

Hansel and Gretel

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Next to a great forest there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children. The boy's name was Hansel and the girl's name was Gretel. He had but little to eat, and once, when a great famine came to the land, he could no longer provide even their daily bread.

One evening as he was lying in bed worrying about his problems, he sighed and said to his wife, 'What is to become of us? How can we feed our children when we have nothing for ourselves?'

'Man, do you know what?' answered the woman. 'Early tomorrow morning we will take the two children out into the thickest part of the woods, make a fire for them, and give each of them a little piece of bread, then leave them by themselves and go off to our work. They will not find their way back home, and we will get rid of them.'

'No, woman,' said the man. 'I will not do that. How could I bring myself to abandon my own children alone in the woods? Wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces.'

'Oh, you fool,' she said, 'then all four of us will starve. All you can do is to plan the boards for our coffins.' And she gave him no peace until he agreed.

'But I do feel sorry for the poor children,' said the man.

The two children had not been able to fall asleep because of their hunger, and they heard what the stepmother had said to the father.

Gretel cried bitter tears and said to Hansel, 'It is over with us!'

'Be quiet, Gretel,' said Hansel, 'and don't worry. I know what to do.'

And as soon as the adults had fallen asleep, he got up, pulled on his jacket, opened the lower door, and crept outside. The moon was shining brightly, and the white pebbles in front of the house were glistening like silver coins. Hansel bent over and filled his jacket pockets with them, as many as would fit.

Then he went back into the house and said, 'Don't worry, Gretel. Sleep well. God will not forsake us.' Then he went back to bed.

At daybreak, even before sunrise, the woman came and woke the two children. 'Get up, you lazybones. We are going into the woods to fetch wood.' Then she gave each one a little piece of bread, saying, 'Here is something for midday. Don't eat it any sooner, for you'll not get any more.'

Gretel put the bread under her apron, because Hansel's pockets were full of stones. Then all together they set forth into the woods. After they had walked a little way, Hansel began stopping again and again and looking back toward the house.

The father said, 'Hansel, why are you stopping and looking back? Pay attention now, and don't forget your legs.'

'Oh, father,' said Hansel, 'I am looking at my white cat that is sitting on the roof and wants to say good-bye to me.'

The woman said, 'You fool, that isn't your cat. That's the morning sun shining on the chimney.'

However, Hansel had not been looking at his cat but instead had been dropping the shiny pebbles from his pocket onto the path.

When they arrived in the middle of the woods, the father said, 'You children gather some wood, and I will make a fire so you won't freeze.'

Hansel and Gretel gathered together some twigs, a pile as high as a small mountain.

The twigs were set afire, and when the flames were burning well, the woman said, 'Lie down by the fire and rest. We will go into the woods to cut wood. When we are finished, we will come back and get you.'

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire. When midday came, each one ate his little piece of bread. Because they could hear the blows of an axe, they thought that the father was nearby. However, it was not an ax. It was a branch that he had tied to a dead tree and that the wind was beating back and forth. After they had sat there a long time, their eyes grew weary and closed, and they fell sound asleep.

When they finally awoke, it was dark at night. Gretel began to cry and said, 'How will we get out of the woods?'

Hansel comforted her, 'Wait a little until the moon comes up, and then we'll find the way.'

After the full moon had come up, Hansel took his little sister by the hand. They followed the pebbles that glistened there like newly minted coins, showing them the way. They walked throughout the entire night, and as morning was breaking, they arrived at the father's house.

They knocked on the door, and when the woman opened it and saw that it was Hansel and Gretel, she said, 'You wicked children, why did you sleep so long in the woods? We thought that you did not want to come back.'

But the father was overjoyed when he saw his children once more, for he had not wanted to leave them alone.

Not long afterward there was once again great need everywhere, and one evening the children heard the mother say to the father, 'We have again eaten up everything. We have only a half loaf of bread, and then the song will be over. We must get rid of the children. We will take them deeper into the woods, so they will not find their way out. Otherwise there will be no help for us.'

The man was very disheartened, and he thought, 'It would be better to share the last bit with the children.'

