

Hansel and Gretel

ONCE UPON A TIME a brother and sister named Hansel and Gretel who lived in a hut in the woods with their father, a poor woodcutter. Their mother had died when the children were very young, and after a number of years their father remarried. As soon as that new stepmother moved in, she made life very hard for the children. Hansel and Gretel were not allowed to eat until after the stepmother had eaten everything she wanted off the plates. Most of the time, only scraps were left. Each day the children had to work long and hard to finish the chores.

Hansel and Gretel tried to tell their father about their hard situation but he would hear none of it. It seemed the only one he listened to was his wife. And all the stepmother talked about was how much trouble it was to have children in the hut, and how she wished they would go away forever.

Each day there was less and less food for the boy and girl to eat. Yet the stepmother gave them more hard work to do. One day Gretel begged her father, "Please, Father! We work all day long, and we're hungry!" But the stepmother slapped her face. "You ungrateful brats!" she yelled. "You eat us out of house and home!"

That night the two children were not allowed to sleep in the hut at all. Instead, they had to sleep outside in the cold. They shivered and tried to keep each other warm as best they could. Winter was coming, and the clothes they wore were so thin it felt as if they had no clothes at all.

The next morning when the sun rose, Gretel turned to her little brother. "Hansel," she said, "we cannot stay here any more. We must escape, today! There has to be more to eat in the woods than what they give us at home."

"What if we get lost?" said Hansel. "How could we get back?"

"I will take bread with us," said Gretel, "and leave crumbs of bread behind us. If we have to come back, all we need to do is to follow the crumbs back home."

And so the two of them escaped from the house into the woods, and left behind their hard life.

They went deeper and deeper into the woods. Gretel was careful to drop one crumb behind her and then another, just as she said she would do.

Alas! They looked for something to eat in the woods - an apple tree, pear tree, some nuts on the ground, even dried-up berries. But there was no food to be found! The trees and bushes were all past the time when they bore fruit. The poor children were hungrier than ever. At last, poor Hansel and Gretel knew if they did not return to their hut, they would surely starve. All they needed to do was to follow the breadcrumbs that would lead them home. Yet when they looked for the trail of breadcrumbs, there was nothing to be found - the breadcrumb trail was no more!

A bird whooshed up into the air and in its beak was a large breadcrumb. Hansel and Gretel were struck with grief – the birds must have swooped down and stolen away all the breadcrumbs! The sun was setting. A wolf howled in the distance. Hansel and Gretel knew they were lost and hungry. Now they were scared, too.

“Gretel,” whispered Hansel in fear, “what will we do?” She did not know what to say. All she could do was to hug her little brother. Every minute it was getting darker and darker. Again, a wolf howled in the distance.

All of a sudden, Gretel saw a small light shining from far away. It must mean someone was living there in the woods! “Look!” cried Gretel. “I bet whoever lives there will be kind and will take us in.”

The two children sped as fast as they could to the light in the distance.

But when they got closer, they were astonished by what they saw. Try to imagine this – from top to bottom, the hut was made entirely of candy! Wrapped with white frosting and dotted with red licorice bricks, the hut was decorated all around the edges with large hard candies and a gingerbread roof, what a sight to see!

Before Gretel could say: “I bet it will be okay if we have just a little taste,” both of them were nibbling bits and then chunks of frosting and candy.

“WHO is nibbling on my house?” a sharp voice called out. Hansel and Gretel spun around. A green old witch stared at them, frowning.

Stunned, Gretel could only curtsy. “If you please, ma’am,” she said, as sweetly as she could. “There was so much candy on your house. And we're so hungry!”

“You got that right, it's MY house!” snapped the witch. Her voice dropped. “Well then,” she said in a gentler tone, “come inside. I'll get something for you to eat.”

Hansel and Gretel looked at each other. It looked like this was this going to work out fine after all! They would be warm, fed, and safe. What more could they want? They skipped into the witch’s hut.

The witch gave them a fine meal of soup and bread. As they licked their spoons and swallowed the last crust of bread, they looked around. Then what the brother and sister saw turned their hearts cold. Piles of bones in the corners! Yet the two children were very tired, so tired that they tried not to think about any of this. Instead, they quickly felt asleep.

When he awoke the next morning, Hansel found himself locked in a cage. The witch roared to Gretel, “Your brother will stay there from now on. Every day I will fatten him up. Until he is ready to make me a fine dinner!” She laughed, rubbing her hands with glee. “And YOU,” she turned and looked sharply at Gretel. “Will do as I say.”

Gretel worked hard all day doing chores for the witch. And Hansel was well fed, just as the witch said.

Each morning the witch said to the boy, "Show me your finger. I will feel how plump you are getting." For the old witch could not see very well. Hansel held out his finger. The witch smiled when she felt how plump he was getting.

"Gretel," Hansel whispered to his sister in fear. "What can we do? Soon I will be plump enough. Who knows? Any day now the witch will want to eat me!" His sister wished she had a plan, but could not think of anything she could do.

One night when the witch was sleeping, Gretel had an idea. She picked up a bone from one of the piles on the floor and woke her brother. "Hansel," she said, "the next time the witch asks to see your finger, hold out this bone to her instead."

The next morning, he did just that. "Hmph!" said the witch, touching the bone and thinking it was the boy's finger. "This is going to take longer than I thought!"

"At least we have more time," Gretel thought. But still, she could not think of any way they could escape.

Each morning when the witch said, "Show me your finger," Hansel held out the thin bone. One day the witch yelled, "I will not wait another day! The boy will be my dinner tonight, no matter how skinny he is!" The witch ordered Gretel to start the fire in the oven at once. Gretel worked as slowly as she could. Why was the witch looking at her with such a sly smile?

"Be a dear," said the witch with a slow grim. "Go inside the oven, won't you? Tell me if it is hot enough."

Gretel's heart skipped a beat. If she did that, the witch could push her inside and she would eat them both! But that gave her an idea.

Gretel looked down. "I am not sure how to tell if the fire is hot enough."

Nonsense!" said the witch. "Nothing could be easier. Just go in!"

"Um," said Gretel slowly, "please show me first?"

"Stupid girl!" snapped the witch. Mumbling and grumbling, she stepped inside the oven. The moment the witch was inside, Gretel quickly slammed the door.

Gretel!" Hansel cried out. "You saved us!"

The sister tried to think fast. "Where is that key to your cage?" She looked and looked. At last she found it below a heavy barrel. She freed her brother from the cage. How they hugged and laughed! Then she went back to that barrel. Why was it so heavy? And that is when she found out why - the barrel was filled with precious jewels!

Their pockets filled with jewels, Hansel and Gretel ran out of the witch's hut as fast as they could.

They soon found a small path and followed it. The small path led to a wider path, and the wider path led to a road. They waited by the side of the road hoping someone would ride by. A horseman trotted up and Hansel and Gretel waved their hands. When he stopped, the children offered one of the small jewels. The horseman was happy to give them a ride home.

When the brother and sister opened the door to their home, their father was wild with joy to see them. He had worried night and day since they left. They also learned that their stepmother had died. She would never trouble them again.

Hansel and Gretel could once again live happily with their father in the hut in the woods. And so the three of them lived in joy for many years to come.