

Hansel and Gretel

Copyright © 1991 Ellen L Fitelson
Translated from the original German

In a large forest there lived a poor woodchopper with his wife and two children; the boy Hansel and the Gretel. He had little to eat and once, when a large rise in prices in the land came, he could no longer make his daily bread. What was he to do? Every evening when he would go to bed, he spent the whole night tossing and turning--"what am I to do?" Once he said to his wife: "What are we to do? How are we to feed our poor children, when we ourselves have no more?"

"Do you know what husband," replied his wife, "early in the morning we will lead the children out in the forest where it is thickest and make a fire and give them a piece of bread. Then we will attend to our work and let them alone. They will not find the path to the house again and we shall be free."

"No wife," said the man. "I cannot do this. How could I in my heart bring my children in the forest and leave them alone; soon the wild animals would come and tear them up."

"Oh you fool," said she, "then must we all four starve to death. Why not plane the boards for our coffins?" And she gave him no calm until he agreed.

The two children were hungry and no sleep came. They heard what the stepmother and father planned. Gretel wept bitter tears and said to Hansel: "Now, we are finished."

"Be still, Gretel," spoke Hansel. "Do not grieve. I already have an idea to help us." And when his old parents had fallen asleep, he got up, slipped on his little coat, opened the door and slipped out. The light of the moon shone on the white pebbles which lay in front of the house; they glittered like silver. Hansel stooped down and stuck as many as he could in his pockets. Then he crept back and spoke to Gretel: "Be comforted my loving sister, and sleep in peace. God will not abandon us," and he lay down again in his bed.

When the day dawned, even before the sun had risen, the woman came and woke the two children. "Stand up you lazybones. We must go into the forest and collect wood." Then she gave each a piece of bread and said: "Here's something for midday, but do not eat it before, for you will get nothing more." Gretel took her brother's bread and put it under her apron because Hansel had the pebbles in his pockets. Then they all set out on the path to the forest.

When they had walked for a time, Hansel stood still and looked back at the house. This he did again and again. The father said: "Hansel what do you look at? What causes you to remain behind? Take care and do not lose your footing." "Oh father," said Hansel, "I see my little white kitten that sits on top of the roof waving me farewell."

"Fool, that is not your kitten. That is the morning sun shining on the chimney," But Hansel had not really looked back and seen his kitten. Instead, he always dropped a pebble from his pocket onto the path.

When they had come to the middle of the forest, the father said: "Now children, gather wood. I will make a fire so that you are not cold." Hansel and Gretel heaped up a small hill of brushwood. The brushwood was set afire and when the flames burned high, the woman said: "Stay put by the fire children and rest yourselves. We are going into the forest to cut wood. When we are finished, we will come back and fetch you."

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire and when midday came, they ate their pieces of bread. Since they believed they heard the axe of their father, they believed he was near. But it was not an axe. It was a dried branch blown down by the wind. After sitting for a long time, their eyes

closed from fatigue and they fell fast asleep. When they awoke it was night. Gretel began to cry and said: "Now how shall we leave the forest?" Hansel comforted her. "Wait a little while until the moon is up. Then we shall surely find the path." When the full moon had risen, Hansel took his sister by the hand and walked after the pebbles that glittered like coins and showed them the path. They walked the whole night and by break of day reached their father's house. They knocked on the door and when the woman opened it and saw Hansel and Gretel she said: "You bad children, why did you sleep so long in the forest? We believed you were never coming back." But their father was pleased when he saw them and it made his heart heavy that he abandoned them.

Not long after there was again nothing in any corner of the house and the children heard what their mother said to their father each night in bed: "Again all is finished. We have only half a loaf of bread and when it is gone, the hymn is ended. The children have to leave. We will lead them deeper into the forest this time so they cannot find their way out; there is no other way for us." Heaviness fell upon the man's heart and he thought: "It is better to share your last bite with your children." But his wife would not hear what he had to say. She fell silent and reproached him. As he had given in the first time, so would he do so a second time. The children were still awake and they heard the conversation. When their old parents were sleeping, once more Hansel wanted to go out and pick up white pebbles. But his stepmother had locked the door and Hansel could not go out. He consoled his sister and said: "Cry not Gretel and sleep in peace. The love of God will help us."

Early in the morning the stepmother came to fetch them from their beds. She handed them a piece of bread that was smaller than the previous piece. Then they started on their walk toward the forest. Often Hansel stood still and dropped a small crumb of bread onto the earth. "Hansel," said his father, "Why do you stand and look about?"

"I see my little pigeon that sits on the roof and waves farewell to me," answered Hansel. "Fool," said the stepmother, "that is not your little pigeon. That is the morning sun shining on the chimney top." Gradually Hansel dropped all the bread crumbs on the path.

The woman led the children ever deeper into the forest where they had never before in their whole lives been. When they reached the deepest, thickest part, the stepmother said: "Stay here children. Rest and when you are tired, you can sleep a little. We are going into the forest and chop wood and in the evening when we are finished, we will come and fetch you."

When it was midday, Gretel shared her bread with Hansel because he had dropped his piece on the path. Then they slept a little. As the evening passed on and changed to night, nobody came for the poor children. They awakened in the dark of night and Hansel comforted his sister and said: "Wait Gretel until the moon has risen. Then we shall see the little crumbs of bread I have scattered that will show us the path toward home." When the moon appeared they looked but found no bread crumbs because many thousands of birds in the forest and the field had flown and picked them from the path. Hansel said to Gretel: "We will soon find the path." but they found nothing. They wandered the entire night and the next day from morning until evening, but they could not find a way out of the forest. They were so hungry because they had nothing to eat but a couple of berries resting on the earth. Soon they were so tired; their legs could carry them no more. They fell down under a tree and slept a little.

