

Hansel and Gretel
by Brothers Grimm
1889

ONCE upon a time there dwelled on the outskirts of a large forest a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children; the boy was called Hansel, and the girl Gretel. He always had little enough to live on, and once, when times were bad, they had to get by with one piece of bread and butter each. One night, as he was tossing about in bed, full of cares and worry, he sighed and said to his wife, "What's to become of us? How are we to feed our poor children, now that we have nothing more for ourselves?"

"I'll tell you what, husband," answered the woman, "early tomorrow morning we'll take the children out into the thickest part of the wood. There we shall light a fire for them and give them each a piece of bread; then we'll go on to our work and leave them alone. They won't be able to find their way home, and we shall be rid of them."

"No, wife," said her husband, "that I won't do; how could I find it in my heart to leave my children alone in the wood? The wild beasts would soon come and tear them to pieces."

"Oh! You fool," said she, "then we must all four die of hunger, and you may just as well go and saw the boards for our coffins." They argued and argued, until he agreed that they must get rid of Hansel and Gretel. "But I can't help feeling sorry for the poor children," added the husband.

The children, too, had not been able to sleep for hunger, and had heard what their stepmother had said to their father. Gretel wept bitterly and spoke to Hansel, "Now it's all up with us."

"No, no, Gretel," said Hansel, "don't fret yourself; I'll be able to find a way to escape, no fear." When the old people had fallen asleep he got up, slipped on his little coat, opened the back door and stole out. The moon was shining clearly, and the white pebbles which lay in front of the house glittered like bits of silver. Hansel bent down and filled his pocket with as many of them as he could cram in. Then he went back and said to Gretel, "Be comforted, my dear little sister, and go to sleep. God will not desert us," and he lay down in bed again.

At daybreak, even before the sun was up, the woman came and woke the two children, "Get up, you lie-abeds, we're all going to the forest to fetch wood." She gave them each a bit of bread and said, "There's something for your luncheon, but don't you eat it up beforehand, for it's all you'll get." Gretel took the bread under her apron, as Hansel had the stones in his pocket. Then they all set out together on the way to the forest. After they had walked a little, Hansel stood still and looked back at the house, and this manoeuvre he repeated again and again. His father observed him, and said, "Hansel, what are you gazing at there? Why do you always remain behind? Take care, and don't lose your footing."

"Oh! father," said Hansel, "I am looking back at my white kitten, which is sitting on the roof, waving me a farewell."

The woman exclaimed, "What a donkey you are! That isn't your kitten, that's the morning sun shining on the chimney." But Hansel had not looked back at his kitten, but had always dropped one of the white pebbles out of his pocket on to the path.

When they had reached the middle of the forest the father said, "Now children, go and fetch a lot of wood, and I'll light a fire that you may not feel cold." Hansel and Gretel heaped up brushwood until they had made a pile nearly the size of a small hill. The brushwood was set fire to, and when the flames leaped high the woman said, "Now lie down at the fire, children, and rest yourselves: We are going into the forest to cut down wood, and when we've finished we'll come back and fetch you."

Hansel and Gretel sat down beside the fire, and at midday ate their little bits of bread. They heard the strokes of the axe, so they thought their father was quite near. But it was no axe they heard, but a bough he had tied on a dead tree, and that was blown about by the wind. When they had sat for a long time their eyes closed with

fatigue, and they fell fast asleep. When they awoke at last, it was pitch dark. Gretel began to cry, and said, "How are we ever to get out of the wood?"

Hansel comforted her. "Wait a bit," he said, "until the moon is up, and then we'll find our way sure enough." When the full moon had risen, he took his sister by the hand and followed the pebbles, which shone like new threepenny bits, and showed them the path. They walked on through the night, and at daybreak reached their father's house again. They knocked at the door, and when the woman opened it she exclaimed, "You naughty children, what a time you've slept in the wood to! We thought you were never going to come back." The father rejoiced, for his conscience had reproached him for leaving his children behind by themselves.

Not long afterwards there was again great dearth in the land, and the children heard their mother address their father thus in bed one night, "Everything is eaten up once more; we have only half a loaf in the house, and when that's gone it's all up with us. The children must be gotten rid of; we'll lead them deeper into the wood this time, so that they won't be able to find their way out again. There is no other way of saving ourselves." The man's heart smote him heavily.

