

## The Chest

Mr and Mrs Newt lived in a small tumbledown cottage on the edge of a forest. They were old and poor. In the winter they were always hungry.

One particularly cold morning, Mrs Newt gave Mr Newt her last coins and sent him to the market to buy some rice flour to make noodles.

Mr Newt returned later that evening carrying a large package under his arm. "What is that?" Mrs Newt asked. "It doesn't look like flour to me."

"It's a metal detector." Mr Newt mumbled.

"A metal detector?" Mrs Newt said. "We can't eat a metal detector!"

"No, but we can use it to find treasure," said Mr Newt. "And after we find treasure, we can buy pork, fish, rice, fruit. Anything we like."

"Treasure?" Mrs Newt roared. "You'll be lucky if you find an old bottle top round here. Take it back at once. And bring me my flour!"

"Just give me a few days," Mr Newt begged. "If I don't find treasure, I'll take it back. I promise."

Mrs Newt stomped her wellies in the mud.

"Three days," she said. "And not a moment longer."

The next day, Mr Newt left the cottage at dawn. All day he searched the fields to the north of the cottage. The metal detector did not beep a single time.

"Well?" Mrs Newt demanded when her husband returned home in the evening. "I hope you found treasure. I'm starving. And I'm really looking forward to some juicy pork chops."

Mr Newt shuffled past his wife with his head bowed. "Sorry, Dear," he said. "But I'm sure I'll find something tomorrow."

The next day Mr Newt searched the woodland to the south of the cottage. This time the metal detector did beep, but all he found was a rusty nail and an old bucket handle.

"We're down to our last four potatoes and two onions," Mrs Newt said. "You'd better hope that hen of ours lays some eggs before dinner time."

On the third day, Mr Newt went to the hill to the east of the cottage. He searched all morning and found nothing. In the afternoon, he found an old cannonball from the war. He was just about to give up and return home when the metal detector began to beep. Mr Newt marked the spot, picked up his shovel and started to dig.

The sun had set when Mr Newt returned to the cottage. He was toiling under the weight of something large and heavy. "What's that?" Mrs Newt asked.

Mr Newt placed the object at Mrs Newt's feet. "A chest," he said.

"A chest. What's in it?" asked Mrs Newt.

"I don't know," Mr Newt said. "It's locked."

"Well, go on then. Unlock it!" said Mrs Newt.

In the next half an hour, Mr Newt tried a knife, a screwdriver, and a crowbar. But the lid would not budge.

"It's stronger than it looks," Mr Newt said.

Mrs Newt pushed her husband out of the way. "Here." she said. "Let me try."

Mrs Newt pulled a hairpin from her hair. She prodded it into the lock and twisted and twiddled. Suddenly, there was a loud click.

Slowly Mrs Newt raised the lid.

"Well? What's in it?" asked Mr Newt.

"It's empty," sighed Mrs Newt. "Completely empty."

Mr Newt peered over Mrs Newt's shoulder.

"But what's that there?" He asked pointing into the dark interior.

"Oh, that. That's just my old hairpin," said Mrs Newt. "It must have fallen inside when I was leaning over."

Mr Newt pointed again. "And what's that?" He asked.

Mrs Newt bent forward and peered into the chest. "Well, fancy that," she said. "It's another hairpin. Exactly like my old one." She picked up the two hairpins for Mr Newt to see. They were as identical as peas in a pod.

At first, Mr Newt looked puzzled. Then he smiled. Then he laughed. Then he jumped up and did a little jig around the chest.

"What's got into you?" Mrs Newt demanded. "We won't get fat bellies on a couple of old hairpins."

Mr Newt disappeared into the darkness. When he reappeared, he was clutching their scrawny, old hen. He placed it into the chest and shut the lid. A minute or so later he opened it again. Clucking away in front of them were two identical hens.

"A magic chest," he said. "Whatever we put in, we get double out."

By ten o'clock that night, the Newts had sixteen hens, forty eggs, 512 onions, and 1024 potatoes. By midnight, they had 10 pans, 50 spoons, 16 knives, and 2 pounds of salt.

The following day they sold most of what they had doubled at the market. When they returned home, they took their money and placed it in the chest and doubled it. They doubled it again and again and again until they had so much money that every bucket and drawer in the cottage was filled to the brim with silver.

That night after eating platefuls of pork, squash and oranges, and drinking a bottle of rice wine, the Newts went to bed and fell soundly asleep.

Shortly after midnight, Mr Newt was woken by a dull thumping sound coming from the living room. He climbed out of bed and went to investigate. The thumping was coming from inside the chest. Mr Newt cautiously lifted the lid and peered in. Curled up inside was his wife.

Mrs Newt stepped out of the chest and stood with her hands on her hips.

"What were you doing in there?" Mr Newt asked.

"I was doubling my wedding ring," said Mrs Newt. "And . . ." But before she could finish her sentence, a second Mrs Newt jumped out of the chest.

"And I fell in," said the second Mrs Newt. "Tripped over my bootlaces and went socks over bonnet."

Mr Newt looked at the two Mrs Newts. They were identical down to the last grey hair on their heads.

"But which of you is the real Mrs Newt?" he asked.

"I am," declared the first Mrs Newt. "Clearly she is the copy. She came out second."

The second Mrs Newt snorted. "I came out second, because 'she' stood on 'my' head in her rush to get out. I'm the real Mrs Newt, and I'll prove it. Ask me anything you like. As I am your wife, of course I will be able to answer."

Mr Newt stood looking from Mrs Newt to Mrs Newt.

"OK", he said after a minute. "I'll ask you both a question that only my real wife would know the answer to. And the one who gets it right will clearly be the real Mrs Newt."

