

HANS'L THE STRONG

Once upon a time there was a farmer who had three sons, one of whom was incredibly strong — and very careless. His first name was Hans and he carried his father's surname, but everybody knew him simply as Hans'l the Strong. Hans'l didn't really know his own strength, so everything he did always resulted in great damage. His father couldn't send him out into the fields with his two brothers to herd the cattle. Hans'l would have driven them so hard until the last one had dropped dead with exhaustion. The only task which his father trusted Hans'l to do was to take the food out to his brothers in the field. But, even that didn't go well.

At least once, he swung the huge pot he was carrying so hard that everything flew out. Sometimes he ran too far and ended up in the wrong field, miles away. And, more often than not, he became hungry himself, took a little taste, and ended up eating both of his brothers' meals. On one such occasion, he had been sitting on a large rock in the middle of the pasture, when he realised that he had once again eaten so much that there was very little left. It was no longer worth his while to take the rest his brothers, so he emptied the remains onto the ground, where it was soon discovered by a herd of goats. The goats greedily fell upon their meal and bleated happily — and loudly. To Hans'l, it sounded as if they were laughing at him and he became angry — very angry. One by one, he took his knife to each nanny, and made its smile even wider.

Having had his revenge on the poor creatures, he headed for home, where he happily told his father what he had done to the nasty creatures. When the poor man heard what Hans'l had done to his goats, he was angry. In truth, he didn't know what he should do with his great big stupid son, who couldn't be trusted with any task. After some thought, he came up with an idea. He decided to send the boy out into the forest. Maybe the bears and wolves could knock some sense into him. He said to his son "Hans'l, take the cart into the woods, and bring back as many logs as you can find".

Hans'l hurried happily into the barn, single-handedly pulled out the largest cart, harnessed the two huge oxen, and drove away. It wasn't long before he had collected all the tree trunks which had been felled. He loaded the cart until it was full, and then continued piling the logs on top until there were none left. Then, he climbed up on top, and the oxen strained in their harness. But, nothing moved. He shouted, he whipped! The oxen pulled and panted, but the load was too heavy. The wheels didn't turn an inch! Hans'l whipped the oxen and beat them harder, until finally they both fell dead in their harness.

Now, Hans'l had to find another animal to pull the cart. After tying up the two oxen, and hanging them by their feet from two tree trunks, he

walked deeper into the forest. Soon he came across a huge bear, which he wrestled to the ground. He tied a rope around its neck and dragged it back to the cart. With the bear pulling and Hans'l pushing, the cart now moved slowly forward.

When his poor father saw Hans'l come back, with a bear in the harness and his two oxen now dead, he was angry. In truth, he didn't know how he could be rid of his great big stupid son, who couldn't be trusted with any task. After some thought he came up with an idea. Maybe the devil would take him. He said to his son "Hans'l I need a hair from the head of the devil himself. Tomorrow, you must find him and get him to give you one".

Hans'l agreed, and, after eating all the food in the house, he went to bed. The day's work had made him both hungry and tired. But, the next morning he awoke bright and early, and set off happily on his errand. Deep in the darkest forest he met a bearded man, dressed like a hunter, all in green except for two little red feathers in his hat. The stranger asked him what he was doing there, so far from home so early in the morning.

"I'm looking for the devil to get a hair from his head" answered Hans'l.

"Really" said the stranger "then it's good that you've met me. If that is all that you need, I can give you hair."

"That would be very helpful." said Hans'l "Then, I'll get back home sooner."

"I'll give you a hair, but only if you complete three tasks which I'll set you" said the devil. "But, if you fail, then I get to keep all of your hair, and the rest of you besides!"

Hans'l was happy that he had found the devil so quickly and easily, and agreed to the contest. The devil then pulled a heavy iron hammer from underneath a stone, and said "For the first challenge, we are going to throw this hammer up into the clouds. I will go first, and if you can't throw it higher than me, then you lose. If you lose, then you belong to me."

"Good!" replied Hans'l "That sounds like it could be fun."

The devil swung the hammer round and round, and then let it fly. It soared high into the clouds and then fell back to earth where the devil caught it. As he watched the hammer fly, Hans'l smiled to himself because it was such an easy task.

"Your turn" said the devil.

Hans'l held up his hand and said "Just a moment!", and laid down on the ground looking up at the sky.

"What are you doing, Hans'l?" asked his opponent, whose curiosity had got the better of him

"I'm just being careful" Answered Hans'l. "I need to make sure that I have a clear shot and don't knock any stars out of the sky." Then he stood up and prepared to throw. The devil, not wanting any trouble with the people upstairs, stopped him.

For the next challenge, the devil fetched a huge hunting horn, which he put to his lips and blew. He blew so hard that it could be heard throughout the land, and echoes bounced between the mountains. When the last echo of the last echo had faded, he turned to Hans'l and saw something strange. Hans'l had ripped up a huge fir tree and twisted it into a coil. His curiosity got the better of him, and he asked "What are you doing, Hans'l?"

"I'm making a binding for the horn" answered the boy "so it doesn't break apart when I blow it."

The devil didn't like the idea of his best hunting horn being broken by the wild young boy, and so he didn't let him blow. Instead, he told him "For the third challenge, we will dance on top of my furnace in Hell. Whoever dances the longest, wins".

There are not many people who get the chance to visit Hell when they are still alive, so Hans'l agreed to this suggestion. He accompanied the hunter as he walked through dark evergreen woods, and then through barren stony gorges, until they passed through the gates of Hell. The devil then had the great iron furnace heated until it glowed bright red. When he thought it was hot enough, he instructed Hans'l to take off his shoes. Then they both jumped onto the top of the foven and started to dance. As they danced, Hans'l clicked his fingers and, with each click, cried "Too cold!"

But, it wasn't too cold for the devil, who climbed down from the furnace, while Hans'l carried on dancing wildly like Saint Vitus shivering from the cold. The devil knew that he had lost, lifted his hat and plucked a hair from the top of his head and presented it to Hans'l. Then, while he still had wood left to burn in his furnace, he chased Hans'l out of Hell and back into the world above.

When his poor father saw Hans'l come back from Hell with a hair from the head of the devil, he was relieved. In truth, he was inwardly proud of his great big strong son, and didn't wish him any harm. Many years later, when his father died Hans'l inherited the farm, and, even if he wasn't always so himself, everybody else was careful of Hans'l the Strong.