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The Witch

And Her

Two Guests

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One day, an old witch baked some gingerbread in the shape of children, with raisins for eyes, lemon peel for mouths, and caraway seeds for buttons. After taking them out of the oven, She laid them out on the windowsill to cool, and went around to the back of Her house to do some work in the garden. Now, this witch lived in a clearing in the forest, quite far from the nearest village, so She didn't expect to find two children gobbling down the gingerbread when She came back: but that's exactly what She did find.

All of a sudden, one of the gingerbread children began calling out, in a squeaky little voice: "Help! Mother! Your little children are being eaten by horrible monsters. Save Us!"

This, of course, made the two children jump with surprise and drop the gingerbread that They had in Their hands. Then, what was more, They heard another voice crying: "I'm coming, Children, I'm coming!" and They turned to see an old woman running towards Them from the corner of the house. She soon slowed down and, by the time She got to where They were, She was walking quite normally.

"Hello, Children," She said to the two real children, then turned to the gingerbread children, and said: "What do You mean, 'horrible monsters'? Why, these are just human children!" And a squeaky voice came from the gingerbread: "Well, They look like horrible monsters to me! And They want to eat Us!" Another, slightly different voice said: "Look: one of Them's already bitten off My leg, and how am I to get home now! And They've eaten Anna and Michael."

"Oh, You silly, silly things!" cried the witch, "Why make such a fuss about being eaten? You're all going to be eaten. Why do You think I made You, if not to eat You?"

"What?" cried another squeaky voice. "You mean We're not going to live with You forever, and be Your little children?"

"Oh, You'll be My little children, alright," said the witch, but I'll eat You all up. Some I'll save 'til tomorrow, and some 'til later. But I'll eat two of You right now. See: I've picked some peppermint in the garden. I'll make some mint tea, and have a nibble on two of You. And these children can eat some others."

"Oh!Oh!Oh!" squeaked the little voices: "She's going to eat Us, too!"

Then the old woman turned to the two human children (who'd been watching and listening to all this with Their mouths wide open, and Their eyes almost as wide as Their mouths) and asked Them to sit at a table that stood by the doorway, saying: "I'm just going inside to put the water on and get out some cups, if You'd like to wait." She went inside, but soon came out with cups, spoons, and a pot of honey. Then She put the gingerbread children on the table, and went inside again to fetch the pot of mint tea. When She came out, She pointed to the gingerbread child with only one leg, and said: "You'd better finish that one off. She'll be much happier when She's together again in Your stomach. And while You're eating, You can tell me why You're so far from home."

But the children just stared at the gingerbread, then at the old woman, then back at the gingerbread, until She laughed and explained that She'd played Them a little trick, making Her voice sound like it was coming from the gingerbread. Just then, the teapot, in a deep little voice, said "Phew! I wish You'd hurry up and pour this tea out: I'm getting all hot and bothered!" So She poured out the tea, saying: "I'm afraid I'm not very good at starting conversations – I've lived out here on My own for so long, and most of the people who come and see me come for some particular reason, so there's no problem deciding what to talk about. And the long periods I'm on My own, I sometimes play silly games, like talking with teapots or gingerbread. Oh, sometimes when I'm cleaning the house, there's a big

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discussion, with pieces of furniture, pots and pans, brooms and mops, all taking part."

She laughed at Herself, then said: "Let's see now, how do We begin? Ah, yes: My name's Johanna. And who would You be?"

"I'm Hänsel," said the boy, and "I'm Gretel," said the girl.

"And, at the risk of repeating Myself, what are You doing so far from home? Do You come from the village over that way," (pointing) "or the one over that way?" (pointing in another direction). "Or maybe the one over that way, but that is a long way off!"

"I don't know," said Hänsel. "We're lost!" added Gretel. And They explained how Their father had taken Them into the forest to cut wood, and had left Them with the lunch basket, telling Them to be sure not to move off. And They'd waited and waited, and He hadn't come back. They'd eaten all the food, and night had fallen, and still He hadn't come back. And They'd been frightened and had wandered about, trying to find Their way home in the dark, but had only got more and more lost. They'd fallen asleep at last, only to be awoken several times during the night by strange and frightening noises. The next day, They'd continued Their search, and had found a stream, which They'd followed, thinking that it might lead to the river that flowed past the village, until, after another night disturbed by scary sounds, They'd seen this house.

