

HANSEL AND GRETEL

At the edge of a big forest there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children; the little boy's name was Hansel and the girl's was Gretel. He had precious little to fill his belly, and once when there was a bad famine in the land he could no longer even get bread from one day to the next. At night he lay in bed worrying, and he tossed and turned and sighed and said to his wife: 'What's to become of us? How can we feed our poor children when we've nothing left for ourselves?' 'I'll tell you what, husband,' answered his wife. 'Tomorrow first thing we'll take the children into the forest, into the very thick of it - we'll make a fire for them and give them each one more piece of bread, then we'll go about our work and leave them by themselves. They won't find the way back home and we'll be rid of them.' 'No, wife,' said her husband, 'I'll not do that; how could I have the heart to leave my children alone in the forest? The wild beasts would soon come and tear them to pieces.' 'Oh you fool,' she said, 'then all four of us will have to starve; you may as well begin planing the boards for our coffins.' And she would give him no peace till he consented. 'But I'm sorry for the poor children all the same,' said the man.

The two children were so hungry that they hadn't been able to get to sleep either, and had heard what their stepmother had said to their father. Gretel cried bitterly and said to Hansel: 'Now we're done for.' 'Hush, Gretel,' said Hansel, 'don't be sad, I'll soon find a way.' And when their parents had gone to sleep he got up, pulled on his coat, opened the back door and crept out. There was bright moonlight, and the white pebbles outside the house shone like so many little silver coins. Hansel bent down and filled his coat pockets with as many as would go into them. Then he went in again and said to Gretel: 'Don't worry, little sister, you can go to sleep now, God won't forsake us.' And he got back into bed.

At daybreak, before it was even sunrise, the woman came and woke the two children: 'Get up, you idle brats, we're going into the forest to fetch wood.' Then she gave each of them a piece of bread and said: 'There's something for your lunch, but don't eat it before then because you'll get nothing else.' Gretel put the bread under her apron, because Hansel had the stones in his pockets. Then they all set out together along the path to the forest. When they had been walking for a little, Hansel stopped and looked back towards the house, and he kept on doing this. His father said: 'Hansel, what are you lagging behind for and looking at? Watch what you're doing and get a move on.' 'Oh, father,' said Hansel, 'I'm looking at my white kitten, it's sitting up there on the roof and wants to say goodbye to me.' The woman said: 'You silly boy, that's not your kitten, it's the light of the morning sun on the chimney.' But Hansel hadn't been looking at the kitten; each time he had been throwing one of the shining pebbles in his pocket on to the path.

When they had reached the middle of the forest, their father said: 'Now, you children, gather some wood, I'll make a fire so you won't freeze.' Hansel and Gretel collected firewood and made quite a little pile of it. It was set alight, and when the flames were burning high the woman said: 'Now lie down by the fire, children, and have a rest. We're going into the forest to chop wood. When we're done, we'll come back and fetch you.'

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire, and at midday they ate their pieces of bread. And hearing the blows of a woodcutter's axe, they thought their father was nearby. But it wasn't the axe, it was a branch he had tied to a withered tree and the wind was blowing it to and fro. And when they had been sitting and sitting, their eyes dropped shut with weariness and they fell fast asleep. When they finally woke up, it was already pitch dark. Gretel began to cry and said: 'How shall we find the way out of the forest!' But Hansel comforted her: 'Just wait a little till the moon rises, then we'll find the way all right.' And when the full moon had risen, Hansel took his little sister by the hand and followed the pebbles; they glistened like new silver sixpences and showed them the way. They walked all through the night and got back to their father's house at daybreak. They knocked at the door, and when the woman opened it and saw it was Hansel and Gretel she said: 'You naughty children, why did you sleep so long in the forest, we thought you would never come back.' But their father was glad, for he had been heartsore at having left them behind all by themselves.

Not long after that times got very hard again everywhere, and at night the children heard their mother saying to their father in bed: 'Everything's been eaten up again, we've just got half a loaf of bread left and then that'll be the end of the story. The children must go, we'll take them deeper into the forest so they won't be able to find the way out again; it's our only way of saving ourselves.' The man's heart grew heavy and he thought: It would be better to share the last bite with your children. But his wife would not listen to anything he said; she scolded him and reproached him. Take one step and you must take the next; and because he had given in the first time, he had to do so again.

