

Nine

Hansel and Gretel

At the edge of a great forest lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children, a boy called Hansel and a girl called Gretel. The family had little to eat at the best of times, and what's more there was a famine in the land, and often the father couldn't even provide their daily bread.

One night as he lay in bed worrying about their poverty, he sighed and said to his wife, 'What's going to become of us? How can we keep the children fed when we haven't any food for ourselves?'

'I tell you what,' she said. 'This is what we'll do. Early tomorrow morning we'll take them into the thickest part of the forest, make them comfortable, light a fire to keep them warm, give them a little bit of bread, and then leave them there by themselves. They won't find their way home, and we'll be rid of them.'

‘No, no, no,’ said the husband, ‘I won’t do that. Abandon my own children in the forest? Never! Wild animals would tear them to pieces.’

‘You’re a fool,’ said his wife. ‘If we don’t get rid of them, all four of us will starve. You may as well start planing the wood for our coffins.’

She gave him no peace until he gave in.

‘But I don’t like it,’ he said. ‘I can’t help feeling sorry for them ...’

In the next room, the children were awake. They couldn’t sleep because they were so hungry, and they heard every word their stepmother said.

Gretel wept bitterly and whispered, ‘Oh, Hansel, it’s the end for us!’

‘Hush,’ said Hansel. ‘Stop worrying. I know what we can do.’

As soon as the grown-ups had fallen asleep, Hansel got out of bed, put on his old jacket, opened the lower half of the door and crept outside. The moon was shining brightly, and the white pebbles in front of the house glittered like silver coins. Hansel crouched down and filled his pockets with as many as he could cram in.

Then he went back inside and got into bed and whispered, 'Don't worry, Gretel. Go to sleep now. God will look after us. Anyway, I've got a plan.'

At daybreak, even before the sun had risen, the woman came in and pulled the covers off their bed.

'Get up, you layabouts!' she said. 'We're going into the forest to get some wood.'

She gave them each a slice of dry bread.

'That's your lunch,' she said, 'and don't gobble it up too soon, because there's nothing else.'

Gretel put the bread in her apron, because Hansel's pockets were full of pebbles. They all set off together into the forest. From time to time Hansel would stop and look back at the house, until finally his father said, 'What are you doing, boy? Keep up. Use your legs.'

'I'm looking at my white kitten,' Hansel said. 'He's sitting on the roof. He wants to say goodbye to me.'

'Stupid boy,' said the woman. 'That's not your kitten, it's the sun shining on the chimney.'

In fact, Hansel had been dropping the pebbles one by one on the path behind them.

He was looking back because he wanted to make sure they could be seen.

When they got to the middle of the forest their father said, 'Go and fetch some kindling. I'll make a fire so you won't freeze.'

The children gathered some small twigs, a whole pile of them, and their father set them alight. When the fire was burning well the woman said, 'Make yourselves comfortable, my dears. Lie down by the fire and snuggle up warm. We'll go off and cut some wood now, and when we've finished we'll come and get you.'

Hansel and Gretel sat down by the fire. When they felt it must be midday they ate their bread. They could hear the sound of an axe not far away, so they thought their father was nearby; but it wasn't an axe, it was a branch that he'd tied to a dead tree. The wind swung it back and forth, so it knocked on the wood.

The children sat there for a long time, and gradually their eyelids began to feel heavy. As the afternoon went past and the light faded, they leaned closer together and fell sound asleep.

They awoke to find themselves in darkness. Gretel began to cry. 'How can we ever find our way out?' she sobbed.

‘Wait till the moon comes up,’ said Hansel. ‘Then you’ll see how my plan will work.’

When the moon did come up it was full and brilliant, and the white stones Hansel had dropped shone like newly minted coins. Hand in hand, the two children followed the trail all through the night, and just as dawn was breaking, they arrived at their father’s house.

The door was locked, so they knocked loudly. When the woman opened it her eyes opened too, in shock. ‘You wretched children! You made us so worried!’ And she hugged them so tightly they couldn’t breathe. ‘Why did you sleep so long? We thought you didn’t want to come back!’