"And You haven't had anything to eat since the day before yesterday?"

"Oh, We ate some berries that We found," said Gretel, "but I think they made Us sick."

"What kind of berries?" asked Johanna, and tried to get Them to describe the bushes or trees that the berries had come from, but They didn't remember very well, so She described a few kinds until They said yees, They thought that those were the kinds They'd eaten. And She took Them to see an elder tree growing near the house, and They were quite sure, yes, They were certain that that was one of the kinds, and yes, that was the other, when She showed Them a tangle of blackberry brambles. "Well, You've been eating blackberries, and that's alright, though, of course, eating too many of them isn't very good for You; and also elderberries, which make a very nice jam or fruit drink: but if You eat them without boiling them first, they'll make You sick. Not very sick, but I expect You've both been throwing up and've had the shits, am I right?" (nods from the children) "But it's not too serious. It could've been worse. There are some berries in the forest that look quite tasty, but are really very poisonous. Oh, how can people live right on the edge of a forest and not teach Their children what's safe and what isn't safe to eat!" And She shook Her head. Anyway, the two of You look as if You could use a wash and a good rest. Then, when You've woken up, I'll have a nice soup ready for You. Now, is Your village the one with the wooden bridge across the river, or the one where the road splashes through the river where it's shallow?"

"The bridge, the bridge!" both children nodded together.

"Well then, after We've had some soup, We'll set off to take the two of You home. We should be." But here, Hänsel started crying.

"I don't think They want Us at home," He said after a time, still crying. "I think father brought Us into the forest to lose Us on purpose!"

"Why, whatever do You mean?" exclaimed Johanna.

And Hänsel began to tell how for some time, Their parents had been treating the two of Them especially harshly. They'd always been quite strict, and often rough too, "but for months now, tothom're always angry with Us, and nothing We do pleases Them."

"Yes," added Gretl, "and They're always fighting between the two of Them as well, shouting at each other, and sometimes throwing things. Unless They see Us: then They both start yelling at Us."

"My, My!" said Johanna.

"And that's not all," continued Hänsel. "Last week I woke up in the middle of the night, and went to get a drink of water. And I heard Them talking in the kitchen. Father was saying that They had to do something about Us – that They couldn't afford to keep Us. And that nobody'd want to take Us as apprentices, because We were good-for-nothings." And the two children looked down at the table, miserably unhappy.

"Well, I'll tell You what," said Johanna, "You get washed and have a rest, the two of You, and when You wake up, We'll have some soup. And this evening, when You're asleep again, I'll go into the village Myself and find out what I can find out."

The children were very tired, and after washing Themselves in the stream, They crawled into the bed that Johanna'd made up for Them in Her spare room, and were soon fast asleep.

That evening, the witch made a valerian tea to help the children to sleep soundly. And while They slept, true to Her word, She went through the forest to Their village. She'd lived in this forest for a long time, and was so used to walking in it that She knew it like an old friend. So it didn't take Her long to reach the village. When She did, She went straight to the house of one of Her friends, where She found out what She'd wanted to know.

The children had been right. The woodcutter had a reputation for being a hard man, and had few friends in the village. Recently, His business hadn't been going well for Him, He'd started cheating His customers, and business had got even worse. And He seemed to have been taking His bad feelings out on His wife and children. Of course His wife reacted by treating the children badly. And was it any wonder that the children were always fighting each other or bullying younger children in the village? But then, just a few days before, the woodcutter'd come back from the forest, bleeding, and had said that He and the two children – for He'd taken the children that day – had been attacked by bears, and that He'd been knocked down before the bears had carried the children off.

So Johanna went back to the forest, to Her house. It was quite dark, but Her feet knew the paths through the woods so well, that they took Her home, and all the time She was thinking. She wasn't surprised to hear that the woodcutter took out His bad feelings about the business on His wife and children. She'd been used to people who acted like this. Many years before, She'd lived in a village. But whenever something bad had happened to the farmers' crops or animals, or there was a lot of rain or a big accident, some silly people had started to blame all Their problems on the witch, on Johanna. And, even though many other people appreciated the good work She did, a few silly, angry people had made things so unpleasant for Her in the village, that She'd gone into the forest to build Herself a house and live there. And now She went into the villages when somebody needed Her help, or to see old friends, but She spent most of Her time in the forest.

