

The Early Years of Hansel & Gretel

Some time ago early in the 17th century there lived in a small village in the Black Forest a young woodcutter called John, or in his own language, Johannes. He was much liked in the neighbourhood where he was also not only hardworking but also a skilful worker whose woodcuts were much in demand from printers in the neighbouring town; he thus made a reasonable living at his trade. He was also handsome and soon won the heart of a young lady called Margaret. The two became engaged and were married. Everyone in the village wished them well.

Their joy became greater a year later when they had a young daughter who was baptized Margaret, taking her mother's name. But she was generally called Gretel, that is, 'little Margaret' by her parents and by others in the village.

About a year and a half later they were blessed by the birth of a son who was baptized Johannes after his father; but the son was generally known both by his parents and those in the village as Hansel, that is 'little John.'

The birth of Hansel, though of great joy as giving the woodcutter a son and heir, was also the occasion of sadness, for his mother contracted postpartum fever and died two weeks later. Although the people in the village rallied round and helped the young family, the woodcutter found it more and more difficult to continue to work full time and to bring up two children. Eventually he married a young widow from the town. So Hansel and Gretel came into the care of a stepmother.

Their stepmother was probably genuinely in love with the woodcutter, but she was also domineering and wanted to run things her own way. The woodcutter certainly loved her at first and was happy to allow her to manage the home and the finances while he got on with his work for, as we have observed, he was a hard-worker and provided well for his family.

Although the stepmother had no great love for the two children, she had no great dislike either. Emotionally she was indifferent and brought them up well enough. As the children grew older they sensed her lack of love towards them but as she treated them well enough and they were very fond of their father who, they knew, loved them dearly, they accepted things as they were. Over time the woodcutter sensed there was a lack of intimacy between his wife and the children and began to resent her domineering ways, but he had no wish to break up the family and hoped that things would work out all right in the end.

Indeed, the family might well have continued in this *modus vivendi* until the children had grown up and left home if it had not been for the Thirty Years' War which tore much of Europe apart during the first half of the 17th century.

You must know, dear listeners, that at that time there was no country called Germany. That area was part of the Holy Roman Empire which, as Voltaire a century later was to observe, was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire. It had begun centuries earlier as an Empire under its first Emperor, Charlemagne. But over time it had lost territories in France and northern Italy and become a loose conglomeration of semi-independent states in central Europe, dominated by German speakers and pledging allegiance to their elected Emperor.

The Thirty Years' War was occasioned when the newly elected Emperor, Ferdinand II, feared

northern states which had embraced Luther's break with the Pope might also break with the 'Roman Emperor', that is, with him. Therefore, wishing to preserve both the unity and the Romanitas of his Empire, he tried to impose the Roman Church on all his territories. The northern states banded together to form the Protestant Union and so began hostilities between the Union and the Emperor. These events led to unrest throughout northern and central Europe and developed into a power struggle between the Habsburgs and the French monarchy, involving much of Europe, including our own country.

The war caused widespread famine and plague, with serious dislocations in the economies and populations of central Europe. Our woodcutter and his family were caught up in this turmoil and were facing famine. During this time the stepmother blamed her husband for their loss in income, saying that in these troubled times he ought to be working even harder to make ends meet. He tried to explain that printers in the town were hit by the troubles and could not afford to pay for woodcuts as they had before; but his explanations fell on deaf ears. They argued more and more.

Then came the fateful day when the stepmother one evening, after the children had gone to bed, told her husband that they did not have enough food to feed the family. They must take the children, she said, into the wood and lose them there; if God wanted the children to survive, they would do so somehow, but she couldn't feed them.

As we know, Hansel overheard them and secretly laid a path of pebbles behind him and thus on the first attempt thwarted his stepmother's plans. We know that that made her more determined and eventually the children were lost and the rest, as they say, is history, though the Brothers Grimm turned the wicked hag, who had resorted to cannibalism in order to survive famine, into a witch, gave a fictitious description of her house and added one or two other supernatural details to spice up the story. We may ignore, even though some still believe it, Hans Taxler's fictive non-fictional Georg Ossegg who, he claimed, had discovered archaeological evidence of the "true" Hansel and Gretel.

Beneath the supernatural folklorist veneer of the Grimms' story lies the truth. Thus the stepmother's scheming did her no good for it was only a matter of time before plague came to the village; weakened by famine, both our woodcutter and his wife fell victims and she did not survive. The woodcutter, however, did survive and, as we know, was reunited with his children.

Also we may add that the Paramount Pictures' sequel, "Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters" is pure fiction. Although the Thirty Years' War did occasion major waves of witch-hunting and serious outbreaks of witch persecutions in many areas, Hansel and Gretel were never involved in any of this and all connexions with witches and witchcraft in their story is nothing but fantasy.

Hansel and Gretel, re-united with their father, did, as the Brothers Grimm tell us, live happily ever after or, at least, happily for the rest of their natural lives. But that is another story.