And she pinched their cheeks as if she were really glad to see them. When their father came down a moment later, the relief and joy in his face was real, because he hadn’t wanted to leave them at all.

So that time they were safe. But not long afterwards, food was short again, and many people went hungry. One night the children heard the woman say to their father, ‘It’s no good. We’ve only got half a loaf left, and then we’ll all starve. We must get rid of the children, and do it properly this time. They must have had some trick before, but if we

take them deep enough into the woods they'll never find their way out.'

'Oh, I don't like it,' said the father. 'There's not just wild animals in the forest, you know. There are goblins and witches and the Lord knows what. Wouldn't it be better to share the loaf with the children?'

'Don't be stupid,' said the woman. 'Where's the sense in that? You're soft, that's the trouble with you. Soft and stupid.'

She tore him to shreds with her criticism, and he had no defence; if you've given in once, you have to give in ever after.

The children were awake, and they had heard the conversation. When the adults were asleep, Hansel got up and tried to go outside again, but the woman had locked the door and hidden the key. Nevertheless, he comforted his sister when he got back into bed, and said, 'Don't worry, Gretel. Go to sleep now. God will protect us.'

Early next morning the woman came and woke the children as she'd done before, and gave them each a piece of bread, though it was even smaller this time. As they went into the forest, Hansel crumbled his bread up and dropped the crumbs on the path, stopping every so often to make sure he could see them.

‘Hansel, keep going,’ said his father. ‘Stop looking back all the time.’

‘I was looking at my pigeon sitting on the roof,’ said Hansel. ‘She wants to say goodbye to me.’

‘That’s not your pigeon, you fool,’ said the woman, ‘it’s the sun shining on the chimney. Stop dawdling.’

Hansel didn’t look back again, but he kept crumbling up the bread in his pocket and dropping it on the path. The woman made them all walk fast, and they went deeper into the forest than they’d ever gone in all their lives.

Finally she said, ‘This’ll do,’ and once again they made a fire for the children to sit by.

‘Now don’t you move,’ the woman told them. ‘Sit here and don’t budge till we come and get you. We’ve got enough to worry about without you wandering off. We’ll be back in the evening.’

The children sat there until they felt it must be midday, and then they shared Gretel’s little piece of bread, because Hansel had used all his up. Then they fell asleep, and the whole day went by, but no one came for them.

It was dark when they woke up. ‘Hush, don’t cry,’ Hansel said to Gretel. ‘When the

moon comes up, we'll see the crumbs and find our way home.'

The moon came up, and they began to look for the crumbs, but they couldn't find any. The thousands of birds that fly about in the woods and the fields had pecked them all up.

'We'll find our way,' said Hansel.

But no matter which way they went, they couldn't find the way home. They walked all through the night and then all through the following day, and still they were lost. They were hungry, too, terribly hungry, because all they'd had to eat was a few berries that they'd found. They were so tired by this time that they lay down under a tree and fell asleep at once. And when they awoke on the third morning, and struggled to their feet, they were still lost, and with every step they seemed to be going deeper and deeper into the forest. If they didn't find help soon, they'd die.

But at midday, they saw a little snow-white bird sitting on a branch nearby. It sang so beautifully that they stopped to listen, and when it stretched its wings and flew a little way ahead, they followed it. It perched and sang again, and again flew a little way ahead, moving no faster than they could walk, so that it really seemed to be guiding them.

And all of a sudden they found themselves in front of a little house. The bird perched on the roof, and there was something strange about the look of that roof. In fact—

‘It’s made of cake!’ said Hansel.

And as for the walls—

‘They’re made of bread!’ said Gretel.

And as for the windows, they were made of sugar.

The poor children were so hungry that they didn’t even think of knocking at the door and asking permission. Hansel broke off a piece of roof, and Gretel knocked through a window, and they sat down right where they were and started to eat at once.

