

A STORY FOR CHILDREN. TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN.



HERE was once a little girl, who was named Gretchen, so good and cheerful that she was a favourite with everybody. This girl had a friend called Hilda, who was also a very good child, and they greatly loved each other.

It was in winter, and the snow was lying deep upon the hills and fields, when Hilda fell sick, and her parents became very anxious on her account. She was quite unable to eat, and she was sometimes burning hot and at others shivering with cold; and, though she had several doctors and much medicine, she did not get any better.

Whenever any of her young friends came to see her she would often say:—

“Do give me some strawberries. Which of you will go and find me some nice strawberries, then I shall get well again?”

If her father and mother said: “Dear Hilda, it is now winter, and therefore there are no strawberries to be found,” Hilda would raise herself up in bed, and say:—

“Far away over the high hills there is a green slope: there I can see plenty of strawberries. Who will go and fetch them for me?—only one of the nice red berries—only one!”

The children left the room, and then, talking to each other, said:—

“What foolish things Hilda spoke of to day.”

But Gretchen was much troubled that she could not help her dear sick friend. All at once she said:—

“Who will come with me over the mountains to look for strawberries? It will be some comfort to poor Hilda if she sees us going over the hills and seeking for them.”

But not one of the children would agree to go, and all but Gretchen went straight home.

So Gretchen had to set out alone, and went through a forest. A small, trodden footpath led up the hill and down again on the other side through another wood of tall oaks and beeches.

She came to a place where three paths met; she stood still a moment, not knowing which to take, when, quite suddenly, she saw a little man approaching through the trees. He had a green hat upon his head, with a feather as white as snow. His dress was made of the softest swansdown; he carried an ivory bow on his shoulder and a small silver hunting-horn hung at his side. “What do you want here, my little girl?” he said, with a friendly voice.



"Ah!" said Gretchen, "I have a sick friend who longs for strawberries and says they will make her well again. I know very well that it is winter; but I think I shall be able to find some in spite of that, and do not intend to return home empty-handed."

"Come with me," said the little hunter. "I will show you a place where you will find what you are come in search of."

He went on before her and led her through many winding paths in the thicket, till at length the forest appeared lighter, and a warm, spring-like air met them, and at last they stood before a grated iron door. The little man unlocked it, saying:—

"Now, if you go straight forward you will find what you seek."

Gretchen would have thanked the good-natured little man, but he had vanished instantly. She went on a few steps farther, and came to a green slope.

Here winter had disappeared. The sun shone warm in the cloudless blue sky; the birds sang merrily; yet a few steps farther, and she found the ground covered with the finest strawberries. How the good little maiden rejoiced! She quickly gathered a large bunch, and hastened back to take them to her dear sick friend.

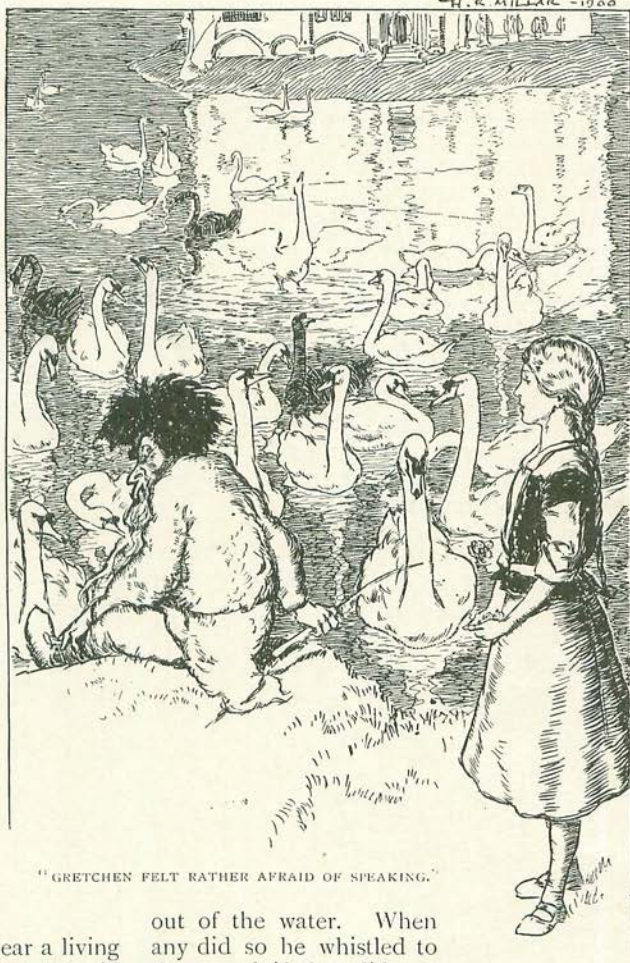
But somehow it happened that in her haste she could not find her way back. She came to the iron palisades which surrounded the wood; but all her attempts to find the gate were useless. She ran in great anxiety this way and that; but no gate was to be seen. Then she heard the sound of a whistle at a distance.

