

The Boy With Shoes Of Bread

by Théophile Gautier

Listen to this tale which the grandmothers of Germany tell to entertain their little children- Germany, a beautiful country of legends and dreams where the moonlight, playing over the mist on the old Rhine, once created a thousand fantastic visions.

A poor woman lived alone at the edge of a village, in a humble cottage, a house so wretched and unfortunate that furniture was hardly necessary.

An old four-poster bed hung with curtains of yellowed serge; a trough for making bread; a walnut chest brightly polished but with many worm-holes plugged with beeswax, telling of long service; an armchair with faded upholstery where an old woman might rest her weary head; a spinning-wheel burnished by hard use: that was all.

We shouldn't forget a child's cradle, very new, very tenderly adorned, and made up with a beautiful quilt stitched all over with flowers by an untiring needle, just as a mother will decorate the nursery of her little Jesus.

All the wealth of that poor household were concentrated there.

The child of a burgomaster or an Aulic Counsellor would not have slept more softly. What sainted prodigality, what sweet folly in a mother to deprive herself of every little luxury, amid such wretchedness, for her dear suckling babe!

This cradle gave a festive air to the tiny hovel. Nature, which is compassionate toward the unfortunate, had already covered the nakedness of the hut with sprays of sempervivum and with velvet mosses. Beautiful plants, full of pity, had with seeming casualness stopped up the holes in the roof, making of them splendid flower-baskets, thus preventing rain from falling on the cradle. Pigeons would perch on the window ledge and coo just when the child was falling asleep.

A little bird to which the young Hans had given a morsel of bread during the winter, when snow blanketed the ground, had during the spring let drop a grain from its beak to the foot of the wall, and this had grown into a beautiful morning glory which, bearing its green leaves over the stones, had entered the room by a broken tile and garlanded the child's cradle so that Hans's blue eyes and the blue flowers of the morning glory would open at the same time and regard each other with an air of intelligence.

This house was a very poor one, but not sad.

Hans's mother, whose husband had died honorably in the war, lived well enough on beans from the garden and the produce of her spinning. Slight fare, but you may be sure Hans wanted for nothing.

A pious and Christian woman was Hans's mother, certainly. She prayed, lived, and worked in virtue. But she had one fault: she regarded her son with too much complacency and pride.

It sometimes happens that mothers, looking on pretty children with dimpled hands, pink cheeks, white foreheads, and tender feet, tell themselves that children will always be theirs. But God gives nothing; he lends only, and like a forgotten creditor he sometimes appears suddenly to demand his due.

Because a fresh bruise had come out on Hans's leg, his mother believed she had caused it herself. God, who in the depths of his azure vaulted paradise spangled with gold observes all that passes on earth and commands all things from first to last, even causing the blades of grass to grow, did not view that with pleasure.

He saw also that Hans was a gourmand and his mother indulged him too much in his gourman-dizing. Often this naughty child would cry until his breath failed, wanting to eat a grape or an apple before the bread which every wretch envied him, and his mother had to throw away the morsel he had nibbled or else finish it herself.

Now, it happened that Hans fell sick. The fever burned him; the strangled breath hissed in his throat. He had the croup, a terrible sickness which reddens the eyes of the best of mothers and fathers.

At this sight the poor woman felt a horrible pang.

Doubtless you have seen in some church the image of Our Lady dressed in mourning and standing under the cross, her breast torn open and into her bloody heart plunged seven silver blades, three on one side and four on the other. It is hard to say whether this were not a more frightful agony than that of a mother who has watched her child die.

And yet the holy Virgin believed in the divinity of Jesus and knew that her son would be resurrected.

Hans's mother did not have such a hope.

Awaiting Hans's last days, his mother kept a vigil beside the sick-bed, all the while continuing mechanically to spin, and the humming of the spinning-wheel was mingled with the coughing of the dying child.

If rich people find it strange that a mother should spin beside the deathbed of her child, that is to be ignorant of how poverty aggravates the tortures of love. Alas! not only her body was broken, but her heart was broken as well.

