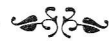


Hansel and Gretel



Once upon a time, at the edge of a great forest, there lived a poor woodcutter with his second wife and the two children from his first marriage—a boy named Hansel and a girl named Gretel. A famine fell across the land and times grew hard. Soon the woodcutter and his family were going hungry. No matter how hard he thought, the poor man could not think of any way to get enough food for all of them. One night as he lay awake, he turned to his wife and said, “What will become of us? How can I earn enough to feed my family?”

“Listen to me, husband,” his wife replied. “Tomorrow you must take the children deep into the forest. There we will build a great fire and give each of them one last piece of bread. Then we will go about our work and leave them behind. They will never find their way home, and we will be rid of them forever.”

“I cannot do that!” the husband cried. “How could I abandon my own dear children in the forest? The wild beasts will surely find them and tear them to pieces!”

“As you wish,” his wife answered. “But if you don’t do it, all four of us

will surely die of hunger." And she gave him no peace until at last he said, "Very well. I'll do as you wish. But all the same, I pity my poor children."

Hansel and Gretel, who had been kept awake by their hunger, heard their stepmother's words. Gretel began to cry bitterly.

"Don't worry, Gretel," her brother told her. "I will think of a way to save us."

As soon as their parents had gone to sleep, Hansel slipped from his bed, put on his jacket, and stole outside. The moon was shining brightly on the pebbles in front of the house. They gleamed like silver pennies. Hansel bent down and filled his pockets with them. Then he tiptoed back inside. "Don't worry, dear Gretel," he whispered. "Everything will be all right." Then he crept into bed and fell fast asleep.

Early the next morning, before the sun had risen, the stepmother came in to wake the two children. "Get up, you lazybones! We have work to do," she said. "Today we must go into the forest and gather wood."

She gave each of them a small piece of bread, saying, "Here is your lunch. But don't eat it all at once, for that's all you'll get today." Gretel put Hansel's piece under her apron, for his pockets were full of pebbles. Then they all set out into the forest.

After they had gone a little way, Hansel turned around and looked back at the house. Then he stopped and did so again and again.

"Hurry up!" their father called to him. "Why are you dragging behind?"

"Oh, Father, I am just looking at my little white kitten who is sitting on the roof and telling me good-bye," Hansel replied.

"Don't be stupid," his stepmother scolded him. "That isn't your kitten. That's only the morning sun shining on the rooftop."

But Hansel wasn't really looking at his kitten. Each time he turned, he took a pebble from his pocket and dropped it on the path.

When they were deep in the forest their father stopped and said,

"Now gather wood, children, for I'm going to make a big fire to keep you warm." Hansel and Gretel gathered a big pile of twigs and branches. Soon an enormous fire was blazing.

"Lie down beside the fire and rest, children," their stepmother told them. "We are going into the forest to chop more wood. When we're done, we'll come back and fetch you."

So Hansel and Gretel sat beside the fire and ate their pieces of bread. They were not afraid because they thought they heard their father's axe in the distance, but it was really only a dead tree limb knocking against a tree trunk in the wind. After a time their eyelids became heavy, and before long they were fast asleep.

When they woke up, it was night, and the sky was pitch black. Gretel began to cry. "We will never get out of the forest now!" she sobbed. Hansel comforted her. "Wait until the moon rises," he said. "Then you'll see how we can get home again."

When the moon rose, Hansel took his sister's hand. Then they followed the shiny, silvery pebbles on the path all the way home.

They arrived there at daybreak and knocked on the door. When their stepmother answered, she cried, "You bad children, why did you sleep so long in the forest? We thought you'd never come home." But their father was happy to see them, for in his heart he had not wanted to leave them alone in the great forest.

But before long, the woodcutter's cupboards were empty again, and everyone was hungry. "We can't go on like this," his wife said one night. "We must get rid of the children. This time we must take them so deep into the forest, they'll never find their way home!"

The woodcutter argued. "I would rather share my last bit of bread with my children than leave them in the forest," he said. But his wife nagged him so much that at last he agreed.

Hansel and Gretel overheard their stepmother's words. After his parents were asleep, Hansel tried to slip outside to gather more pebbles. But

this time, his stepmother had locked the door. Still, he tried to comfort his sister. "Don't cry, Gretel," he said. "Somehow we will find our way home."

Their stepmother woke them early the next morning. Giving them each a piece of bread that was even smaller than what they had had the last time, she told them they must go into the forest.

Hansel crumbled the bread in his pocket and turned back again and again to scatter the crumbs on the ground.

"Come on!" his father called to him. "What are you doing back there?"

"I am only looking at my little pigeon who is sitting on the roof and telling me good-bye," Hansel replied.

"Don't be stupid!" his stepmother said. "That's not your pigeon. It's only the morning sun shining on the chimney."

This time, their stepmother led them far away into the darkest part of the forest. Once again, their father made a fire, and their stepmother told the children to lie down beside it and rest. Then she and her husband went off into the woods. At noon, Gretel shared her piece of bread with her brother. Then the two children dropped off to sleep.

When they awoke, the sky was pitch black. Gretel started to cry, but Hansel said, "Don't worry, little sister. Wait only until the moon rises. Then we will be able to see the crumbs that I scattered and follow them home."

But when the silver moon rose, there were no crumbs to be seen anywhere. The birds had flown down and eaten every last one.

