

HANSEL AND THE SECRET OF THE PRINCESSES

On top of a hill in the middle of the woods, there was a tree, and under that tree, Hansel and a fox were relaxing in the heat of the day. Hansel was very small, so small that you would be able to hold him up with one hand. He sat comfortably with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck. The fur there was very soft.

Hansel said to the fox, "Nearby here there is a cottage, and living in it, there is only a husband who is gone in the woods throughout the day, and a wife who is gone throughout the day tending to a flock of sheep. We should sneak inside of their cottage, and find ourselves something to eat."

"But you are so small!" the fox said. The fox pointed his face down at Hansel, and gave the back of Hansel's head a lick: even with his small fox tongue, the lick caused all of the back of Hansel's neck to be wet, and messed up the small man's hair. "If I were to kill you a mouse," the fox said, "you would surely be fed for a month."

Hansel wiped the fox's slobber off the back of his neck using his hands, and then wiped his hands on the big blades of grass underneath him. Hansel then began to fix his hair, smoothing it down where the fox's lick had made it all stand up. Thinking that he could tempt the fox, Hansel remarked, "Yes, I could eat a mouse, but yesterday when I was nearby the cottage, I smelled that blueberry pies were being baked in the oven. I'm sure there would still be a pie left for each of us, if we hurry and sneak in before the husband and wife come back in for today."

The fox laughed to himself. "Ho ho ho! You could not eat a pie yourself, and neither could I. You are greedy, Hansel."

"I am not greedy!" Hansel argued. "I simply like food that is tasty, and beds that are soft, and clothes that are splendid, and music that is sweet."

The fox began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

As the fox was singing, the king appeared at the bottom of the hill, riding on a tall and white horse.

Hansel whispered to the fox, "The king! He is out hunting. Run! Run! Go hide in the bushes!"

The fox, heeding Hansel's advice, fled away, down the hill on the opposite side from the king.

In those days, the king was distraught with worry concerning his daughters. The king had twelve daughters. All of the princesses slept in one big bedroom together, which had twelve comfy beds in it, one bed for each princess. All of the princesses were very beautiful and very charming, and had good manners and obeyed the rules that the king commanded them. However, every morning, the shoes of all twelve princesses were always found to be worn completely through, as though the girls had been dancing all night long.

The king, concerned at what might be occupying the princesses' nights, offered a reward to his kingdom: any person who could find out what caused the princesses' shoes to be worn through at night, would be rewarded with the choice to marry any one of the twelve princesses, and would become the next king when this king died. If, after three days, any person failed to find out the secret, then that person would be killed.

A prince from a nearby kingdom, thinking about how beautiful the princesses were, agreed to the challenge. When he arrived at the castle, the king was very happy, and ordered that a feast be made. All throughout the day, the prince and the king and the twelve princesses and the courtiers sat around a long

table in a dining hall, eating very tasty foods. When night had come and it was dark outside, the prince was shown to his guest room, which was the next door down the hall from the princesses' room, so that throughout the night he could spy on the princesses and find out their secret. Before the princesses went to bed, they came and visited the prince in his room, and offered him a glass of wine. The prince drank the wine, and the princesses all left, and went to their room, and all laid down in their beds. The prince laid down in his bed too, and soon he fell asleep, and he did not wake up again until the next morning. Already, the princesses' shoes were all worn through, as though they had been dancing all night.

For two more nights, the prince fell asleep before being able to find out the secret of what caused the princesses' shoes to be worn through. On the third day, the king announced that the prince had failed the challenge, and the prince's head was cut off.

Many princes from nearby kingdoms came to the castle to try to figure out why the princesses' shoes were being worn through, but none of them could, and time after time, the princes were killed.

Hansel had heard about all this. Still sitting beneath the tree on the top of the hill, Hansel called down to the king, "Hello, king!"

The king looked up the hill, but could not see anyone. He called out in a loud voice, "Who is there?"

"Up here!" Hansel yelled. "I am up here, beneath the tree! Come, come and find me!"

The king rode his tall and white horse up the hill. From atop the horse's saddle, the king looked up in the branches of the tree, and down at the ground below, and called out, "Who is here?"

"Down here! Down here!" Hansel said. "Come down from your horse, and then you might see me!"

The king came down from his horse, and again looked down at the grass. Finally, he was able to see Hansel, who was jumping up and down and waving his arms at the king. The king said to the man, "Hello there!"

“Hello, king!” Hansel said. “I have heard that you are looking for someone who can find out what your princesses are doing at night, to cause their shoes to be worn through. As you can see, I am very small. I sleep as little as a fly, and I am very quick to hide. If you would let me try, I would find out the princesses’ secret.”

