

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Hansel and Gretel**

Once upon a time there was a poor woodcutter who lived with his wife and two children in a miserable hut in the forest. The children were called Hansel and Gretel, and as they grew up, so were the poor people in ever greater want of bread. Also, the times became harder and harder, and all provisions more expensive, causing both parents heavy care. One evening, when they had sought their hard bed, the husband sighed, "Oh wife, how on earth are we to provide for the children when winter is approaching and we have nothing for ourselves!" And the mother replied, "I don't know any other way than your taking them into the forest – the sooner the better – giving each of them a piece of bread, lighting them a fire, commending them to the good Lord, and leaving them." "Oh, Lord! How could I do that to my own children, wife?" asked the woodcutter, quite distressed. "Fine then, forget it," snapped the wife. "Then you can make a coffin for all four of us and watch the children starve to death!"

The two children, whom hunger had kept awake in their little beds of moss all this time, listened along to what their mother and father said to each other, and the sister began to weep; but Hansel comforted her, saying, "Don't weep, Gretel, I'll help us, you'll see." He waited until their parents were asleep, whisked out of the hut, looked for white pebbles in the moonlight, hid them well, and crept back in, whereupon he and his sister soon fell asleep.

In the morning, what the parents had discussed came to pass. The mother gave a piece of bread to each child and said, "That is all for today; eat it sparingly." Gretel carried the bread, Hansel secretly carried his pebbles, the father had his wood-axe tucked under his arm, and the mother

locked up the house and followed with a water-jug. Hansel shifted behind his mother so that he brought up the rear, and he often peeked back at their house; and when he could not see it, he dropped a pebble straight away, and then another one a few steps further on, and so forth.



Now they were all in the heart of the deep forest, and the father lit a fire while the children brought over lots of brushwood to feed it; and the mother said to them, “You must be tired, now lie down by the fire and sleep, and in the meantime we’ll fell trees, then we’ll come back to fetch you afterwards.”

The children slumbered a little, and when they awoke the sun was at its meridian height, and the fire had burned down; and Hansel and Gretel being hungry, they consumed their pieces of bread. They did not come – they being the parents. And later, the children fell asleep again until it had grown dark, and they were still alone; and Gretel began to cry and to feel afraid. But Hansel comforted her with the words, “Don’t be afraid, sister, remember that the good Lord is with us, and soon the moon will rise, then we’ll go home.”



And the moon did indeed rise in its full splendour soon afterwards, and it shone for the children on their way home and illumined the silver-white pebbles. Hansel took Gretel by the hand, and so the children walked on together without fear and without mishap, and when the day began to dawn they saw their father's roof gleaming through the bushes; and they walked up to the little house in the forest and knocked. When their mother

opened the door, she was thoroughly startled to see the children, and she did not know whether to scold them or be glad; but their father was glad, and so both children were let back in to the house and bid heartily welcome.

It was not long, however, before concern was again voiced aloud, and that conversation, and the decision to take the children into the forest and leave them there alone and in Heaven's keeping, reoccurred. Again the children listened along to the melancholy discussion, heavy of heart, and clever Hansel got up from his bed to search for shining stones once more, but the door of the house was securely locked, for the mother had noticed it was unlocked and closed it fast. Yet Hansel comforted his weeping little sister once again, saying, "Don't weep, dear Gretel, the good Lord who knows all ways, He'll lead us on the right one, you'll see."

They all had to get up at dawn the next morning to walk into the forest again, and the children were given bread again, but the pieces were even smaller than before; and the path led even deeper into the forest.

Hansel secretly crumbled the bread in his pocket and scattered crumbs, in place of stones, over the path, thinking to safely find his way back with his sister later. And now everything happened as it had before: a large fire was lit and the children had to sleep, and when they awoke they were alone, and their parents never came back. And midday came, and Gretel shared her little piece of bread with Hansel, because he had crumbled all of his and scattered it over the path, and then they fell asleep again to awake in the evening alone and forsaken. Gretel wept but Hansel was full of faith in God, and thinking to find the way easily by means of the breadcrumbs, he waited until the moon had risen then took Gretel by the hand and said to her, "Come, sister, now we're going home."

But when Hansel looked for the crumbs, there were none of them left, for the birds of the forest had pecked all of them, all of them up and eaten them with a good appetite. And so the children wandered through the forest all night long, and they soon strayed from the path, lost their way, and became despondent. Finally, they fell asleep on some soft moss and woke up hungry as day was dawning, for they did not have a bite of bread left, and they had to still their thirst and hunger with the lovely forest berries they found here and there. And as they were wandering around like this in the forest, finding neither highway nor byway, behold – a snow-white bird came flying, and it flew ever before them, as if it wished to show the children the way, and they happily followed the bird. All of a sudden they saw a little house, onto whose roof the bird flew; it pecked at the roof, and when the children had come up close to the house their delight and surprise knew no bounds, for it was made of bread, or its walls were, while the roof was

covered with pancakes and the windows were slabs of transparent rock candy. That was just what the children needed, and they ate some of the little house's roof and some of a broken window-pane. Then a voice from inside was suddenly heard, crying out:

“Nibble, nibble, little mouse,
Who's that nibbling at my house?”