But the children had been still awake and had heard the conversation. When their parents were asleep, Hansel got up again and tried to get out to collect pebbles like the last time, but the woman had locked the door and Hansel couldn't get out. But he comforted his little sister and said: 'Don't cry, Gretel, just go to sleep, God will help us.'

Early in the morning the woman came and fetched the children out of bed. They were given their pieces of bread, but they were even smaller pieces than before. On the way to the forest Hansel crumbled it in his pocket, and kept stopping to throw a crumb on the ground. 'Hansel, why are you stopping and looking behind you?' said his father. 'Keep on walking.' 'I'm looking back at my little dove. It's sitting on the roof and wants to say goodbye to me,' answered Hansel. 'You silly boy,' said the woman, 'that's not your dove, that's the morning sunlight on the chimney up there.' But little by little Hansel dropped all the crumbs on the path.

The woman led the children still deeper into the forest, to where they had never yet been in their lives. A big fire was lit again, and their mother said: 'Just you sit here and wait, children, and if you're tired you can sleep a little - we're going into

the forest to chop wood, and in the evening when we're done we'll come and fetch you.' At midday Gretel shared her bread with Hansel, who had scattered his piece on the path. Then they fell asleep, and the evening passed, but no one came to fetch the poor children. They didn't wake up till it was pitch dark, and Hansel comforted his little sister and said: 'Just wait, Gretel, till the moon rises, then we'll see the breadcrumbs I dropped; they'll show us the way home.' When the moon came

they set out, but they didn't find any breadcrumbs, because all the thousands of birds that fly about in the forest and over the fields had pecked them away and eaten them. Hansel said to Gretel: 'Never mind, we'll find the way,' but they didn't find it. They walked all night and all next day from morning till evening, but they still hadn't got out of the forest, and they were ever so hungry, for they had nothing to eat but the few berries that grew on the ground. They were so tired that their legs wouldn't carry them any further, so they lay down under a tree and fell asleep.

It was the third morning now since they had left their father. They started to walk again, but only got deeper and deeper into the forest, and knew that unless help reached them soon they would die of hunger. When it was midday they saw a lovely snow-white bird sitting on a branch, and it sang so beautifully that they stopped to listen to it. And when it had finished its song, it flapped its wings and flew along in front of them, and they followed it till they came to a little house, where it perched on the roof. And when they came right up to it, they saw that the little house had walls made of bread and a roof made of cake and windows made of clear bright sugar. 'Well, here's something for us,' said Hansel, 'and God bless this food to do us good. I'll eat a slice of the roof, Gretel, and you can start on the window; it'll taste sweet enough.' Hansel reached out and broke off a bit of the roof to try how it tasted, and Gretel stood by the window-panes and nibbled at them. It was then that they heard a thin little voice calling out to them from the parlour:

'Nibble nibble, little rat,
It's my house you're nibbling at.'

The children answered:

'We're the wind, we're the breeze
That plays in the trees'

and just went on steadily eating. Hansel, who was enjoying the roof very much, pulled off a big slab of it, and Gretel bashed out a whole round window-pane and sat down and had a real treat. Then suddenly the door opened and an aged crone, bent double on a crutch, came creeping out. Hansel and Gretel were so scared that they dropped what they had in their hands. But the old woman wagged her head and said: 'Why, you nice little things, how did you get here? Come in and stay with me, you'll come to no harm.' She took them both by the hand and led them into her little house. Then she set a fine meal before them, milk and pancakes with sugar and apples and nuts. Afterwards she made up two lovely little beds with white linen, and Hansel and Gretel lay down in them and thought they must be in heaven.

