

## Hansel and Gretel

### A Fairytale (Germany)

Next to a great forest in a small wooden house there lived a woodcutter, his wife, and his two children. The boy's name was Hansel and the girl's name was Gretel. The mother of the children, the woodcutter's first wife, had passed away, and the woodcutter had remarried.

The family had little to eat. When a great drought came over the land, all they had was bread, and not enough of that to avoid hunger.

One evening the woodcutter was lying in bed worrying. He sighed and said to his wife, "I am cutting down trees and selling them, but the payment is very little. What will become of us?"

"Listen to me," said his wife. "In the morning we will take the two children deep into the forest. We will make a fire for them, give each of them a little piece of bread, and then leave them there. They will not find their way back home, and we will be rid of them."

"No!" exclaimed the woodcutter. "How could I abandon my children in the forest? Wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces."

"You are a fool!" she said. "Then all four of us will starve."

Finally he agreed to her plan.

Hansel, the older of the two children, had been awake and had heard the conversation between his father and stepmother. Hansel made a plan. He waited some time, and when he thought the adults had fallen asleep, he got up and got dressed – wearing his jacket because he knew it would be cold outside – and very quietly he left the house

The moon was shining brightly. There were white pebbles on the ground in front of the house, and they were glistening like silver coins in the moonlight. Hansel bent over and filled his pockets with these pebbles, as many as would fit. Then he went back into the house and went back to bed.

At daybreak, the woman woke the two children. "Get up! We are going into the woods to fetch wood." Then she gave each one a little piece of bread, saying, "Here is your bread for the day. Don't eat it all now, for you won't get any more later."

Hansel asked Gretel to keep his bread with hers in one of her pockets, for his pockets were full of pebbles.

Then all four of them set forth into the forest. Hansel lagged behind the other three, and dropped pebbles along the way.

When they were deep in the forest, the father said to his children, "The sun is up, but it is still cold. Gather some wood, and I will make a fire so you won't freeze."

Hansel and Gretel gathered some twigs and dry dead branches. The twigs were set afire, and when the fire was burning well, the woman said, "Sit by the fire and rest. Your father and I will go to cut wood. After some time we'll come back."

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire. When midday came each ate the little piece of bread. After they had sat there a long time, their eyes grew weary and closed, and they lay down and fell asleep.

When they awoke, the sun had gone down and the dark of night surrounded them. Gretel began to cry and said, "They didn't come for us. How will we find our way home?"

Hansel comforted her, "I expected this, and I dropped white pebbles along the way. Wait a little until the moon comes up, and then we'll follow the pebbles home."

Soon the moon appeared, and it was a full moon. Hansel took his little sister by the hand, and they followed the pebbles that glistened like newly-minted coins, showing them the way. They walked throughout the entire night, and as morning was breaking they arrived at their father's house.

They knocked on the door. The woman opened it, and when she saw that it was Hansel and Gretel an expression of shock and anger came over her face. But the father was overjoyed when he saw his children, and he hugged them again and again. None of them spoke about what had occurred.

The drought lifted for a while – there was some rain and more food. But then drought came again and conditions were even worse than before.

One morning the woman awakened the children and told them, "We'll go to collect wood in the forest today. Your father is away, so he won't be coming. Here's your pieces of bread for the day." Hansel and Gretel put the pieces of bread in their pockets. Fearing that he and his sister might once again be abandoned in the forest, Hansel crumbled his piece of bread in his pocket, walked behind his sister and stepmother, and threw crumbs onto the ground as he walked.

Their stepmother took them deeper into the forest than they had ever been before.

Once again a large fire was made, and the woman said to the Hansel and Gretel, "Sit here. If you get tired you can sleep a little. I am going to collect dead branches. When I am done I will come back here for you."

When it was midday Gretel shared her bread with Hansel, who had scattered his piece along the path. Then they fell asleep. They woke up in the late afternoon, which became evening. The woman did not come for the children.

Hansel said to Gretel, "Don't worry. When the moon comes up we will be able to see the crumbs of bread that I scattered, and they will show us the way back home."

But when the moon appeared, they could not find any crumbs, for the many birds that fly in the forest had pecked them up.

Gretel wept and said, "This is the end of us."

But Hansel said, "Dear sister, we'll be alright. God will save us."

The two children walked through the night, but it seemed to them that they were only going deeper into the forest. In the morning they slept, and then they got up and walked again. For the most part, they were too afraid to sleep in the dark, at night. In this way they lost track of how many days and nights were passing.