"Thank God!" she said, "I hear a living sound; someone is probably there who will show me the way." She hastened through the thicket, and was much astonished at what she saw.

At the end of a beautiful green meadow there was a lake, in which many stately swans, both black and white, were swimming gracefully. In the middle of the lake there was a small island, upon which was a fine castle, surrounded by flower-gardens and pleasure-grounds. As she approached the

shore of the lake she saw a little man sitting, but with a less friendly aspect than the little hunter in the forest. He had a large head, with rough hair, and a grey beard so long that it reached his knees. In one hand he held a whistle and in the other a switch.

Gretchen felt rather afraid of speaking to him, and stood still at a little distance. She soon observed that his office was to take care of the swans and prevent them from going



"GRETCHEN FELT RATHER AFRAID OF SPEAKING."

out of the water. When any did so he whistled to them, and if they did not obey him, then he employed his long switch, which had the property of stretching out or becoming shorter, just as he pleased. Except this swan-herd she saw no one, and there was no bridge over to the castle. So she took courage and said to the greybeard, "Good friend, cannot you show me the gate which will lead me out of the forest?"

The greybeard looked at her in surprise, but did not speak; he merely made her



understand by signs that she should sit down; which she did. Then he whistled, and presently came a large swan from the lake, which laid itself down before him. The little old man seated himself on the swan's back, threw one of his arms round its neck, and away the trusty bird swam with him across the lake; there he alighted, and went into the castle.

Gretchen waited some time, curious to see what would happen; but she did not feel afraid. At length she saw four black swans swim from a creek of the lake, harnessed to a beautiful little green boat adorned with silver. The covering of the boat was formed like a pair of wings, and shaded two small seats, of which the foremost ended in the shape of a long swan's neck.

There sat the greybeard, who looked much more agreeable than before. He gave Gretchen a sign to step in, which she complied with, and they sailed gently across the lake; and when they reached the shore they left the boat, and the old man led her into the palace.

In a light blue marble hall the King of the Swans sat upon his throne, a bright golden crown upon his head, and many richly dressed attendants surrounded him.

"What dost thou seek in my kingdom?" inquired the King.

"I have found what I sought," answered Gretchen; "but I pray you to let someone direct me in the way home, for I find that I have wandered in the wrong direction."

"Very well," said the King, "it shall be done; but it is the custom for all who enter this kingdom to give a present to the King of the Swans. What hast thou to offer?"

"Alas!" replied Gretchen, "I have nothing at all. If I had known I would have brought something with me from home."

"Thou hast strawberries," rejoined the King; "and I like strawberries above all things. Give me thy strawberries, and then one of my servants shall show thee the way home."