But the old woman had only been pretending to be kind, for in fact she was an evil witch who lay in wait for children and had only built the little bread house to lure them her way. When a child fell into her power she would kill it, cook it and eat it, and that was a day of feasting for her. Witches have red eyes and can't see far, but they have a keen sense of smell like animals and notice when people come anywhere near. As Hansel and Gretel approached, she laughed a wicked laugh and said mockingly: 'Here's two for me who shan't escape.' Early next morning before the children were awake she was already on her feet, and as she looked down at them sleeping so sweetly, with their full rosy cheeks, she muttered to herself: 'This will make a tasty morsel.' Then she seized Hansel with her bony hand and carried him off to a little shed and locked him up behind a door

with iron bars; he screamed his head off but it did him no good. Then she went to Gretel, shook her awake and shouted: 'Get up, you idle hussy, fetch water and cook something good for your brother; he's sitting out there in the shed and I want him made plump. When he's plump I mean to eat him.' Gretel began to cry bitterly, but it was all in vain and she had to do as the wicked witch told her.

Now the best meals were cooked for poor Hansel, but Gretel got nothing but crabshells. Every morning the old woman crept out to the little shed and shouted: 'Hansel, stick out your finger for me to feel whether you're getting plump.' But Hansel held out a little bone to her, and the old woman, who had weak eyes, couldn't see it and thought it was Hansel's finger, and was amazed that he went on and on not getting plump. When four weeks were up and Hansel was still skinny, she lost patience and refused to wait any longer. 'Now then, Gretel!' she shouted to the little girl, 'look alive and fetch water - tomorrow, whether he's plump or whether he's skinny, I'm going to cut Hansel's throat and cook him.' Oh, how his poor little sister wailed as she was forced to carry the water, and how the tears poured down her cheeks! 'Please, God, help us!' she cried. 'If only the wild beasts had eaten us in the forest, then at least we'd have died together.' 'You can stop all that bawling,' said the old woman, 'it'll do you no good.'

Early next morning Gretel had to go out and hang up a cauldron full of water and light the fire. 'We'll bake first,' said the old woman. 'I've heated the oven already and kneaded the dough.' She drove poor Gretel out to where the oven was, and flames were licking out of it already. 'Crawl inside,' said the witch, 'and tell me whether it's properly heated, then we can shove in the bread.' And her plan was to shut the oven door when Gretel was inside, so she could roast Gretel, and then she would eat her too. But Gretel guessed what she was up to, and said: 'I don't know how to do it; how can I get in there?' 'You silly goose,' said the old woman, 'the opening's big enough, don't you see, I could get in there myself.' And she came hobbling up and stuck her head inside the oven. Then Gretel gave her a push so that she fell in, right into the middle; and she slammed the iron door shut and bolted it. Wow! The old woman began to howl, it was quite horrible; but Gretel ran off, and the godless witch burned miserably to death.

But Gretel ran straight to Hansel, opened his shed and shouted: 'Hansel, we're saved, the old witch is dead.' And Hansel hopped out as a bird does when the door of its cage is opened. How glad they were, how they danced around and

hugged and kissed each other! And now that there was nothing more to fear, they went into the witch's house and found cupboards all over it full of pearls and precious stones. 'These are even better than pebbles,' said Hansel, and filled his pockets with as much as would go into them, and Gretel said: 'I'll take some home too,' and filled her apron full. 'But now let's go,' said Hansel, 'if we're to get out of this witchy forest.' When they had walked for a couple of hours, they came to a big wide river. 'We can't get across,' said Hansel, 'I don't see any bridge.' 'And there's no boat either,' answered Gretel, 'but there's a white duck swimming along; if I ask it, it'll help us across.' And she called out:

'Little duck, little white duck,
Gretel and Hansel are stuck.
No bridge, no way to get over,
Except your back, if you'll do us the favour.'

Sure enough the duck came swimming towards them, and Hansel sat down on its back and told his sister to sit behind him. 'No,' answered Gretel, 'that'll be too heavy for the duck, it shall take us across one at a time.' The kind little bird did so, and when they were safely on the other side and had walked on for a little, they seemed to recognize more and more of the forest, and finally they saw their father's house in the distance. Then they began to run, rushed into the parlour and flung their arms round their father's neck. The man had not had one happy hour since he had left the children in the forest, but his wife had died. Gretel shook out the contents of her apron, making the pearls and precious stones dance about on the floor, and Hansel threw down handful after handful of them out of his pockets. Now all their troubles were at an end, and they lived on together and were ever so happy. So that was that; look! there runs a rat, who'll catch it and skin it and make a fur hat?