. "What do I owe you?"

Tom rubbed his chin. "Do you play chess?"

"Better than you, young sprout."

"Come around tonight after supper and we'll see about that. If you can beat me two games out of three, I'll consider us even."

"Done!" They shook hands.

"Now who's next?"

The morning passed quickly enough, with people getting sharp knives for dull, spectacles, zippers, new seeds, and paint that changed color with the weather. In exchange, the Tinker accepted silver pennies, recipes, two pairs of knee breeches, goose feathers, and a watercolor painting of the church. He turned down a litter of puppies (they would vex the cat) and a hand-stitched saddle from Ichabod the tanner.

"It's a fine piece," Tom said. "Maybe the best leather I've seen in years. But since you've got only the one saddle, I fear the other horse will be disappointed. They are jealous creatures, you know, and vain as a pretty girl with a new mirror." He handed the saddle back. "Do you have anything else?"

Ichabod put the saddle by his feet. He glanced up at the cottage, where a freckled boy sat playing with the kitten. "You seem fair busy, neighbor. Have you thought about taking on an apprentice?"

Tom raised his hat and wiped his forehead. "I confess I've thought about it."

Ichabod tilted his head toward the cottage. "My sister and her husband died with the fever last year, and their boy Nathan came to stay with me. He's a good lad, strong and smart."

"But you have no room," Tom said.

"Isn't that. We can always make room," the tanner said. "But truth be told, there isn't enough work for three. I 'prenticed Jerome's eldest last year, and that's all I can handle."

Tom crossed his arms and nodded. "I see, neighbor, I see." He took off his hat, wiped his brow on his sleeve. "He's smart, you say?"

"Smart as the day is long. He can read and write, and understands more math than I do." Ichabod bent down and lifted the saddle. "Make a fine Tinker, in my opinion."

"Your confidence says a lot, neighbor, but I can't say one way or t'other without Mary, you understand," said Tom. "I'll tell you what.... Why don't lend me the boy for the afternoon? He can help me turn out some chairs for the weaver's house. If he does a good job, I'll give you a new steel punch for his time."

They shook hands on it. "Much obliged."

The following day Tom took his tool bag and paid a call on Pastor Winthrop, and found him tending to his chickens. Despite the heat, the preacher was dressed in a dark, severe suit and the traditional tricorne of his office. Winthrop waved to Tom and

scattered a last handful of corn. He dusted his hands against his pants, leaving faint smudges of yellow, before offering Tom a surprisingly strong handshake. "Lord save you and yours, Tinker."

"Thank you kindly," said Tom. "I feel He has already."

Winthrop raised an eyebrow. "You speak with some certainty."

Tom laughed. "I'm blessed, and so is my family. You'll forgive me if I interpret that as being saved." He tipped his hat. "No offense, Pastor. You know us Tinkers, all full of bluster."

Winthrop allowed himself a small smile. "So I've noticed. Have you come today for some theological discourse, and is your visit related to more earthly matters?"

"The good Mayor and Sheriff mentioned that your water pump has gone to its final reward."

The pastor shrugged. "It's no trouble, neighbor, really. The Smith farm is close by, and they are kind enough to let me use their well."

"Nonsense!" said Tom. "A man of the cloth has better things to do than spend an hour each day hauling buckets." Seeing the expression on Winthrop's face, Tom added, "Oh, I know that work is worship and all, but there are some in your flock who feel their spiritual leader deserves to have running water."

Winthrop clasped his hands behind his back, rocking a little on his heels. "Well," he said after a moment, "it does seem a waste to have machinery rusting away."

"Idle pumps being the Devil's tools?" asked Tom.

"Something like that."

He took Tom around the back of the church, where the pastor had a small, roughly finished house that held a small sleeping room, kitchen, and pantry. The water pump sat next to this, in a circle of grass. While there were a few spots of rust on the

spigot, the pump itself was reasonably clean. Tom set down his bag and put on large spectacles with pale blue lenses. He unrolled a length of soft leather, setting out many small and intricate tools.

“Bless me,” said Winthrop. “That looks complicated.”

“Not really,” said Tom, removing a metal cover. “The basic principle is simple. Just as you use a bucket to draw water up from the bottom of a well, you use a pipe to bring water to the surface.” He tapped the pipe. “This is full of air, and if pump draws out that air, the water down below rushes up to see what all the fuss is about.”

“Water is such a curious substance.”

Tom looked up, then laughed. “And people say pastors have no sense of humor.”

He worked for a while then, humming to himself as removed bits and pieces of the pump, examining them in front of his lenses. The sun moved higher in the sky, casting welcome shade across both men.

Finally, Tom put together the puzzle of shiny metal pieces, took off his lenses, and wiped his brow. “That’s it, I think. Let’s give it a try.” He inserted an ornate brass key into an opening on the pump and turned. A gentle gurgle sounded from within, and a stream of brackish water emerged from the spout. “Give it a minute,” Tom said.

“I’ll fetch a bucket,” said Winthrop. When he returned, the water had grown clear. He filled the bucket, then took a long draught. “Perfect!” he declared.

“Glad to be of service,” Tom said. He handed the key to Winthrop. “Keep this safe.”

The pastor rolled the key between his thumb and fingers. “Tell me something, Tinker.”

“If I can,” said Tom.

“There can’t be much profit in trading marvelous machines and clothing that never needs mending for pottery and blankets, no matter how fine they might be.”