He thought, "Surely it would be better to share the last bite with one's children!" But his wife wouldn't listen to his arguments, and did nothing but scold and reproach him. If a man yields once, he's done for, and so, because he had given in the first time, he was forced to do so the second.

The children were awake again, and had heard the conversation. When the old people were asleep Hansel got up, and wanted to go out and pick up pebbles again, as he had done the first time; but the woman had barred the door, and Hansel couldn't get out. But he consoled his little sister, and said, "Don't cry, Gretel, and sleep peacefully, for God is sure to help us."

At early dawn the woman came and made the children get up. They received their bit of bread, but it was even smaller than the time before. On the way to the wood Hansel crumbled it in his pocket, and every few minutes he stood still and dropped a crumb on the ground. "Hansel, what are you stopping and looking about you for?" Said the father.

"I'm looking back at my little pigeon, which is sitting on the roof waving me a farewell," answered Hansel.

"Fool!" said the wife; "that isn't your pigeon, it's the morning sun glittering on the chimney." But Hansel gradually threw all his crumbs on the path. The woman led the children still deeper into the forest farther than they had ever been in their lives before. Then a big fire was lit again, and the mother said, "Just sit down there children, and if you're tired you can sleep a bit; we're going into the forest to cut down wood, and in the evening when we're finished we'll come back to fetch you."

At midday Gretel divided her bread with Hansel, for he had strewn his all along their path. Then they fell asleep, evening passed away, and nobody came to the poor children. They didn't awake until it was pitch dark, and Hansel comforted his sister, saying, "Only wait, Gretel, 'til the moon rises, then we shall see the bread-crumbs I scattered along the path; they will show us the way back to the house."

When the moon appeared they got up, but they found no crumbs, for the thousands of birds that fly about the woods and fields had picked them all up. "Never mind," said Hansel to Gretel, "you'll see we'll find a way out," but all the same they did not. They wandered about the whole night and the next day, from morning until evening, but they could not find a path out of the wood. They were very hungry too, for they had nothing to eat but a few berries they found growing on the ground. At last they were so tired that their legs refused to carry them any longer, so they lay down under a tree and fell fast asleep.

On the third morning after they had left their father's house they set about their wandering again, but only got deeper and deeper into the wood, and now they felt that if help did not come to them soon they must perish. At midday they saw a beautiful little snow-white bird sitting on a branch, which sang so sweetly that they stopped still and listened to it. When its song was finished it flapped its wings and flew on in front of them. They followed it and came to a little house, on the roof of which it perched; and when they came quite near they saw that the cottage was made of bread and roofed with cakes, while the window was made of transparent sugar.

“Now we’ll set to,” said Hansel, “and have a regular blow-out. I’ll eat a bit of the roof, and you, Gretel, can eat some of the window, which you’ll find a sweet morsel.” Hansel stretched up his hand and broke off a little bit of the roof to see what it was like, and Gretel went to the casement and began to nibble at it.

Thereupon a shrill voice called out from the room inside, “Nibble, nibble, little mouse. Who’s nibbling my house?”

The children answered, “’Tis heaven’s own child, the tempest wild,” and went on eating, without putting themselves about.

Hansel, who thoroughly appreciated the roof, tore down a big bit of it, while Gretel pushed out a whole round window pane, and sat down the better to enjoy it. Suddenly the door opened, and an ancient dame, leaning on a staff, hobbled out. Hansel and Gretel were so terrified that they let what they had in their hands fall.

The old woman shook her head and said, “Oh, ho! You dear children, who led you here? Just come in and stay with me, no ill shall befall you.” She took them both by the hand, led them into the house, and laid a most sumptuous dinner before them; milk and sugared pancakes, with apples and nuts. After they had finished, two beautiful little white beds were prepared for them, and when Hansel and Gretel lay down in them they felt as if they had gone to heaven.