But the woman would not listen to him, scolded him, and criticized him. He who says A must also say B, and because he had given in the first time, he had to do so the second time as well.

The children were still awake and had overheard the conversation. When the adults were asleep, Hansel got up again and wanted to gather pebbles as he had done before, but the woman had locked the door, and Hansel could not get out. But he comforted his little sister and said, 'Don't cry, Gretel. Sleep well. God will help us.'

Early the next morning the woman came and got the children from their beds. They received their little pieces of bread, even less than the last time. On the way to the woods, Hansel crumbled his piece in his pocket, then often stood still, and threw crumbs onto the ground.

'Hansel, why are you always stopping and looking around?' said his father. 'Keep walking straight ahead.'

'I can see my pigeon sitting on the roof. It wants to say good-bye to me.'

'Fool,' said the woman, 'that isn't your pigeon. That's the morning sun shining on the chimney.'

But little by little Hansel dropped all the crumbs onto the path. The woman took them deeper into the woods than they had ever been in their whole lifetime.

Once again a large fire was made, and the mother said, 'Sit here, children. If you get tired you can sleep a little. We are going into the woods to cut wood. We will come and get you in the evening when we are finished.'

When it was midday Gretel shared her bread with Hansel, who had scattered his piece along the path. Then they fell asleep, and evening passed, but no one came to get the poor children.

It was dark at night when they awoke, and Hansel comforted Gretel and said, 'Wait, when the moon comes up I will be able to see the crumbs of bread that I scattered, and they will show us the way back home.'

When the moon appeared they got up, but they could not find any crumbs, for the many thousands of birds that fly about in the woods and in the fields had pecked them up.

Hansel said to Gretel, 'We will find our way,' but they did not find it.

They walked through the entire night and the next day from morning until evening, but they did not find their way out of the woods. They were terribly hungry, for they had eaten only a few small berries that were growing on the ground. And because they were so tired that their legs would no longer carry them, they lay down under a tree and fell asleep. It was already the third morning since they had left the father's house. They started walking again, but managed only to go deeper and deeper into the woods. If help did not come soon, they would perish. At midday they saw a little snow-white bird sitting on a branch. It sang so beautifully that they stopped to listen. When it was finished it stretched its wings and flew in front of them. They followed it until they came to a little house. The bird sat on the roof, and when they came closer, they saw that the little house was built entirely from bread with a roof made of cake, and the windows were made of clear sugar.

'Let's help ourselves to a good meal,' said Hansel. 'I'll eat a piece of the roof, and Gretel, you eat from the window. That will be sweet.'

Hansel reached up and broke off a little of the roof to see how it tasted, while Gretel stood next to the windowpanes and was nibbling at them. Then a gentle voice called out from inside:

Nibble, nibble, little mouse,

Who is nibbling at my house?

The children answered:

The wind, the wind,

The heavenly child.

They continued to eat, without being distracted. Hansel, who very much liked the taste of the roof, tore down another large piece, and Gretel poked out an entire round windowpane. Suddenly the door opened, and a woman, as old as the hills and leaning on a crutch, came creeping out. Hansel and Gretel were so frightened that they dropped what they were holding in their hands.

But the old woman shook her head and said, 'Oh, you dear children, who brought you here? Just come in and stay with me. No harm will come to you.'

She took them by the hand and led them into her house. Then she served them a good meal: milk and pancakes with sugar, apples, and nuts. Afterward she made two nice beds for them, decked in white. Hansel and Gretel went to bed, thinking they were in heaven. But the old woman had only pretended to be friendly. She was a wicked witch who was lying in wait there for children. She had built her house of bread only in order to lure them to her, and if she captured one, she would kill him, cook him, and eat him; and for her that was a day to celebrate.

Witches have red eyes and cannot see very far, but they have a sense of smell like animals, and know when humans are approaching.

When Hansel and Gretel came near to her, she laughed wickedly and spoke scornfully, 'Now I have them. They will not get away from me again.'