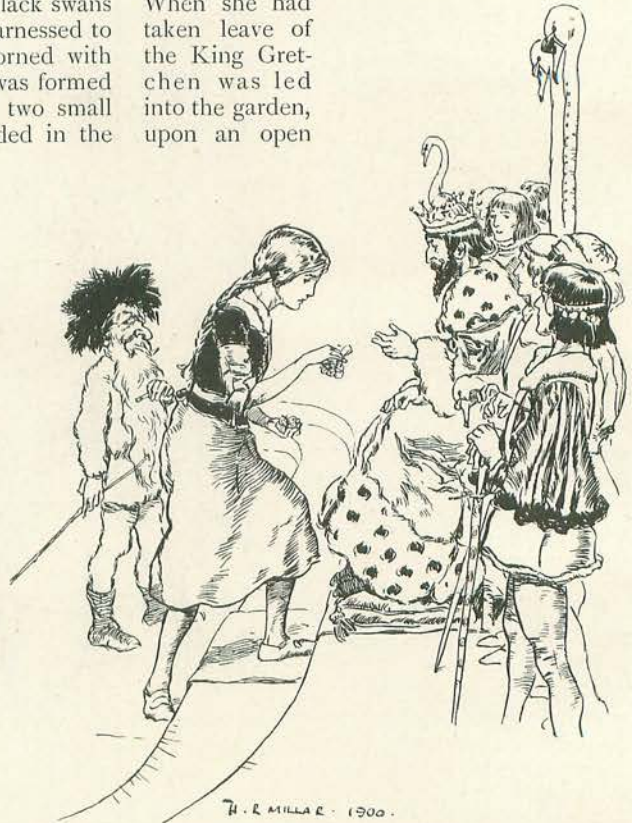
"Alas! I cannot give you all," continued Gretchen; "the strawberries are for my sick friend, who must die if she has no straw-

berries. But I will readily give you some of them."

With these words she took several fine strawberries, with the stem of leaves; tied them in a bunch with the ribbon which confined her hair, and handed them to the King.

"Thanks, my little daughter," said the King. "Now go—this man will attend thee; but do exactly what he bids thee."

The old swan-herd waited ready for her. When she had taken leave of the King Gretchen was led into the garden, upon an open



"SHE HANDED THEM TO THE KING."

lawn; a fine white handkerchief was tied over her eyes; the old man whistled and took her by the arm. She heard a rustling of wings; she felt the wind blow in her face, and felt colder and colder; but she could not see anything.

At last the sound of wings ceased, and the old man set her upon the ground. "Now, my child, count twenty; then take off the bandage, but not before. Preserve it carefully; it will be required of thee at the proper time."

She counted twenty; and, when she had taken off the bandage, she found herself



standing on the hill opposite the house of her friend Hilda, with frost and snow all around. She looked up to the sky, and there beheld a great bird, and the old man sitting upon it with his arms round its neck.

Then she hastened to her friend Hilda, who was still in bed, repeating the words, "Who will bring me strawberries to make me well?"

"There they are," said Gretchen, and handed the bunch to Hilda. Everyone was astonished and wanted to know where Gretchen had got them. But she had hardly begun to relate her wonderful adventures before Hilda had eaten all the strawberries. Then the colour returned to her face and strength to her limbs, and Hilda said, "Thank God! and, dear Gretchen, now I am quite well."

She rose up, and was really quite restored. Who can say how the parents thanked and blessed Gretchen? She was a truly good and brave girl, and when she grew up everyone wished their children to be like her.

One day, as Gretchen was walking in the meadows with her mother, she looked up and saw a black speck in the sky, which became larger as it descended; and at last she saw that it was a prodigious black swan, far larger than our swans, and that it was flying down towards her. There was a tent with golden gauze curtains upon the swan's back; and when the swan had gently alighted on the ground there came out of the tent a little man with friendly eyes—it was the

King of the Swans. "I have heard," said he, "that in a short time thou wilt celebrate a joyful festival, and, as thou gavest me a present when a child, and hast grown up so good and brave and pure a maiden, I will make thee a present in return."

Saying these words, he placed a costly



"HE PLACED A COSTLY CROWN UPON HER HEAD."

crown upon her head. It was formed of gold, wrought in the form of strawberry leaves, and between the leaves there sparkled red rubies, diamonds, and pure amethysts, and the edge was a beautiful golden band.

Gretchen and her mother could hardly thank the King for astonishment. But he did not give them time. The swan rose majestically in the air and flew towards his home, and at last disappeared as a little spot in the clouds.

Many boys and girls have gone over the hills since that time to seek the land of the swans, and to find strawberries in winter, but have not found them. Perhaps they were *more selfish* than and not so good as Gretchen.