The old woman had appeared to be most friendly, but she was really an old witch who had waylaid the children, and had only built the little bread house in order to lure them in. When anyone came into her power; she killed, cooked and ate him, and held a regular feast day for the occasion. Now witches have red eyes, and cannot see far, but like beasts, they have a keen sense of smell, and know when human beings pass by. When Hansel and Gretel fell into her hands she laughed maliciously, and said jeeringly, “I’ve got them now; they shan’t escape me.”

Early in the morning, before the children were awake, she rose up, and when she saw them both sleeping so peacefully, with their round rosy cheeks, she muttered to herself, “That’ll be a dainty bite.” Then she seized Hansel with her bony hand and carried him into a little stable, and barred the door on him. He might have screamed as much as he liked, for it would do him no good. Then she went to Gretel, shook her until she awoke, and cried, “Get up, you lazy bones, fetch water and cook something for your brother. When he’s fat I’ll eat him up.” Gretel began to cry bitterly, but it was of no use; she had to do what the wicked witch bade her.

So the best food was cooked for poor Hansel, but Gretel got nothing but crab shells. Every morning the old woman hobbled out to the stable and cried, “Hansel, put out your finger, that I may feel if you are getting fat.” But Hansel always stretched out a bone, and the old dame, whose eyes were dim, couldn’t see it. Thinking always it was Hansel’s finger, she wondered why he fattened so slowly. When four weeks had passed and Hansel still remained thin, she lost patience and determined to wait no longer.

“Hi, Gretel,” she called to the girl, “Be quick and get some water. Hansel may be fat or thin, I’m going to kill him tomorrow and cook him.” Oh! How the poor little sister sobbed as she carried the water, and how the tears rolled down her cheeks!

“Kind heaven help us now!” She cried. “If only the wild beasts in the wood had eaten us, then at least we should have died together.”

“Just hold your peace,” said the old hag, “it won’t help you.”

Early in the morning, Gretel had to go out and hang up the kettle full of water, and light the fire. “First we’ll bake,” said the old dame. “I’ve heated the oven already and kneaded the dough.” She pushed Gretel out to the oven, from which fiery flames were already issuing. “Creep in,” said the witch, “and see if it’s properly heated, so that we can shove in the bread.” When she had got Gretel in she meant to close the oven and let the girl bake, that she might eat her up too. But Gretel perceived her intention, and said, “I don’t know how I’m to do it; how do I get in?”

“You silly goose!” Said the hag. “The opening is big enough, see, I could get in myself,” and she crawled toward it, and poked her head into the oven. Then Gretel gave her a shove that sent her right in, shut the iron door, and drew the bolt. Gracious! How she yelled; it was quite horrible, but Gretel fled and the wretched old woman was left to perish miserably.

Gretel flew straight to Hansel, opened the little stable door and cried, “Hansel, we are free; the old witch is dead!” Then Hansel sprang like a bird out of a cage when the door is opened. How they rejoiced, fell on each other’s necks, jumped for joy, and kissed one another! As they had no longer any cause for fear, they went in the old hag’s house, and here they found, in every corner of the room, boxes with pearls and precious stones. “These are even better than pebbles,” said Hansel, and crammed his pockets full of them. Gretel said, “I too will bring something home,” and she filled her apron full.

“Now,” said Hansel, “let’s go and get well away from the witch’s wood.” When they had wandered about for some hours they came to a big lake. “We can’t get over,” said Hansel, “I see no bridge of any sort or kind.”

“Yes, and there’s no ferry boat either,” answered Gretel. “But look, there swims a white duck. If I ask her she’ll help us over,” and she called out, “Here are two children, mournful very, seeing neither bridge nor ferry; take us upon your white back, and row us over, quack, quack!”

The duck swam towards them, and Hansel got on her back and bade his little sister sit beside him. “No,” answered Gretel, “we should be too heavy a load for the duck. She shall carry us across separately.” The good bird did this, and when they were landed safely on the other side, and had gone for a while, the wood became more and more familiar to them, and at length they saw their father’s house in the distance. Then they set off to run, and bounding into the room fell on their father’s neck. The man had not passed a happy hour since he left them in the wood, and the woman had died. Gretel shook out her apron so that the pearls and precious stones rolled about the room, and Hansel threw down one handful after the other out of his pocket. Thus all their troubles were ended, and they lived happily ever afterwards.