“There are a surprising number of people with more money than sense,” Tom said. “Besides, the Tinkers have always taken care of our customers. We gave that promise when we signed the armistice.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” said Winthrop. “My grandfather died in that war, like so many of his generation.”

They stood in silence for a moment. Winthrop examined the brass key, then tucked it away in his waistcoat. “You know, neighbor, we had some odd gentleman come calling last winter.”

“Really?” Tom said, leaning the heel of his boot against the wall.

“Aye. They came by wagon at night, and wore the fanciest gold jewelry. Fine mesh, it was, and it covered them from head down to fingertips. They spoke the trade language, but with such fierce accents that only the schoolteacher could make sense of it. She said the men were offering good coin if they could copy out the genealogy pages from our family Bibles.”

“Did anyone take them up on their offer?” Tom asked.

“A few. I remember they gave the potter a nice bag of silver pennies. Good thing, too, since his boy came down with the fever soon after. They needed the money for the funeral.”

“Sad,” said Tom. He picked up his bag and tipped his hat to Winthrop. “Well, I must be going. Enjoy your water, Pastor.”

That night, as the day shook off its heat, Tom and Mary lay on their bed with the doors closed and windows open, enjoying the breeze. The kitten stalked the foot of the

bed, making occasional feints toward their bare feet. Mary played with the buttons of Tom's nightshirt. "You're awfully quiet," she said.

"I'm thinking," he said, his eyes closed.

"About what?"

"About last winter," Tom said. "Two people came into Resolute looking for family history, and after they left, a lot of people came down with a fever. I'll wager they were cousins." He sighed. "Someone's broken the armistice."

Mary hugged him close. "Tom, you can't be sure."

He ignored her comment. "Sometimes I wonder if it was worth it. The war was terrible, but peace is almost as bad for these people. They're barely literate. They—" He thought about saying more, but felt Mary stiffen a bit. So he reached down and scratched the kitten under its chin. "Sorry. Tell me what you found today."

"What we expected, by and large," she said, relaxing a bit. "The children are inbred. The years haven't been kind to the family, not isolated like this."

"They'll live longer than their parents," Tom said. "We can give them that, at least."

"That we can," Mary said.

Tom thought for a moment. "What do you think about Nathan, the tanner's nephew?"

"I haven't met him," said Mary.

"He spent yesterday afternoon here, helping me on the lathe. He's a curious lad: wanted to know about everything we'd seen on the road." Tom chuckled. "He's fascinated by the horses. Kept finding reasons to visit them. He even asked if he could ride one."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him he should take it up with them," Tom said.

The next day Tom and Mary paid a visit to the tanner. Since it was such a fine day (and the tanner was boiling new skins), they took themselves to a small garden behind the house attached to the shop. Tom presented Ichabod with a new punch, as promised, and a sharp knife for his apprentice.

"That makes both of us happy," said Ichabod. "He's always borrowing mine when he thinks I'm not looking." He admired the lines of the blade, and the smaller handle, appropriate for a growing boy.

Mary excused herself to have a look at Nathan and give him a dose of vaccine. Tom accepted Ichabod's offer of a game of horseshoes. When Mary returned, she had a pie from the tanner's wife and a large smile on her face.

On the day before the next Sabbath, the Tinker loaded up his wagon and hitched his team. The Mayor and Sheriff stood at the head of the crowd that had come to see the Tinker off.

"Are you sure you can't stay any longer, neighbor?" asked Silas.

"Honestly, no," replied Tom. "We've a long road ahead, and there isn't a broken pot left within a day's walk. Nay, we're well done here."

"You've all been so kind," put in Mary. "But if Tom has another slice of pie, I'll have to let out his pants. Again!"

Tom scowled and turned his attention to Nathan. The boy sat on the sideboard of the wagon, wearing a fine new belt, his parting gift from Ichabod. "You have everything, son?"

Nathan lifted up a small parcel. "Yes, sir."

“Hey, ho, let’s go!” Tom cried and jumped into his seat. Mary gave a final curtsy to the Mayor and Sheriff, then took Tom’s hand as he pulled her up onto the seat next to him.

With a snap of the reins they were off, slowly at first, giving the children a final chance to chase them to the border of town. The gleaming horses picked up their cadence after that, their hoofs striking the ground in nearly silent unison until the wagon left behind the last boys, laughing and gasping.

They rode steadily until sunset, when they paused long enough for a quick supper. Tom brought out a special treat for dessert: ice cream. Nathan was amazed. “Don’t eat it too fast,” Tom warned him. “It will make your head hurt.”

Nathan licked his bowl clean. “How did you keep it so cold?”

“Tinker’s secret.”

“Can you teach me?”

“I don’t see why not,” said Mary. “After all, you’re a Tinker now.”

Soon the sun set behind the hills, and Nathan lay snuggled in the new quilt, snoring lightly, with the kitten curled up in the crook of his arm.

Tom put his arm around Mary’s shoulder, pulled her close. “It’s a miracle he survived. What is he, my nephew?”

She leaned her head close. “Your tenth great grand nephew, as far as I can tell.”

“Then it’s high time he met the rest of the cousins,” Tom said. He snapped the reins twice. The horses nickered and pranced ahead toward a shooting star that grew larger and brighter as it fell to the ground.

“Let’s go home. Hey, ho!”

The End