Early the next morning, before they awoke, she got up, went to their beds, and looked at the two of them lying there so peacefully, with their full red cheeks. 'They will be a good mouthful,' she mumbled to herself. Then she grabbed Hansel with her withered hand and carried him to a little stall, where she locked him behind a cage door. Cry as he might, there was no help for him.

Then she shook Gretel and cried, 'Get up, lazybones! Fetch water and cook something good for your brother. He is locked outside in the stall and is to be fattened up. When he is fat I am going to eat him.'

Gretel began to cry, but it was all for nothing. She had to do what the witch demanded. Now Hansel was given the best things to eat every day, but Gretel received nothing but crayfish shells.

Every morning the old woman crept out to the stall and shouted, 'Hansel, stick out your finger, so I can feel if you are fat yet.'

But Hansel stuck out a little bone, and the old woman, who had bad eyes and could not see the bone, thought it was Hansel's finger, and she wondered why he didn't get fat.

When four weeks had passed and Hansel was still thin, impatience overcame her, and she would wait no longer. 'Hey, Gretel!' she shouted to the girl, 'Hurry up and fetch some water. Whether Hansel is fat or thin, tomorrow I am going to slaughter him and boil him.'

Oh, how the poor little sister sobbed as she was forced to carry the water, and how the tears streamed down her cheeks! 'Dear God, please help us,' she cried. 'If only the wild animals had devoured us in the woods, then we would have died together.'

'Save your slobbering,' said the old woman. 'It doesn't help you at all.'

The next morning Gretel had to get up early, hang up the kettle with water, and make a fire.

'First we are going to bake,' said the old woman. 'I have already made a fire in the oven and kneaded the dough.'

She pushed poor Gretel outside to the oven, from which fiery flames were leaping. 'Climb in,' said the witch, 'and see if it is hot enough to put the bread in yet.' And when Gretel was inside, she intended to close the oven, and bake her, and eat her as well.

But Gretel saw what she had in mind, so she said, 'I don't know how to do that. How can I get inside?'

'Stupid goose,' said the old woman. The opening is big enough. See, I myself could get in.' And she crawled up and stuck her head into the oven.

Then Gretel gave her a shove, causing her to fall in. Then she closed the iron door and secured it with a bar. The old woman began to howl frightfully. But Gretel ran away, and the godless witch burned up miserably. Gretel ran straight to Hansel, unlocked his stall, and cried, 'Hansel, we are saved. The old witch is dead.'

Then Hansel jumped out, like a bird from its cage when someone opened its door. How happy they were! They threw their arms around each other's necks, jumped with joy, and kissed one another. Because they now had nothing to fear, they went into the witch's house. In every corner were chests of pearls and precious stones.

‘These are better than pebbles,’ said Hansel, filling his pockets.

Gretel said, ‘I will take some home with me as well,’ and she filled her apron full.

‘But now we must leave,’ said Hansel, ‘and get out of these witch-woods.’

After walking a few hours they arrived at a large body of water. ‘We cannot get across,’ said Hansel. ‘I cannot see a walkway or a bridge.’

‘There are no boats here,’ answered Gretel, ‘but there is a white duck swimming. If I ask, it will help us across.’

Then she called out:

Duckling, duckling,

Here stand Gretel and Hansel.

Neither a walkway nor a bridge,

Take us onto your white back.

The duckling came up to them, and Hansel climbed onto it, then asked his little sister to sit down next to him.

‘No,’ answered Gretel. ‘That would be too heavy for the duckling. It should take us across one at a time.’

That is what the good animal did, and when they were safely on the other side, and had walked on for a little while, the woods grew more and more familiar to them, and finally they saw the father’s house in the distance. They began to run, rushed inside, and threw their arms around the father’s neck.

The man had not had even one happy hour since he had left the children in the woods. However, the woman had died. Gretel shook out her apron, scattering pearls and precious stones around the room, and Hansel added to them by throwing one handful after the other from his pockets.

Now all their cares were at an end, and they lived happily together.

My tale is done,

A mouse has run.

And whoever catches it can make for himself from it a large, large fur cap.