

Hansel and Gretel



Hard by a great forest dwelt a poor wood-cutter with his wife and his two children. The boy was called Hansel and the girl Gretel. He had little to bite and to break, and he could no longer procure daily bread. Now when he thought over this by night in his bed, and tossed about in his anxiety, he said to his wife, "What is to become of us?"

"I'll tell you what, husband," answered the woman. "Early tomorrow morning we will take the children out into the forest and leave them alone. They will not find the way home again, and we shall be rid of them."

"No, wife," said the man.

"O, thou fool!" said she, "Then we must all four die of hunger."

The two children had also not been able to sleep for hunger and had heard what their stepmother had said. Gretel wept bitter tears.

"Be quiet, Gretel," said Hansel. "I will find a way to help us." And when the old folks had fallen asleep, he got up and crept outside. The moon shone brightly, and the white pebbles which lay in front of the house glittered like real silver pennies. Hansel put as many of them in the little pocket of his coat as he could possibly get in. Then he lay down again in his bed.

When day dawned, the woman awoke the two children, saying, "Get up, you sluggards! We are going into the forest to fetch wood." She gave each a little piece of bread. When they had walked a short time, Hansel stood still and peeped back at the house, and did so again and again, constantly throwing one of the white pebble stones on the road.

When they had reached the middle of the forest, the father said, "Now, children, pile up some wood, and I will light a fire."

The woman said, "Now, children, lay yourselves down by the fire and rest; we will go cut some wood. When we have done, we will come back and fetch you."

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire, and they fell fast asleep. When at last they awoke, it was dark night. Gretel began to cry, but Hansel comforted her and said, "Just wait a little, and we will find the way." And when the full moon had risen, Hansel took his little sister by the hand, and followed the pebbles which shone like newly coined silver pieces.

They walked the whole night long, and by break of day came to their father's house. When the woman saw them, she said, "You naughty children." The father, however, rejoiced, for it had cut him to the heart to leave them behind alone.

Not long afterward, the children heard their stepmother saying to their father, "Everything is eaten again; we have one half loaf left. The children must go; we will take them farther into the wood."

The children were, however, still awake and had heard the conversation. When the old folks were asleep, Hansel again got up, and wanted to go out and pick up pebbles, but the woman had locked the door.

Early in the morning the woman took the children out of their beds. Their bit of bread was given to them, and Hansel crumbled his in his pocket, and often threw a morsel on the ground.

The woman led the children still deeper into the forest. Then a great fire was again made, and the stepmother said, "Just sit there, you children; we are going to cut wood, and we will come and fetch you." When it was noon, Gretel shared her piece of bread with Hansel, and then they fell asleep. They did not awake until it was dark night. Hansel said, "Just wait, Gretel, until the moon rises, and then we shall see our way home again."

When the moon came, they set out, but they found no crumbs for the birds had picked them all up. They got deeper into the forest. At last, they reached a little house and they saw that it was built of bread and covered



with cakes, but that the windows were of clear sugar. Hansel broke off a little of the roof to try, and Gretel leant against the window and nibbled at the panes. Then a soft voice cried from the room,

“Nibble, nibble, gnaw,

Who is nibbling at my little house?”

The children answered,

“The wind, the wind,

The heaven-born wind,”

and went on eating. Suddenly the door opened, and a very, very old woman came creeping out. Hansel and Gretel were so terribly frightened that they let fall what they had in their hands. The old woman, however, nodded her head, and said, “Oh, you dear children, do come in, and stay with me.” She took them both by the hand, and led them into her little house. Then good food was set before them, milk and pancakes, with sugar, apples, and nuts. Afterward two pretty little beds were covered with clean white linen, and Hansel and Gretel lay down in them and thought they were in heaven.

The old woman had only pretended to be so kind; she was in reality a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had only built the little bread house in order to entice them there. When a child fell into her power, she killed it, cooked and ate it, and that was a feast day with her.

Early in the morning, she seized Hansel with her shriveled hand, carried him into a little stable, and shut him in with a grated door. Then she went to Gretel, shook her till she awoke and cried, “Get up, lazy thing, fetch some water, and cook something good for thy brother; he is in the stable outside. When he is fat, I will eat him.” Gretel began to weep bitterly, but she was forced to do what the wicked witch ordered her.

And now the best food was cooked for poor Hansel, but Gretel got nothing but crab shells. Every morning the woman cried, “Hansel, stretch out thy finger that I may feel if thou wilt soon be fat.” Hansel, however, stretched out a little bone to her, and the old woman, who had dim eyes, thought it was

Hansel’s finger. When four weeks had gone by, she would not wait any longer. “Gretel,” she cried, “fat or lean, to-morrow I will kill him and cook him.” Ah, how the poor little sister did lament.

Early in the morning, Gretel had to go out and hang up the cauldron with the water and light the fire. “Creep in,” said the witch, “and see if the oven is properly heated.”

But Gretel said, “How do you get in?” “Silly goose,” said the old woman. “The door is big enough; just look, I can get in myself!” And she crept up and thrust her head into the oven. Then Gretel gave her a push and shut the iron door, and fastened the bolt. Oh! then the witch began to howl quite horribly, and she was miserably burnt to death.

Gretel ran like lightning to Hansel, opened his little stable, and cried, “Hansel, we are saved! The old witch is dead!” How they did rejoice and embrace each other and dance about and kiss each other! And they went into the witch’s house, and in every corner there stood chests full of pearls and jewels. “These are far better than pebbles!” said Hansel, and thrust into his pockets whatever could be got in, and Gretel said, “I, too, will take something home with me,” and filled her pinafore full.

When they had walked for hours, they came to their father’s house. Then they threw themselves into their father’s arms. The man had not known one happy hour since he had left the children in the forest; the woman, however, was dead. Gretel emptied her pinafore until pearls and precious stones ran about the room, and Hansel threw one handful after another out of his pocket to add to them. Then all anxiety was at an end, and they lived together in perfect happiness.