


HANSEL AND GRETHEL

LOSE TO A large forest there lived a Woodcutter with his Wife and his two children. The boy was called Hansel, and the girl Grethel. They were always very poor, and had very little to live on; and at one time, when there was famine in the land, he could no longer procure daily bread.

One night he lay in bed worrying over his troubles, and he sighed and said to his Wife: "What is to become of us? How are we to feed our poor children when we

have nothing for ourselves?"

"I'll tell you what, Husband," answered the Woman, "to-morrow morning we will take the children out quite early into the thickest part of the forest. We will light a fire, and give each of them a piece of bread; then we will go to our work and leave them alone. They won't be able to find their way back, and so we shall be rid of them."

"Nay, Wife," said the Man; "we won't do that. I could never find it in my heart to leave my children alone in the forest; the wild animals would soon tear them to pieces."

"What a fool you are!" she said. "Then we must all four die of hunger. You may as well plane the boards for our coffins at once."

She gave him no peace till he consented. "But I grieve over the poor children all the same," said the Man.

The two children could not go to sleep for hunger either, and they heard what their Stepmother said to their Father.

Grethel wept bitterly, and said: "All is over with us."

"Be quiet, Grethel!" said Hansel. "Don't cry; I will find some way out of it."

When the old people had gone to sleep, he got up, put on his little coat, opened the door, and slipped out. The moon was shining brightly, and the white pebbles round the house shone like newly-minted coins. Hansel stooped down and put as many into his pockets as they would hold.

Then he went back to Grethel, and said: "Take comfort, little sister, and go to sleep. God won't forsake us." And then he went to bed again.

When the day broke, before the sun had risen, the Woman came and said: "Get up, you lazybones; we are going into the forest to fetch wood."

Then she gave them each a piece of bread, and said: "Here is something for your dinner, but mind you don't eat it before, for you'll get no more."



Grethel put the bread under her apron, for Hansel had the stones in his pockets. Then they all started for the forest.

When they had gone a little way, Hansel stopped and looked back at the cottage, and he did the same thing again and again.

His Father said: "Hansel, what are you stopping to look back at? Take care, and put your best foot foremost."

"O Father!" said Hansel, "I am looking at my white cat, it is sitting on the roof, wanting to say good-bye to me."

"Little fool! that's no cat, it's the morning sun shining on the chimney."

But Hansel had not been looking at the cat, he had been dropping a pebble on to the ground each time he stopped. When they reached the middle of the forest, their Father said:

"Now, children, pick up some wood, I want to make a fire to warm you."

Hansel and Grethel gathered the twigs together and soon made a huge pile. Then the pile was lighted, and when it blazed up, the Woman said: "Now lie down by the fire and rest yourselves while we go and cut wood; when we have finished we will come back to fetch you."

Hansel and Grethel sat by the fire, and when dinner-time came they each ate their little bit of bread, and they thought their Father was quite near because they could hear the sound of an axe. It was no axe, however, but a branch which the Man had tied to a dead tree, and which blew backwards and forwards against it. They sat there such a long time that they got tired, their eyes began to close, and they were soon fast asleep.

When they woke it was dark night. Grethel began to cry: "How shall we ever get out of the wood!"

But Hansel comforted her, and said: "Wait a little till the moon rises, then we will soon find our way."

When the full moon rose, Hansel took his little sister's hand, and

they walked on, guided by the pebbles, which glittered like newly-coined money. They walked the whole night, and at daybreak they found themselves back at their Father's cottage.

They knocked at the door, and when the Woman opened it and saw Hansel and Grethel, she said: "You bad children, why did you sleep so long in the wood? We thought you did not mean to come back any more."

But their Father was delighted, for it had gone to his heart to leave them behind alone.

Not long after they were again in great destitution, and the children heard the Woman at night in bed say to their Father: "We have eaten up everything again but half a loaf, and then we are at the end of everything. The children must go away; we will take them further into the forest so that they won't be able to find their way back. There is nothing else to be done."