It was now the third morning since they had left their father's house. Once more they looked for a way out; they only wandered deeper into the forest and if help did not come soon, they would perish. When it was midday they saw a beautiful snow-white bird sitting on a branch. It sang so beautifully, they stood still to listen. And when it was finished, it flapped its wings and flew in front of them. They followed him until they reached a small house where he perched on the roof and as they approached the cottage, they saw it was made of bread and roofed with cakes; the window was formed from sugar. "Now we will feast," said Hansel. "Gretel, you can eat from the window. It tastes sweet." Hansel reached upward and broke himself a piece from the roof and attempted to see how it tasted. Gretel sat herself on the doorstep and nibbled on it. There called a sharp voice out of the room: "Nibble, nibble little mouse, who nibbles on my little house?"

The children answered: "The wind, the wind." and went on eating without planning to leave off. Hansel found the roof tasted very good and tore himself a bigger piece and Gretel sat down on a low wall, pushed out an entire round window pane, and began feasting on it. Suddenly the door opened and an ancient woman supported on a crutch came out. Hansel and Gretel were so alarmed that what they held in their hands fell. But the old woman shook her head and said: "Ah, dear children, who has brought you here? Just come in and stay with me; nothing will happen to you." She took them both by the hand and led them into the house. She brought good food to eat and drink -- milk and pancakes with sugar, apples and nuts. Then she led them to two beautiful, little white beds. Hansel and Gretel crawled under the covers and thought they were in heaven.

The old woman only appeared to be friendly, but she was really a wicked witch. She would wait impatiently for children; she constructed a house of gingerbread to lure them. When one came under her power, she killed him, cooked and ate him and this was her feast-day. Witches have red eyes and cannot see far, but they have a sharp scent, like wild beasts and take notice when children are coming. When Hansel and Gretel drew near, she laughed maliciously and said: "'I have them. They shall not escape me again."

Early in the morning, before the children were awake, she stood up and when she saw how sweetly and peacefully they slept, she muttered to herself: "That will be a good bite." Then she seized Hansel with her bony hand and carried him into a small stall and locked him behind a lattice fence; he might scream as much as he wanted, it did him no good. Then she went to Gretel, she shook her until she woke and said: "Get up lazybones, fetch water and cook something good for your brother. He sits outside in a stall until he becomes fat. When he is fat, I will eat him." Gretel began to cry bitter tears, but it was all in vain; she must do as the witch demanded.

Now, for poor Hansel, the best food was cooked, but Gretel got nothing except crab shells. Every morning the old hag limped out to the stall and cried: "Stick out your finger that I may feel if you are getting fat." But Hansel stuck out a bone. The old hag had clouded eyes and could not see if it was Hansel's finger; she wondered why he did not become fat. After four weeks had passed and Hansel remained lean, she lost her patience and would wait no longer. "Gretel," cried the old woman, "be quick and draw water. Hansel may be fat, he may be thin,... tomorrow I will cook and eat him."

Oh how his poor sister lamented when she carried the water, how the tears rolled down her cheeks! "Loving God," she cried out, "help us. If only the wild animals in the forest had eaten us. If only we would have starved together!" "Save your blabbering," said the old woman, "it will not help you."

Early in the morning Gretel had to go out, hang the kettle filled with water and ignite a fire under it. "First we shall bake," said the old dame. "I have already heated the oven and kneaded the dough."

She pushed poor Gretel toward the oven from which fiery flames issued forth. "Crawl in," said the witch, "and see if it is the right temperature. Then we will push in the bread." When Gretel was inside, the old hag planned to close the oven door and cook and eat her also.

But Gretel perceived what she wanted to do and said: "I don't know what I am to do; how do I get inside?" "Silly goose," said the old woman, "the opening is big enough. See how well I myself can get in!" She crawled close and stuck her head in the oven. Gretel pushed her through the wide opening, closed the hard iron door and slid the bolt. My! The captured hag howled horribly, but Gretel ran away and the godless wretched witch was left to burn.

Gretel ran straight away to Hansel, opened his stall and cried: "Hansel, we are free; the old witch is dead." Hansel sprang out like a bird from its cage. How they rejoiced as they fell upon each other's necks with great love and affection. Now they had nothing more to fear so they went into the house of the witch. Standing alone in a corner was a chest filled with

pearls and precious stones. "They are much better than pebbles," said Hansel and he stuck them in his pockets, as much as they could hold. Gretel said: "I will also bring something home," and she filled her pinafore abundantly.

"But now, let us leave the forest of the witch," said Hansel.

After the pair had walked around a long time, they arrived in front of a large body of water. "We cannot get across," said Hansel. "I see no footpath and no bridge." "And no boats travel here," said Gretel. "But look, there swims a white duck. If I ask she may help us cross over."

She cried:

"Duck, duck,
Here stand Hansel and Gretel.
No bridge, no footpath,
Take us over on your white back."

The duck came near and Hansel sat and bade his sister sit with him. "No," answered Gretel. "It will be too hard for the duck. It should bring us across, each in turn." The animal performed this good deed and when they were successfully on the other side, as they walked, the forest became more and more familiar. At last they caught sight of their father's house in the distance. They began to run and tumbled into the room and fell into their father's arms. The man had known no joy since he had abandoned the children in the forest. His wife had starved.

Gretel shook out her pinafore and pearls and precious stones bounced around the room. Hansel, in addition, drew out handful after handful from his pockets.

All sorrow and worry had ended and they lived together in genuine happiness.

My fairytale is over little bird -- fly on to tell another.