What she was spinning so was thread for the winding-sheet for her little Hans. She did not have a linen cloth that would serve to wrap the dear corpse and, as she had no money, she had to make her spinning-wheel hum with funereal activity. But she did not pass the thread over her lip as was her habit: there fell sufficient tears to moisten it.

At the end of the sixth day Hans died Whether by chance or from sympathy, the garland of morning glories which had caressed his cradle also languished, faded, wilted, and dropped its last crisp flowers on the bed.

When his mother was convinced that the breath had flown forever from Hans's lips, where now the violets of death were displacing the roses of life, she covered up with the sheet that head so dear, tucked her package of thread under her arm,

and made for the house of the weaver.

"Weaver," she said to him, "here is thread which is very smooth, fine, and without knots. A spider couldn't spin more delicately between the ceiling joists. Pass your shuttle back and forth, and with this thread make me an ell of linen as soft as the linen of Friesland and Holland."

The weaver took the skein, set up the warp, and the bustling shuttle, pulling the thread after itself, raced from one side of the loom to the other.

The comb strengthened the weft and the linen grew under the master's hands without un-evenness, without breaks, as fine as the chemise of an archduchess or the linen with which a priest wipes the chalice at the altar.

When the thread was all used up the weaver gave the linen to the poor mother and said to her, because he had fully understood the wretched woman's deep-seated despair:

"The Emperor's son who died last year a suckling is not wrapped, in his little ebony coffin with silver fastenings, in a winding-sheet more soft or more fine."

Folding up the linen, the mother drew forth with an emaciated finger a tiny gold ring well rubbed.

"Good weaver," said she, "take this ring, my wedding ring, the only gold which I have ever owned."

This noble man of the weaving trade would not take what was offered, but she said to him:

"I have no need of that trifle where I am going because, I have a feeling, Hans's little arms are drawing me into the earth."

She went next to the carpenter's shop, and said to him:

"Master, give me a good heart of oak which will not rot and which the worms will never pierce. Make of it five planks and two small boards and with them make a coffin to this measure."

The carpenter took up his saw and plane and formed the boards. With his hammer he knocked in the nails as softly as possible so as not to push the points of iron into the poor

woman's heart much before he did into the wood.

When the job was finished, so well had the work it was said to be a box made of jewels and lace.

"Carpenter, you have made such a beautiful casket for my little Hans I give you my house on the edge of the village, and the little garden behind it, and the well with its grape vine. You will not have to wait long."

With the shroud and the coffin under her arm, so small was it, she took herself back through the village streets, and the children, who did not know that anyone had died, said:

"See how Hans's mother is taking a beautiful box of toys to Nuremburg. Without doubt it's a toy town with wooden houses painted and varnished, with a steeple covered in sheets of lead and a crenelated belfry and tower, and paths bordered with trees so leafy and green. Or suppose it's a pretty violin with a carved neck and pegs and a horse-hair bow. Oh! that we do not have a box so fine."

And the mothers blanched, embraced them, and stopped their mouths.

"Imprudent as you are, do not say that. Do not wish for that box of toys, that violin case which she carries tearfully under her arm. You will get too much, poor children!"

When Hans's mother returned home she took the delicate and still beautiful body of her son and prepared to give it that final washing which was so important because it would have to last her an eternity.

She arrayed him in Sunday clothes, with his robe and his fur-lined pelisse, so that he would not be cold in the wet ground where he would be laid. She placed beside him the doll with enamel eyes which he loved, so that he would be able to sleep with his baby.

But, when she had tucked the shroud around the corpse which she had given a last kiss a thousand times, she saw that she had forgotten to put on the dead child his pretty little red shoes.

She searched the room, because she was pained to see his bare feet, once so warm and rosy, now so icy and pale, but

while she was gone the rats had found the shoes under the bed and, for lack of anything better to eat, had nibbled and gnawed the leather to shreds.

The poor mother was greatly chagrined that her Hans would go to the other world with bare feet; because her heart was already so wounded, a touch was sufficient to make it bleed.