Mr Newt sent Mrs Newt Number One out of the room. He leaned and whispered into Mrs Newt Number Two's ear. Mrs Newt Number Two thought for a second, and then whispered her answer back into Mr Newt's ear. Mr Newt then sent Mrs Newt Number Two out of the room and called Mrs Newt Number One back in. Again, he whispered his question, and again Mrs Newt whispered her response.

When Mrs Newt Number Two came back into the room, Mr Newt was slumped in his armchair.

"It's no good," he said. "You both knew the answer."

Mrs Newt Number Two glared at Mrs Newt Number One.

"Of course she did. The chest must have copied everything. Including 'my' memories."

"Her memories!?! Just listen to that imposter!" Mrs Newt Number One shouted.

"Imposter!" Mrs Newt Number Two shouted back. "I'll give you imposter. You fake you."

"I'm a fake? Listen who's talking! Let me tell you about fakes . . . "

And so it went on all day. By bedtime, Mr Newt had had about as much as could stand. He plugged his ears with acorns and buried his head beneath his pillow.

The next morning, Mr Newt woke up alone in bed. He thought for a second he might have dreamed the whole episode. But then he heard two voices calling from the kitchen. "Breakfast Dear!" they chimed in unison.

On the kitchen table were two plates of food fit for a king. 100-year-old eggs with noodles on one side, fried liver and onions on the other.

"Sit, Dear," said Mrs Newt Number One. "Sit and enjoy your favourite ever breakfast."

Mr Newt seated himself in front of the bowl of eggs and noodles.

"But that is not your *favourite* breakfast, Dear," said Mrs Newt Number Two. "Surely your *favourite* breakfast is the one we shared on our wedding morning?"

Mr Newt switched chairs. He licked his lips and raised a spoonful of steaming liver to his mouth.

"Stop!!" shouted Mrs Newt Number One. "I know her plan. She'll poison us both. She'll do us in, throw us down the well, and take all the silver for herself."

Mr Newt dropped his chopsticks, stood up, and changed chairs a second time. Carefully, he balanced an egg on his spoon.

"Very clever," said Mrs Newt Number Two. "How better to hide poison than inside a century egg. Only a true poisoner would think of a plan as cunning as that."

Mr Newt dropped the egg into the bowl.

"I think I'll skip breakfast, Dearests," he said, and went off to whittle bean poles in the tool shed.

At lunch Mrs Newt Number One had prepared duck in oyster sauce. Mrs Newt Number Two had prepared beef and turnip stew. Mr Newt did not get to eat any of it. Nor did he get any dinner. By bedtime, he was starving.

During the night, while the two Mrs Newts slept, Mr Newt crept into the living room. He opened the chest, climbed in and pulled the lid tightly closed.

In the morning, when the two Mrs Newts awoke, there were two Mr Newts besides them in bed.

"What have you done!?" Mrs Newt Number One exclaimed.

"He's only gone and doubled himself," shouted Mrs Newt Number Two.

The two Mr Newts jumped out of the bed.

"Two of us. Two of you," they said as one. "Now we might get some peace."

But there was no peace. Everybody plotted. Everybody schemed.

Mrs Newt Number One fashioned a key from a wishbone and locked the chest shut. But Mrs Newt Number Two simply made an identical key and unlocked it. Mr Newt Number One sneaked out with the chest and hid it under a pile of straw. But that evening the second Mr Newt found the chest, dragged it back to the house, set it down on a pile of potatoes and turnips, and said:

"I . . . I mean 'you' . . . will not tell 'me', 'what 'you', I mean 'I' can and can and cannot do with the chest. The chest that 'I' dug up with 'my', not 'your' bare hands.

Mr Newt Number One protested. But it was no use. Mr Newt Number Two sat on the lid of the chest with crossed arms, crossed legs and a cross expression on his face, and refused to budge.

The next day at cockcrow, Mr Newt Number One awoke and went to the shed. Mr Newt Number Two had fallen asleep and fallen off the chest into the pile of potatoes and turnips. Mr Newt Number One tiptoed to the chest, raised it in his arms, and carried it out into the yard. Then he returned to the house and fetched an oil lamp from the bedroom. He raised the lid of the chest and poured in the oil. When he was done, he took a box of matches

from his pocket. He removed a match and struck it. Just as he was about to drop it, the other Mr Newt appeared in the doorway.

"Go right ahead!" he shouted. "Now we will see who the real Mr Newt is. And it's not you."

Mr Newt Number One hesitated. The match burned slowly down.

"Of course, I am the real Mr Newt," he said. But the truth was that he was no longer sure if he was or wasn't the real Mr Newt. He was just about to extinguish the match, but the flame burned his fingertips and it fell from his grasp. With a whoosh the chest caught fire. It burned and burned until it was little more than a pile of ashes.

In the days that followed, townsfolk began to notice that their newly acquired pots and pans, spoons and knives, sacks of salt and rice flour had mysteriously disappeared. Word soon got round. The Newts had diddled them.

A delegation was got up, led by the Mayor. They marched through the forest to the Newts cottage. The Mayor beat on the door with his staff.

"Come out you swindlers!" he shouted.

Inside, all was silent.

The others took up the cry.

"Come out you swindlers!"

But the door remained steadfastly shut.

"Break it down," shouted one trader, who was down fifteen silver pieces.

And break it down they did. Till it lay in splinters about their feet.

In they all piled, calling on the Newts to show themselves. But the Newts were nowhere to be seen. Nor was their silver. Or much else for that matter. Just an old hen that didn't lay eggs, four potatoes, two onions, two spoons, two knives, a pot and a pan.