After a good few mouthfuls, they heard a soft voice from inside:

*‘Nibble, nibble, little mouse,
Who’s that nibbling at my house?’*

The children answered:

*‘The wind so wild,
The Heavenly Child.’*

And then they went on eating, they were so ravenous. Hansel liked the taste of the roof so much that he pulled off a piece as long as his arm, and Gretel carefully pushed out another windowpane and started crunching her way through it.

Suddenly the door opened and an old, old woman came hobbling out. Hansel and Gretel were so surprised that they stopped eating and stared at her with their mouths full.

But the old woman shook her head said, 'Don't be frightened, my little dears! Who brought you here? Just come inside, my darlings, come and rest your poor selves in my little box of treats. It's as safe as houses!'

She pinched their cheeks fondly, and took each of them by the hand and led them into the cottage. As if she'd known they were coming, there was a table laid with two places, and she served them a delicious meal of milk and pancakes with sugar and spices, and apples and nuts.

After that she showed them into a little bedroom where two beds were made up ready, with snow-white sheets. Hansel and Gretel went to bed, thinking they were in heaven, and fell asleep at once.

But the old woman had only pretended to be friendly. In fact she was a wicked witch, and she had built her delicious house in order to lure children to her. Once she'd captured a child, whether a boy or a girl, she killed them, cooked them, and ate them. It was a feast day for her when that happened. Like other

witches, she had red eyes and couldn't see very far, but she had a keen sense of smell, and she knew at once when humans were nearby. Once Hansel and Gretel were tucked up in bed, she laughed and rubbed her knobbly hands together.

'I've got 'em now!' she cackled. 'They won't get away from me!'

Early next morning she got up and went to their room, and looked at the two of them lying there asleep. She could barely keep her hands from their full red cheeks.

'Nice mouthfuls!' she thought.

Then she seized Hansel and before he could utter a cry she dragged him out of the cottage and into a little shed, where she shut him in a cage. He cried then all right, but there was no one to hear.

Then the witch shook Gretel awake saying, 'Get up, you lump! Go and fetch some water from the well and cook something for your brother. He's in the shed, and I want him fattened up. When he's fat enough, I'm going to eat him.'

Gretel began to cry, but it was no good: she had to do everything the witch ordered. Hansel was given delicious food every day, while she had to live on crayfish shells.

Every morning the witch limped down to the shed, leaning on her stick, and said to Hansel: 'Boy! Stick your finger out! I want to see if you're fat yet.'

But Hansel was too clever for that: he stuck a little bone through the bars, and the witch, peering through her red eyes, thought it was his finger. She couldn't understand why he wasn't fat.

Four weeks went by, and she thought Hansel was still thin. But then she thought of his nice red cheeks, and she shouted to Gretel: 'Hey! Girl! Go and fetch lots of water. Fill the cauldron and set it on to boil. Fat or thin, skinny or plump, I'm going to slaughter that brother of yours tomorrow and boil him up for a stew.'

Poor Gretel! She wept and wept, but she had to fetch the water as the witch ordered. 'Please, God, help us!' she sobbed. 'If only the wolves had eaten us in the forest, at least we'd have died together.'

'Stop your snivelling,' said the witch. 'It won't do you any good.'

In the morning Gretel had to light a fire under the oven.

'We'll do the baking first,' said the witch. 'I've kneaded the dough already. Is that fire

hot enough yet?’

She dragged Gretel to the oven door. Flames were spitting and flaring under the iron floor.

‘Climb in and see if it’s hot enough,’ said the witch. ‘Go on, in you go.’

Of course, the witch intended to shut the door when Gretel was inside, and cook her as well. But Gretel saw what she was up to, so she said, ‘I don’t quite understand. You want me to get inside? How can I do that?’

‘Stupid goose,’ said the witch. ‘Get out of the way, I’ll show you. It’s easy enough.’

And she bent down and put her head inside the oven. As soon as she did, Gretel shoved her so hard that she overbalanced and fell in. Gretel closed the door at once and secured it with an iron bar. Horrible shrieks and screams and howls came from the oven, but Gretel closed her ears and ran outside. The witch burned to death.