She cried over the shoes. From that dry, inflamed eye one tear could yet spurt.

How could she obtain shoes for Hans, since she had given away her ring and her house? Such was the thought which tormented her. An idea came to her with the force of a dream.

In the kneading-trough lay a round loaf still whole because, for a long time now the wretched woman, nourished by her grief, had eaten nothing else.

She split open that loaf, a reminder of other times when to amuse Hans she had with the soft crumb made pigeons, ducks, chickens, sabots, boats, and other childish things.

Cupping the crumb in her hand, moistening it with her tears and molding it with her thumb, she made a pair of little shoes out of bread, which she put in the cold and blueish feet of the dead child. Her heart solaced, she tucked up the shroud and closed the coffin. —While she was molding the bread a poor child came to the threshold timidly asking for bread, but with her hand she made a sign to go away.

The grave-digger came for the box and buried it in a corner of the cemetery under a clump of white roses. The air was sweet; it hadn't rained and the earth was not wet; this was a consolation to the mother, who thought that her poor little Hans would not pass too bad a first night in the tomb.

Returning to her solitary house, she placed Hans's crib beside her bed and lay down to asleep.

Her broken spirit yielded.

Asleep, she had a dream in which she knew that she was dreaming.

Hans appeared to her dressed as in his bier, in his Sunday

robe and fur-lined pelisse of swans-down, having in his hand his doll with enamel eyes and on his feet the shoes of bread.

He seemed sad.

He did not have that halo which death gives to innocent little ones; because if one puts a child into the earth out comes an angel.

The roses of paradise did not flourish on his pale cheeks, made up in white by death. Tears fell from his blond eyelashes, and great sighs swelled his little chest.

The vision disappeared and the mother woke up bathed in sweat, delighted to have seen her son but frightened that he had come back so sad. But she reassured herself, saying: Poor Hans! even in paradise, he can't forget me.

The following night the apparition renewed itself. Hans was now more sad and more pale.

His mother, stretching out her arms to him, said:

"Dear child, console yourself and don't pine; n heaven. I will rejoin you there."

The third night Hans came again. He groaned and cried more than before and he disappeared with his little hands clasped. He no longer had the doll, but he still had the shoes of bread.

Uneasy, his mother went to consult a venerable priest who said to her:

"I will come to you this night and interrogate the little specter. He will answer me; I know the words which one says to spirits innocent and guilty."

Hans appeared at the usual hour and the priest called on him with the consecrated words to reveal what was tormenting him in the other world.

"It is the shoes of bread which are the cause of my torment and prevent my climbing the stairs of diamond to paradise. They are as heavy on my feet as a postillion's jack-boots. I can manage no more than two or three stair steps, which gives me great pain because above me I see a cloud of beautiful cherubs with rosy wings who are calling me joyously and showing me

toys of silver and gold."

After saying these words, he disappeared.

The holy priest to whom Hans's mother had made her confession said:

"You have committed a great sin. You have profaned our daily bread, our sacred bread, the bread of our gracious god, the bread of Christ's last supper, chosen to represent his body, and, rather than give some to a poor person on your doorstep, you selfishly kneaded it into shoes for your Hans. It is necessary to open the grave, remove the shoes of bread from the child's feet, and burn them up in that fire which purifies all."

Accompanied by the grave-digger and the mother, the priest hastened to the cemetery. Four strokes of the spade laid the coffin bare, and he opened it.

Hans was lying within just as his mother had composed him, but his face had a melancholy expression.

The holy priest delicately removed the shoes of bread from the dead boy's heels and burned them in the flame of a consecrated candle, reciting a prayer.

That night Hans appeared to his mother one last time, but now joyous, pink, glad, with two little cherubs who had become his friends. He had luminous wings and a child's soft cap beaded with diamonds.

"Oh! Mother, what joy, what delight! How beautiful it is in the gardens of paradise! One is eternally happy and Our Father never scolds."

On the morrow Hans's mother rejoined her son, not in the earth but in the sky, because during the day she died, her head bowed over the empty cradle.