They were terribly hungry, for the only food they found were berries that grew on some bushes.

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 made entirely of cookies and cake, the windows were made of clear sugar, and the roof was made of bread.

"Let's eat!", said Hansel.

Hansel broke off a little of a door, and tasted it. It was delicious! He broke off another piece and gave it to Gretel, who ate it immediately. They also broke off and ate a small part of the roof.

Then a gentle voice called out from inside:

"Nibble, nibble, little mouse,  
Who is nibbling at my house?"

The children answered:  
"It is just the wind, the wind."

They continued to eat. Suddenly a woman stepped out of the house. She appeared to be very old, her eyes were red, and she supported herself with a crutch.

Hansel and Gretel were so frightened that they dropped what they were holding in their hands.

But the old woman said, "Oh, dear children, I am so happy to have some company! 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: pancakes with apples and nuts, with milk to drink. Afterward she made two beds for them, fitted with clean white sheets. Hansel and Gretel went to bed, thinking they were in heaven.

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. She laughed wickedly and said to herself, "Now I have them, and they will not get away from me. They will be a good mouthful."

Then she grabbed Hansel with her withered hand and dragged him outside, where she threw him into a cage, and then locked the cage door. Cry as he might, there was no help for him.

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

Gretel began to cry, but it was to no avail. She had to do what the witch demanded.

However, Gretel noticed that the witch could not see very well. So Gretel gave her brother a chicken bone and told him to extend it to the witch whenever the witch asked to feel his finger, to see if he was plump enough to eat.

Four weeks went by, and Hansel's finger was still very thin as far as the witch could tell. But impatience overcame her, and she could wait no longer. The witch said to herself, "Whether Hansel is fat or thin, tomorrow I am going to bake and eat him. I think I'll eat that little girl, too."

The witch put a sleeping potion in Hansel's drinking water, which caused Hansel to continue sleeping the next morning even though the sun was rising in the sky.

The witch had an outdoor oven, and she put plenty of wood inside it. She lit the fire, and the flames inside the oven leapt.

The witch called out to Gretel, "My dear little helper, please come here. I need you to check the oven to see if it is ready to bake the bread."

Gretel was afraid of the oven and of the witch. She imagined that the witch might be planning to bake her and her brother in that oven. So Gretel came close to the oven, but she hesitated to get near the oven door, which the witch had opened.

"Climb into the oven a little bit," said the witch. "That's the only way to really tell if it is hot enough."

Gretel said, "I don't know how to do that. How could I get inside?"

"Foolish goose," said the witch. "The opening is big enough. See, I myself could get in." And the witch stuck her own head into the oven.

At this moment, Gretel boldly took the opportunity to shove the witch into the oven. Gretel had developed some strength in the past month, doing many household chores, so it was a hard shove, causing the witch to slide completely into the oven. Then Gretel closed the iron door and secured it with a bar. The witch began to howl frightfully, but Gretel ran away, and the witch burned up and died.

Gretel ran to her brother and exclaimed, "Hansel, we are saved, the old witch is dead!", as Gretel unlocked his cage.

Hansel jumped out of the cage like a bird flies out of the opened door of a cage in which the bird has been kept.

How happy they were! They threw their arms around each other's necks and jumped with joy. Because they now had nothing to fear, they went into the witch's house. In every corner there were wooden chests. The children opened the chests and discovered that each was filled with pearls and precious stones.

The children filled bags with as many pearls and precious stones as they could carry.

"Now we must leave," said Hansel, and he stepped out of the witch's house

The same white bird that had led them to the witch's house now re-appeared, swooping down through the sky.

Hansel and Gretel decided to follow the bird, hoping it would lead them in the direction of their father's house. And that is what the good animal did. The journey took some days, but eventually the forest grew more and more familiar to them, and finally they saw their father's house in the distance. They began to run, and when they reached the house, they rushed inside, where they found their father sitting alone. He jumped up when he saw his children. No father and children ever hugged each other more joyfully!

The woodcutter had not had one happy hour since he had been apart from his children. His second wife had recently died, and he had resigned himself to living alone for the rest of his life.

The children emptied their bags, scattering pearls and precious stones around the floor of their home. Now all their cares were over, and they lived happily together.

My tale is done,  
A mouse has run,  
And whoever catches it can make from it a large fur cap.