The king agreed, and Hansel promised to be at the castle the next morning. The king then rode off, and returned to his hunt. The fox, seeing that the king had gone, came out of hiding in the bushes, and ran up the hill to Hansel.

Hansel and the fox set off towards the castle, so that they would be there by tomorrow. On the way, they met an old woman beside a well, who told them, “Be sure that you do not drink the drink that the princesses offer to you. The drink they give to princes is mixed with secret drugs that will make the drinker fall fast asleep until the next morning. Act as though you have drank it, so that they will think they have tricked you, and then you must pretend to go to sleep. Take this cape with you: while you are wearing it, you will be invisible, and no one will be able to see you. You will be able to spy on the princesses this way.”

The next morning, Hansel arrived at the castle with a fox draped around his shoulders, as though wearing a scarf made from a fox pelt. Really though, the fox was alive, and only pretending to be dead. Hansel walked confidently through the castle gate, standing perfectly upright. When he was standing up as straight as he could, he was as tall as any normal person. He was only so small when his back was hunched over or slouched, which was most of the time.

The king was happy to see Hansel, and ordered a feast. Hansel ate sugared strawberries, and cake, and pieces of blueberry pie, sneaking some forkfuls to the fox that was draped around his neck. The fox held the bites of tasty pie in his mouth, and swallowed when nobody was looking.

When night had come and it was dark outside, Hansel was taken to his room, which was beside the princesses’ room. As he was getting ready to go to bed, the twelve princesses came in, and offered him a glass of wine. Hansel secretly poured the glass out, and handed the empty glass back to the eldest princess,

who had given him the glass. He then yawned, and stretched, and laid down on his bed, and pretended to snore.

The princesses all left Hansel's room, and returned to their own bedroom, and they all laid down on their beds.

The fox crawled off of Hansel's neck, and whispered into his ear, "Now, we must go and see that the princesses are doing at night!"

Hansel stopped pretending to snore, and got up out of bed. He then slouched his back, and was smaller than the fox. The fox put on the cloak that they had gotten from the woman by the well, and he became invisible! The fox then picked up Hansel in his mouth. Hansel remained in the fox's mouth, sticking his head out of the front of the fox's lips, right under the fox's little black nose. The fox tip-toed on his four paws out into the hall, and then tip-toed into the princesses' room. There, unseen, the fox sat in the corner and watched, along with Hansel, who still poked his head out from the fox's mouth.

One by one, the princesses began to giggle, not knowing that they were being watched. Then, one by one, the princesses got out of bed, and put on their shoes, and all gathered around the eldest princess. The eldest princess clapped her hands, and as soon as she did, her bed sank into the floor: *Shoomp!* And where the bed was, there was now a trap door. The eldest princess bowed down, and opened the trap door, which had old and loud hinges: *Creeeeak!* All of them giggling, the princesses lined up in a single file line, with the eldest princess at the front, and the youngest princess in the back, and then they went down through the trap door, going down a secret staircase.

"Quickly!" said Hansel. "We must follow them!"

The fox said, "Yef! We wiw fowwow vem at onf!"

The fox tiptoed quickly across the bedroom, and dove into the secret entrance before the last princess had closed the trap door behind herself.

Down and down the staircase went, and down and down the princesses walked.

"Ow!" said the youngest princess. "Someone has stepped on my dress! We are being followed!"

"Of course no one stepped on your dress," said the eldest princess. "You saw that we gave the man a potion with secret

drugs, and you saw how he fell asleep at once. Your dress was only snagged on a nail.”

The youngest princess did not think so, but could not argue. She continued to follow the other princesses down the staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a forest with trees that were made of silver. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. The princesses skipped along a trail through the silver forest.

“Sister!” called the youngest princess. “I am sure I have heard someone’s footsteps behind, following us!”

“Of course you did not hear anyone’s footsteps,” said the eldest princess. “Do you see anyone behind us?”

The youngest princess did not see anyone at all, and could not argue.

Eventually the trail went through a golden forest. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. At the end of the golden forest, the princesses came to a lake. There at the shore, twelve boats were waiting to take them across. At one boat was a pig. The youngest princess skipped to that boat, kissed the pig on the cheek, and climbed into the boat. The pig oinked happily as he began to row. Before the boat had gone very far, the fox leapt up into that boat, and sat hidden in it with Hansel still in his mouth.

Beside each of the other boats was an animal too. There was a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and at the last boat was a dog, whose hair was long and golden like the hair of the eldest princess. The eldest princess climbed into the boat with the dog, and all the other princesses climbed into the boats with the other animals, and the animals all began rowing across the lake.