The Man took it much to heart, and said: "We had better share our last crust with the children."

But the Woman would not listen to a word he said, she only scolded and reproached him. Any one who once says A must also say B, and as he had given in the first time, he had to do so the second also. The children were again wide awake and heard what was said.

When the old people went to sleep Hansel again got up, meaning to go out and get some more pebbles, but the Woman had locked the door and he couldn't get out. But he consoled his little sister, and said:

"Don't cry, Grethel; go to sleep. God will help us."

In the early morning the Woman made the children get up, and gave them each a piece of bread, but it was smaller than the last. On the way to the forest Hansel crumbled it up in his pocket, and stopped every now and then to throw a crumb on to the ground.

"Hansel, what are you stopping to look about you for?" asked his Father.

"I am looking at my dove which is sitting on the roof and wants to say good-bye to me," answered Hansel.

"Little fool!" said the Woman, "that is no dove, it is the morning sun shining on the chimney."

Nevertheless, Hansel strewed the crumbs from time to time on the ground. The Woman led the children far into the forest where they had never been in their lives before. Again they made a big fire, and the Woman said:

"Stay where you are, children, and when you are tired you may go to sleep for a while. We are going further on to cut wood, and in the evening when we have finished we will come back and fetch you."

At dinner-time Grethel shared her bread with Hansel, for he had crumbled his up on the road. Then they went to sleep, and the evening passed, but no one came to fetch the poor children.

It was quite dark when they woke up, and Hansel cheered his little sister, and said: "Wait a bit, Grethel, till the moon rises, then we can see the bread-crumbs which I scattered to show us the way home."

When the moon rose they started, but they found no bread-crumbs, for all the thousands of birds in the forest had pecked them up and eaten them.

Hansel said to Grethel: "We shall soon find the way."

But they could not find it. They walked the whole night, and all the next day from morning till night, but they could not get out of the wood.

They were very hungry, for they had nothing to eat but a few berries which they found. They were so tired that their legs would not carry them any further, and they lay down under a tree and went to sleep.

When they woke in the morning, it was the third day since they had left their Father's cottage. They started to walk again, but they only got deeper and deeper into the wood, and if no help came they must perish.

At midday they saw a beautiful snow-white bird sitting on a tree. It sang so beautifully that they stood still to listen to it. When it stopped, it fluttered its wings and flew round them. They followed it till they came to a little cottage, on the roof of which it settled itself.

When they got quite near, they saw that the little house was made of bread, and it was roofed with cake; the windows were transparent sugar.

"This will be something for us," said Hansel. "We will have a good meal. I will have a piece of the roof, Grethel, and you can have a bit of the window, it will be nice and sweet."

Hansel stretched up and broke off a piece of the roof to try what it was like. Grethel went to the window and nibbled at that. A gentle voice called out from within:

"Nibbling, nibbling like a mouse,
Who's nibbling at my little house?"

The children answered:

"The wind, the wind doth blow
From heaven to earth below,"

and went on eating without disturbing themselves. Hansel, who found the roof very good, broke off a large piece for himself; and Grethel pushed a whole round pane out of the window, and sat down on the ground to enjoy it.

All at once the door opened and an old, old Woman, supporting herself on a crutch, came hobbling out. Hansel and Grethel were so frightened, that they dropped what they held in their hands.

But the old Woman only shook her head, and said: "Ah, dear children, who brought you here? Come in and stay with me; you will come to no harm."

She took them by the hand and led them into the little house. A nice dinner was set before them, pancakes and sugar, milk, apples, and nuts. After this she showed them two little white beds into which they crept, and felt as if they were in Heaven.

Although the old Woman appeared to be so friendly, she was really a wicked old Witch who was on the watch for children, and she had built the bread house on purpose to lure them to her. Whenever she could get a child into her clutches she cooked it and ate it, and considered it a grand feast. Witches have red eyes, and can't see very far, but they have keen scent like animals, and can perceive the approach of human beings.

