



soldier looked closely. *The leaves were all of shimmering silver.* “The king will never believe this!” he thought. “I must take a branch to show him.” So he reached for a tiny branch. But no sooner did he break it off than the tree let out a great cry. “What was that noise?” asked the youngest princess. “Someone is blowing a trumpet to welcome us,” said the eldest. Next they came to a forest where the leaves were all of shining gold. Then they reached a forest where every tree had leaves of glittering diamonds. The soldier broke off a tiny branch from a tree of gold and a tree of diamonds. And each time the tree let out a great cry. “Something is wrong!” said the youngest princess. “I told you,” said the eldest. “It’s only a trumpet.”

Soon they came to a large lake. By the shore of the lake there were twelve little boats. In every boat sat a handsome prince. Each princess stepped into a boat, and the soldier sat beside the youngest. “The boat seems heavy tonight,” she said. And the prince agreed. He rowed and rowed with all his might, but the boat moved very slowly. On the other side of the lake stood a marble castle lit from top to bottom. The sounds of trumpets, flutes, and drums rang through the open windows. “Ah,” thought the soldier, “what merry music for dancing!”

Once inside the ballroom, each prince danced with his princess. The invisible soldier danced, too. But, of course, no one could see him. Then the soldier played a little game. Whenever a princess held a cup of wine, he drank from it. By the time she put it to her lips, the cup was almost empty. “This is very strange,” said the youngest princess. But the eldest told her not to worry. And so it went. On and on they danced till three in the morning. Then their shoes were worn out and they had to stop.

The princes rowed them back across the lake. The time the soldier sat beside the eldest princess. When they reached the shore, the princesses said good-bye to their princes. “We will return tomorrow night,” they promised. Then they slowly returned, back through the forest of diamonds, and the forests of gold and silver. The moment they came to the secret stairs, the invisible soldier ran ahead. He hung up the cloak and quickly got into bed.

By the time the twelve princesses reached their room, they heard him snoring loudly. “We’re safe,” they whispered. Then they took off their jewels and gowns and put them away. They kicked off their shoes, lay down, and fell fast asleep. The next

morning the soldier said nothing to the king. He wanted to see more of the magical world underground. So he followed the princesses again on the second and third nights. Everything happened the same as before. The princesses danced till their shoes were full of holes. But on the third night, the soldier carried away a golden cup to show the king.

The next morning it was time for the soldier to give his answer. So he took the three branches and the golden cup and went before the king. The twelve princesses listened behind the door to hear what he would say. “Do you know where my daughters go every night and dance their shoes to pieces?” asked the king. “Yes I do,” said the soldier. “They dance with twelve enchanted princes in a castle underground.” And he told the king everything that had happened. “That’s impossible!” cried the king. “I have proof,” said the soldier. And he held out the three branches and the golden cup.

At once the king called for his daughters. “Has this soldier told me the truth?” he asked. The twelve princesses bowed their heads. “Yes,” they whispered. “Well! Well!” said the king. “You are a very lucky man. Which of my daughters do you choose for a wife?” “I’m not as young as I used to be,” said the soldier. “I will take the eldest.” So the wedding was held that very day. And the soldier became heir to the kingdom just as the king had promised. But the twelve princes remained under a magic spell for as many nights as they had danced with the king’s daughters. And no one knows how long that was.