The pig stopped oinking for a moment to say, “Hm! Princess, this rowing is more work than usual! Here I am rowing as always, yet we move as slowly as if there were someone else in this boat!”

The fox and Hansel stayed very quiet.

Across the water, all of the boats arrived at the shore of an island. There on the island, the trees were made of diamonds, and there were many tables with food and drinks set out, and in the middle of the island there was a big round floor to dance on.

By the moonlight, the princesses began to dance with the animals.

Hiding in the diamond trees, Hansel climbed out of the fox's mouth. The two of them changed, so that Hansel was wearing the cloak instead of the fox. Hansel then stood upright, and picked up the fox, and Hansel and the fox danced in secret with the princesses and the animals all through the night. By the end of the dancing, all of the princesses' shoes were worn through.

Hansel carried the fox as they followed the princesses back over the lake and through the forests. On the way, Hansel took a branch from a diamond tree, a branch from a golden tree, and a branch from a silver tree. When they came to the stairs, Hansel ran up them quickly ahead of the princesses, and opened and closed the trap door at the top before the first princess had gotten close enough to hear the noise: *Creak-a-Creak!* Hansel hid the branches he had taken under his bed, and then he and the fox went to sleep.

The next day, Hansel and the fox sat in a garden in the castle. The sunlight was warm. Hansel sat with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck.

The fox said to Hansel, "We have found out the secret of why the princesses' shoes are worn through. Do you mean to wait to tell the king, and have your head cut off on the third day because you have not told him?"

Hansel said, "I must first find out how the king will react to the answer, if I tell it to him."

"Oh, very well," said the fox, and then he began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

That night, Hansel and the fox again followed the princesses, and danced all night with them, and drank wine and ate food from the tables. When they came back, Hansel ran quickly to his bed and pretended to be asleep until the sun came out, so the princesses still would not know that their secret had been found out.

Later that day, Hansel went to the king, with the fox draped around his shoulders so that he could hear all that was said as well.

“Hello there!” the king said. “Have you found out what my daughters have been doing at night, that causes their shoes to all be worn through in the morning?”

“I have some idea of it,” Hansel said, “but I would like to make sure of it tonight, and tell you in the morning. If it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing each night with men from the town, surly sailors and gruff carpenters, what would you do?”

The king looked angry, and answered, “I would hang the men so that they died, and I would lock all of the princesses up, in dungeons and in towers.”

“And what if,” Hansel said, “it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing with chickens and sheep, and dogs and cats?”

The king became amused, and laughed, “Ha ha ha! If they are dancing with animals, they are only playing, as princesses should! If that is what they are doing each night, to cause their shoes to be worn through, I would be glad.”

“Thank you, O king,” Hansel said, and then saluted the king, and walked backwards out of the room.

That night, Hansel and the fox again danced with the princesses. As they were leaving the dance, Hansel took a golden cup from one of the tables, as more proof of this secret ball.

In the morning, Hansel and the fox and the princesses and the king and the courtiers all gathered together in the throne room.

“So,” the king said, “have you figured out what happens each night, that causes the princesses’ shoes to be worn through by each morning?”

“Yes, O king,” Hansel answered, and told the king the secret of the stairway under the eldest princess’s bed, and the silver forest at the bottom of the stairs. As proof, Hansel held up to the king the sparkling branch he had taken that was made of silver, and then the branch that was made of gold which sparkled even more, and finally the branch that was made of diamonds which sparkled the most. Hansel also showed the king the golden cup.

He said to the king, "Each night, the youngest princess dances with a pig, and the other princesses dance with animals as well: there is a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and lastly, the eldest princess dances each night with a dog, whose hair is long and golden, just like hers."

Seeing the branches and the cup that Hansel had shown him, the king asked the eldest princess, "Is all of this true?"

Knowing they had been found out, the eldest princess nodded her head, and confessed, "Yes, king."

The king laughed, "Ha ha ha! Wonderful! Thank you for telling me this secret! Now, you may choose one of the princesses to be your wife, and someday you will wear my crown!"

Hansel chose the eldest princess to marry. He and she went on a walk outside of the castle together, and as they walked, he said to her, "I will marry you, and someday, I will be king, and you will be queen. But you may keep dancing with the dog, whose long and golden hair is like your hair, and I will keep dancing with the fox, because he is already my dearest friend, and I already love him more than any other, and I can see that you already love the dog as well."

The princess thought that all of that was wonderful, and she and Hansel got married, and they continued to dance every night, her with the dog, and him with the fox.