To which the children replied:

“It's only the breeze
That blows through the trees”

and kept on eating, for they had been very hungry, and the taste was quite delicious.

Then the door of the little house opened and an ancient, hunchbacked, rheumy-eyed little woman stepped out, of no slight ugliness, with a face and forehead full of wrinkles and, in the middle, a large, large nose. She also had grass-green eyes. The children were not a little startled, but the old woman was very



friendly, saying, “Well, dear children, come on in to my little house, come on in! There are much tastier cakes inside!”

The children readily followed the old woman, and inside she served them up a real treat. It was a case of, ‘Take your pick.’ Biscuits and marzipan, sugar and milk, apples and nuts, and exquisite cakes. And while the children ate and ate and were happy, the old woman prepared two little

beds with pillows of fine down and lily-white linen, and she settled the children in them ready to sleep; thinking themselves in Heaven, they piously said their evening prayer and fell asleep directly.

However, with regard to the old woman, the case was as follows, and it was terrible. She was a wicked and nasty witch who ate the children she lured with her Bread-and-Cake house once she had fed them up nice and fat. This was her intention with Hansel and Gretel too. When day broke the old woman was already standing before the beds of the children, who were still sweetly asleep, and rejoicing at her catch; and she tore Hansel out of bed, took him to the goose coop, with its narrowly-barred door, and stopped up his mouth so he would not cry out. Then she violently woke poor Gretel and raucously yelled at her: "Get up, you lazy maid! Your brother's in the coop, we must cook him a good meal so he gets fat and makes a good roast for me!"

Gretel was scared to death, and she wept and bawled, but it was all to no purpose: she had to obey and get up, and help to cook a meal, and she had to carry it to the coop herself, where she wept with her incarcerated brother. She herself was held in very scant regard by the witch. Things continued thus for a time, during which the old woman would often creep to the coop and order Hansel to stick a finger through the bars so she could feel if he were fat yet. But Hansel always stuck out a scraggy little bone, and she was amazed that the boy stayed so skinny in spite of all the good food he ate. At length she grew weary of this and told Gretel, "In short, he'll be roasted today," and she made a mighty fire in the oven that stood next to the little house, and then she shoved in some bread, so she would have

something freshly-baked to eat with her roast. Gretel was at a complete loss for what to do; at last, the old witch bade her sit on the loader and have a look in the oven – she would push her in just a little so that Gretel could see if the bread was brown. But her real intent was to roast the poor girl inside.

But then the snow-white bird flew by, singing, “Take care, take care, watch out!” And Gretel’s eyes were opened, so that she saw through the old woman’s wicked ruse and said, “First show me how it’s done, then I’ll do it.” At once the old one sat down on the oven-board and Gretel pushed the handle, and she pushed her into the oven as far as the handle was long, and then bang! she slammed the iron door of the oven shut and shot the bolt across, and as the oven was still astoundingly hot the old witch had to sputter and spit inside and die a dog’s death as reward for her misdeeds. Gretel ran to Hansel and let him out of the goose coop, and he came out and delightedly flung his arms round the neck of the truest of sisters, and they kissed, wept tears of joy, and thanked God.

And then the white bird was back again, with many, many other birds of the forest, and they flew on to the cake-roof of the little house where there was a nest, and each bird took a colourful gem or a pearl from it and brought it to the children, and Gretel held up her apron to catch all the rain of jewels. The snow-white bird sang,

“For the crumbs of bread,
Pearls and gems instead.”

Then the children realised that the birds were grateful for the breadcrumbs Hansel had scattered on the path, and now the white bird flew

before them again to show them the way out of the forest. Soon they came upon a mighty river and they stood there bewildered, unable to go on or go over. But suddenly a large, beautiful swan came swimming by, and the children called out to it, “Beautiful swan afloat, will you be our boat?” And the swan bent its head and paddled to the bank, and it carried the children, one after the other, across to the far bank. The white bird had already fluttered over, and it flew on, ever on, before the children until they finally came out of the forest and were back at their parents’ little house.



The old woodcutter and his wife were sitting sad and silent in the narrow parlour, in deep grief over the children, and they regretted abandoning them a thousandfold; and they sighed, “Ah, if only Hansel and Gretel could come back, only just one the more time, never again would we leave them alone in the forest” – and at that very moment the door opened without anyone having knocked, and there walked in Hansel and Gretel in the flesh. What joy there was! And once the valuable pearls and gems the children had brought with them were produced, there was rejoicing all over, and from that time on, all want and all care were at an end.