"We'll still get home somehow," Hansel told his sister. They walked all night and the next day from sunrise to sunset, but try as they might they could not find a way out of the forest.

They were growing very hungry because they could find nothing to eat save a few berries. When they were too tired to walk any farther, they laid down under a tree and fell asleep. When they awoke it was light again.

It was the third morning since they had left their father's house. They began to walk again, but they were so weak that they knew if they did not find food soon they would surely die.

At noon they saw a snow-white bird perched on a branch above their heads. The bird sang so beautifully, the children stopped to listen. When its song was finished, the bird fluttered its wings and flew just in front of them. They followed it until they came to a little house.

The pretty white bird perched on the roof, and as Hansel and Gretel drew closer, they saw that the house was made all of gingerbread and trimmed with raisins, nuts, and jellies. The windows were clear sugar candy, and the roof was made of almond cake.

"Let us eat, little sister," Hansel cried, "and have a good meal. I'll have a piece of the roof, and you can have some of the window—that's sure to be sweet and tasty." So Hansel broke off a piece of the almond cake roof while Gretel nibbled on a windowpane.

Suddenly a voice screeched from inside:



*"Nibble, nibble, little mouse,
Who's that nibbling at my house?"*

The children replied:

*"It is just the wind on high,
We, the children of the sky."*

And they kept right on eating, for they were very hungry. The roof tasted so good Hansel broke off a large piece of it. Gretel knocked out a big round windowpane and sat down and munched on it contentedly.

Suddenly the door of the house flew open, and out came an old, old woman, supporting herself on a cane. Hansel and Gretel were so frightened they started to run away. But the old woman called to them, "Wait, dear children, come back! Come in and stay with me a while. I won't do you any harm." Then she took them by the hand and led them inside.

She sat them down at her table and fed them milk and sugar pancakes and apples and nuts. Then she took them upstairs, where there were two beautiful beds with snow-white linen sheets. As Hansel and Gretel crawled into bed, they thought they were in heaven.

But the old woman was only pretending to be kind and good. She was really a wicked witch who lured children to her gingerbread house and then roasted them and ate them. After Hansel and Gretel had fallen fast asleep, she rubbed her hands together and said, "These children can never escape me now!"

The next morning, the witch woke up early and went to fetch the children. They looked so lovely with their round, rosy cheeks that she couldn't help smiling. "They will make me a very tasty meal!" she cackled. She seized Hansel with her bony hand. She pulled him off to a little cage and locked him inside. He screamed and struggled, but it did no good.

Then she shook Gretel awake. "Get up, you lazy creature!" she shrieked. "Fetch me water so I can cook something good for your brother.

He's outside in my cage, and when he's nice and fat, I'm going to eat him up."

Gretel began to cry, but her tears were for nothing. She had to do as the witch told her.

Now Hansel was fed only the finest meals—roast chicken and beef and boiled potatoes and all the bread he could eat. Every morning, bright and early, the witch crept out to the cage. "Put out your finger so I can see if you're fat enough yet," she would say. But clever Hansel only stuck out a little bone. As the witch was almost blind, she couldn't tell the difference. So she decided Hansel must be fed more so he would become nice and fat.

After a month had passed and Hansel remained as thin as ever, the witch grew impatient. One day she said to Gretel, "I am tired of waiting. Whether Hansel is fat or thin, I'm going to roast him and eat him tomorrow morning."

Gretel wept bitterly. "If only the wild beasts of the forest had eaten us," she said to herself. "At least then my brother and I would have died together."

The next morning, the witch told Gretel to light the oven fire. "I'll soon roast Hansel," the witch said, "but first we will bake some bread. I've already kneaded the dough. Just crawl inside the oven for me and see if it's hot enough." Then she pushed Gretel toward the oven door. Inside the hot flames sputtered.

The old witch meant to close the door as soon as Gretel was inside, for she wished to eat her, too. But Gretel guessed what the witch was planning, so she said, "But I don't know how to climb inside!"

"Don't be so stupid," the witch shrieked. "Why, the door is big enough for me to get in myself!" She stuck her head in the oven, and as she did so, Gretel quickly shoved her inside. Then she slammed the iron door and bolted it shut. The witch screamed horribly, but Gretel didn't open the door until the witch was dead.

Then Gretel ran outside to Hansel and unlocked his cage. "Oh, brother," she cried, throwing her arms around him. "The wicked witch is dead, and we are saved!"

Hansel flew from his prison like a bird set free from its cage. Then, as there was nothing to be afraid of anymore, the two children went hand in hand into the witch's house. There they found chests of pearls and diamonds and other precious jewels.

Hansel filled his pockets with them. "These are better than pebbles," he told Gretel. And so she, too, filled her apron with them. "Now we must find our way home," Hansel said, "and leave this great forest."

The two children walked and walked all day.

At last, the forest began to look familiar. Then the children glimpsed their father's cottage in the distance. They started to run. They ran all the way to the door and rushed inside. There, they found their father sitting by the fire, and they flung their arms around him and held him as if they would never let go.

The woodcutter had not had a happy moment since he had abandoned his children in the deep, dark forest. His wife had since died, as well. The poor man wept with joy when he saw that Hansel and Gretel had come back to him.

Then Gretel emptied her apron of the jewels. Hansel also emptied his pockets, so that pearls, diamonds, sapphires, and rubies skittered all over the room. Wherever they looked jewels gleamed and glittered. Now they were rich and all their troubles were over. They all lived happily ever after.