Gretel ran straight to the shed and cried: ‘Hansel, we’re safe! The old witch is dead!’

Hansel leaped out, as joyful as a bird that finds its cage open. They were so happy! They threw their arms around each other’s necks, they hugged, they jumped for joy, they kissed each other’s cheeks. There was nothing to fear any more, so they ran into the cottage and

looked around. In every corner there were trunks and chests full of precious stones.

‘These are better than pebbles!’ said Hansel, dropping some in his pocket.

‘I’ll take some too,’ said Gretel, and filled her apron with them.

‘And now let’s go,’ said Hansel. ‘Let’s leave these witchy woods behind.’

After walking a few hours, they came to a lake.

‘It’s going to be difficult to get across,’ said Hansel. ‘I can’t see a bridge anywhere.’

‘There aren’t any boats either. But look,’ said Gretel, ‘there’s a white duck. I’ll see if she can help us get across.’

She called out:

*‘Little duckling, little duck,
Be kind enough to bring us luck!
The water’s deep and cold and wide,
And we must reach the other side.’*

The little duck swam up to them, and Hansel climbed on her back.

‘Come on, Gretel!’ he said. ‘Climb on with me!’

‘No,’ said Gretel, ‘that would be too much of a cargo. We should go one at a time.’

So the good little bird took them one after the other. When they were safely ashore again

they walked on further, and soon the forest began to grow more familiar. At last they saw their own home in the distance, and they ran up and rushed inside and threw themselves into their father's arms.

The man hadn't had one happy moment since he'd left his children in the forest. Not long after that, his wife had died, and he was all alone, and poorer than ever. But now Gretel unfolded her little apron and shook out all the jewels so that they bounced and scattered all over the room, and Hansel threw handful after handful after them.

So all their troubles were over, and they lived happily ever after.

*The mouse has run,
My tale is done –
And if you catch it, you can make yourself a
great big furry hat.*

Tale type: ATU 327, 'Hansel and Gretel'

Source: story told to the Grimm brothers by the Wild family

Similar stories: Alexander Afanasyev: 'Baba Yaga and the Brave Youth' (*Russian Fairy Tales*);

Giambattista Basile: 'Ninnillo and Nennella' (*The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, ed. Jack Zipes); Italo

Calvino: 'Chick', 'The Garden Witch' (*Italian Folktales*); Charles Perrault: 'Little Thumbling' (*Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*)

The best-known tales, of which this is certainly one, have lived on in countless anthologies and picture-books and theatrical adaptations (and, in this case, opera) until familiarity threatens to dull their fine qualities. But this is a great and ferocious classic. The wonderful invention of the edible house, together with the implacable cruelty of the witch and the wit and bravery of Gretel in dealing with her so neatly, make it unforgettable.

Mother, or stepmother? In the Grimms' first edition, of 1812, the woman is simply 'the mother'. By the time of the seventh edition of 1857 she had become a stepmother, and so she remains. Marina Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, is very interesting on the Grimms' reasons for this (the only way they could preserve an ideal vision of the Mother was to banish and replace her) and also on Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation (the mother/stepmother split allows the listening children to deal guiltlessly with their anger at their own mother's threatening side). From the storytelling point of view, I go for simplicity.

Jack Zipes, in *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, points out that underlying this tale, which to many seems a matter of pure fancy, is the unhappy reality of rural poverty and the prospect of real starvation for many families. Desperate times, desperate remedies, no doubt, but shouldn't the story condemn the father a little more? And the death of the stepmother is very convenient, especially given the association of stepmother and witch that many modern storytellers have built on (including myself). It would have been a sorry ending for the children to come home and find her still ruling the

roost. Perhaps the father killed her. If I were writing this tale as a novel, he would have done.

The episode of the duck is a curious little intervention in the story from the Grimms' final edition. It didn't exist before that, at least in print, but I think it works, so I've included it too. The lake is an impassable barrier between the threatening forest and the safety of home, and a barrier is a desirable thing to have unless you're on the wrong side of it; but it can be crossed with a combination of the benevolence of nature and human ingenuity.