Then She thought of Gretl and Hänsel. It'd obviously not do to send Them back home. They weren't wanted there. If They went back,, Their parents would just continue to ill-treat Them. And maybe They'd try again to 'lose' Them in the forest. They'd just have to stay with Her until She could come up with a better solution.

So Gretl and Hänsel stayed with Johanna, who tried to teach Them how to take care of Themselves in the forest, to recognise the different kinds of plants



that grow there, and to know which were good to eat, which were good for making teas. Teas for all kinds of different uses. She got Them to help Her make bread in the big oven. But They weren't very good learners, or very good helpers: They'd been told so often by Their parents that They were good-for-nothings that They believed it, and didn't try to learn. They were miserable most of the time, They fought over any little thing, and were always talking about life in the village. They missed Their home, even though They'd been unhappy there. And Johanna didn't really know what to do to cheer Them up or get Them interested in what was around Them. She wasn't used to living with children, and most of the children She knew (the children in the families that She visited, or who came to see Her in the forest when They needed help or were ill) were happier than these two, and easier to talk to. She'd acted as midwife at the birth of many of Them, and treated quite a few when They had broken bones or bruises, measles or fevers. They'd come to trust Her, and respect Her great knowledge and healing power. They liked Her in spite of Her strange ways and Her strange appearance. And They came to learn that Her ways and appearance weren't so strange after all – they were only different.

One day, an old man came to Johanna's house for another pot of the special ointment She made for easing the pain of rheumatic joints. And Häns| heard Him say, as He left, "Well, thank You very much, Witch Johanna. I don't know what I'd do without this ointment. Why, it's worth it's weight in gold and more! Goodbye, now!" And off He went.

Now, this was the first time that either of the children had heard Johanna being called a witch. They'd just thought that She was a crazy old woman who lived in the forest, all alone, talking to the plants, to the goats and chickens She kept as if They were people, calling Them Her friends, and acting in other strange ways. The two children talked together about this, and reminded each other of the stories that some people in the village told about witches: how They were wicked and tricked people, then turned Them into toadstools or frogs. Their parents had used to tell Them that if They didn't behave Themselves, the wicked witch'd come out of the woods to carry Them off to eat. "She's been lying to Us all this time. She's really a witch, and She's fattening Us up to eat!" whispered Häns|. "Remember those gingerbread children?" asked Gret|. "And that's probably why She talks to the trees and animals: they're people that She's cast a spell on! Oh, no! Do You think She'll turn Us into chickens, or just eat Us as We are?"

"We'll run away," answered Häns|, "and go back home back home. She was probably lying about Father and Mother, too."

"But how can We find Our way back? And She knows the forest so well, She'll be able to catch Us and bring Us back."

"We'll have to wait for Our chance. But it'd better come soon: who knows how soon She's going to do whatever She's been planning?"

They|se Themselves, the wicked witch would
The very next time that Johanna was baking bread, Häns| saw His chance. The witch was pushing some burning sticks into the middle of the oven, where there was some more wood to catch alight. As She was bending over to push the sticks further back, Häns| rushed up behind Her, and pushed Her into the oven. He shouted for Gret|, who came running, and together They pushed Her all the way in, slammed the metal door shut, and bolted it.

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Johanna had been taken completely by surprise, and, after the first shock, thought that They were playing a very silly joke. But then They began to chant: "Ha, ha! Wicked witch! You tried to trick Us, but We've tricked You instead!"

Then They ran into the other room, where Hänsl took two of the pots of ointment from the shelf, and handed one to Gretl.

"That old man said it was worth more than gold. Now Father won't have to work anymore, and We'll all be rich!" And They ran out of the house and into the forest, followed by the sound of the old witch banging on the door of the oven, and Her muffled cries: "Oh, Children! Oh, My Children! Let me out! Let me out!"

After wandering in the forest for two more days, and accidentally breaking one of the pots of ointment, They were found by a hunter, who took Them home to Their village, where They told everybody that the wicked witch in the forest had tricked Them, and kept Them prisoner, and was fattening Them up to eat Them. Yes, and that She turned children into gingerbread. But They had thrown Her into the oven and escaped.

And some people believed every word. But when They were shown the ointment, They explained that it was only rheumatic ointment. It wasn't worth its weight in gold at all: that was just a manner of speaking. The pot They had left would be worth about two dozen eggs.

Which was just what Their mother dropped when She saw Them.