When Hansel and Grethel came near her, she laughed wickedly to herself, and said scornfully: "Now I have them, they shan't escape me."

She got up early in the morning, before the children were awake, and when she saw them sleeping, with their beautiful rosy cheeks, she murmured to herself: "They will be dainty morsels."

She seized Hansel with her bony hand and carried him off to a little stable, where she shut him up with a barred door; he might shriek as loud as he liked, she took no notice of him. Then she went to Grethel and shook her till she woke, and cried:

"Get up, little lazy-bones, fetch some water and cook something nice for your brother; he is in the stable, and has to be fattened. When he is nice and fat, I will eat him."

Grethel began to cry bitterly, but it was no use, she had to obey the Witch's orders. The best food was now cooked for poor Hansel, but Grethel only had the shells of crayfish.

The old Woman hobbled to the stable every morning, and cried: "Hansel, put your finger out for me to feel how fat you are."

Hansel put out a knuckle-bone, and the old Woman, whose eyes were dim, could not see, and thought it was his finger, and she was much astonished that he did not get fat.





When four weeks had passed, and Hansel still kept thin, she became very impatient and would wait no longer.

"Now then, Grethel," she cried, "bustle along and fetch the water. Fat or thin, to-morrow I will kill Hansel and eat him."

Oh, how his poor little sister grieved. As she carried the water, the tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Dear God, help us!" she cried. "If only the wild animals in the forest had devoured us, we should, at least, have died together."

"You may spare your lamentations; they will do you no good," said the old Woman.

Early in the morning Grethel had to go out to fill the kettle with water, and then she had to kindle a fire and hang the kettle over it.

"We will bake first," said the old Witch. "I have heated the oven and kneaded the dough."

She pushed poor Grethel towards the oven, and said: "Creep in and see if it is properly heated, and then we will put the bread in."

She meant, when Grethel had got in, to shut the door and roast her.

But Grethel saw her intention, and said: "I don't know how to get in. How am I to manage it?"

"Stupid goose!" cried the Witch. "The opening is big enough; you can see that I could get into it myself."

She hobbled up, and stuck her head into the oven. But Grethel gave her a push which sent the Witch right in, and then she banged the door and bolted it.

"Oh! oh!" she began to howl horribly. But Grethel ran away and left the wicked Witch to perish miserably.

Grethel ran as fast as she could to the stable. She opened the door, and cried: "Hansel, we are saved. The old Witch is dead."

Hansel sprang out, like a bird out of a cage when the door is set open. How delighted they were. They fell upon each other's necks, and kissed each other, and danced about for joy.



"Stupid goose!" cried the Witch. "The opening is big enough; you can see that I could get into it myself"

As they had nothing more to fear, they went into the Witch's house, and they found chests in every corner full of pearls and precious stones.

"These are better than pebbles," said Hansel, as he filled his pockets. Grethel said: "I must take something home with me too." And she filled her apron.

"But now we must go," said Hansel, "so that we may get out of this enchanted wood."

Before they had gone very far, they came to a great piece of water. "We can't get across it," said Hansel; "I see no stepping-stones and no bridge."

“And there are no boats either,” answered Grethel. “But there is a duck swimming, it will help us over if we ask it.”

So she cried—

“Little duck, that cries quack, quack,
Here Grethel and here Hansel stand.
Quickly, take us on your back,
No path nor bridge is there at hand!”

The duck came swimming towards them, and Hansel got on its back, and told his sister to sit on his knee.

“No,” answered Grethel, “it will be too heavy for the duck; it must take us over one after the other.”

The good creature did this, and when they had got safely over and walked for a while, the wood seemed to grow more and more familiar to them, and at last they saw their Father’s cottage in the distance. They began to run, and rushed inside, where they threw their arms round their Father’s neck. The Man had not had a single happy moment since he had deserted his children in the wood, and in the meantime his Wife was dead.

Grethel shook her apron and scattered the pearls and precious stones all over the floor, and Hansel added handful after handful out of his pockets.

So all their troubles came to an end, and they lived together as happily as possible.