

Strong Hans

There were once a man and a woman who had an only child, and lived quite alone in a solitary valley. It came to pass that the mother once went into the wood to gather branches of fir, and took with her little Hans, who was just two years old. As it was spring-time, and the child took pleasure in the many-coloured flowers, she went still further onwards with him into the forest. Suddenly two robbers sprang out of the thicket, seized the mother and child, and carried them far away into the black forest, where no one ever came from one year's end to another. The poor woman urgently begged the robbers to set her and her child free, but their hearts were made of stone, they would not listen to her prayers and entreaties, and drove her on farther by force. After they had worked their way through bushes and briars for about two miles, they came to a rock where there was a door, at which the robbers knocked and it opened at once. They had to go through a long dark passage, and at last came into a great cavern, which was lighted by a fire which burnt on the hearth. On the wall hung swords, sabres, and other deadly weapons which gleamed in the light, and in the midst stood a black table at which four other robbers were sitting gambling, and the captain sat at the head of it. As soon as he saw the woman he came and spoke to her, and told her to be at ease and have no fear, they would do nothing to hurt her, but she must look after the house-keeping, and if she kept everything in order, she should not fare ill with them. Thereupon they gave her something to eat, and showed her a bed where she might sleep with her child.

The woman stayed many years with the robbers, and Hans grew tall and strong. His mother told him stories, and taught him to read an old book of tales about knights which she found in the cave. When Hans was nine years old, he made himself a strong club out of a branch of fir, hid it behind the bed, and then went to his mother and said, "Dear mother, pray tell me who is my father; I must and will know." His mother was silent and would not tell him, that he might not become home-sick; moreover she knew that the godless robbers would not let him go away, but it almost broke her heart that Hans should not go to his father. In the night, when the robbers came home from their robbing expedition, Hans brought out his club,

stood before the captain, and said, "I now wish to know who is my father, and if thou dost not at once tell me I will strike thee down." Then the captain laughed, and gave Hans such a box on the ear that he rolled under the table. Hans got up again, held his tongue, and thought, "I will wait another year and then try again, perhaps I shall do better then." When the year was over, he brought out his club again, rubbed the dust off it, looked at it well, and said, "It is a stout strong club." At night the robbers came home, drank one jug of wine after another, and their heads began to be heavy. Then Hans brought out his club, placed himself before the captain, and asked him who was his father? But the captain again gave him such a vigorous box on the ear that Hans rolled under the table, but it was not long before he was up again, and beat the captain and the robbers so with his club, that they could no longer move either their arms or their legs. His mother stood in a corner full of admiration of his bravery and strength. When Hans had done his work, he went to his mother, and said, "Now I have shown myself to be in earnest, but now I must also know who is my father." - "Dear Hans," answered the mother, "come, we will go and seek him until we find him." She took from the captain the key to the entrance-door, and Hans fetched a great meal-sack and packed into it gold and silver, and whatsoever else he could find that was beautiful, until it was full, and then he took it on his back. They left the cave, but how Hans did open his eyes when he came out of the darkness into daylight, and saw the green forest, and the flowers, and the birds, and the morning sun in the sky. He stood there and wondered at everything just as if he had not been very wise. His mother looked for the way home, and when they had walked for a couple of hours, they got safely into their lonely valley and to their little house. The father was sitting in the doorway. He wept for joy when he recognized his wife and heard that Hans was his son, for he had long regarded them both as dead. But Hans, although he was not twelve years old, was a head taller than his father. They went into the little room together, but Hans had scarcely put his sack on the bench by the stove, than the whole house began to crack the bench broke down and then the floor, and the heavy sack fell through into the cellar.

"God save us!" cried the father, "what's that? Now thou hast broken our little house to pieces!" - "Don't grow any grey hairs about that, dear father," answered Hans; "there, in that sack, is more than is wanting for a new house." The father and Hans at once began to build a new house; to buy cattle and land, and to keep a farm. Hans ploughed the fields, and when he followed the plough and pushed it into the ground, the bullocks had scarcely any need to draw. The next spring, Hans said, "Keep all the money and get a walking-stick that weighs a hundred-weight made for me that I may go a-travelling." When the wished-for stick was ready, he left his father's house, went forth, and came to a deep, dark forest. There he heard something crunching and cracking, looked round, and saw a fir-tree which was wound round like a rope from the bottom to the top, and when he looked upwards he saw a great fellow who had laid hold of the tree and was twisting it like a willow-wand. "Hollo!" cried Hans, "what art thou doing up there?" the fellow replied, "I got some faggots together yesterday and am twisting a rope for them." - "That is what I like," thought Hans, "he has some strength," and he called to him, "Leave that alone, and come with me." The fellow came down, and he was taller by a whole head than Hans, and Hans was not little. "Thy name is now Fir-twister," said Hans to him. Thereupon they went further and heard something knocking and hammering with such force that the ground shook at every stroke. Shortly afterwards they came to a mighty rock, before which a giant was standing and striking great pieces of it away with his fist. When Hans asked what he was about, he answered, "At night, when I want to sleep, bears, wolves, and other vermin of that kind come, which sniff and snuffle about me and won't let me rest; so I want to build myself a house and lay myself inside it, so that I may have some peace." - "Oh, indeed," thought Hans, "I can make use of this one also;" and said to him, "Leave thy house-building alone, and go with me; thou shalt be called Rock-splitter." The man consented, and they all three roamed through the forest, and wherever they went the wild beasts were terrified, and ran away from them. In the evening they came to an old deserted castle, went up into it, and laid themselves down in the hall to sleep. The next morning Hans went into the garden. It had run quite wild, and was full of thorns and bushes. And as he was thus walking round about, a wild boar rushed at him; he, however, gave it such a blow with his club that it

fell directly. He took it on his shoulders and carried it in, and they put it on a spit, roasted it, and enjoyed themselves. Then they arranged that each day, in turn, two should go out hunting, and one should stay at home, and cook nine pounds of meat for each of them. Fir-twister stayed at home the first, and Hans and Rock-splitter went out hunting. When Fir-twister was busy cooking, a little shrivelled-up old mannikin came to him in the castle, and asked for some meat. "Be off, sly hypocrite," he answered, "thou needest no meat." But how astonished Fir-twister was when the little insignificant dwarf sprang up at him, and belaboured him so with his fists that he could not defend himself, but fell on the ground and gasped for breath! The dwarf did not go away until he had thoroughly vented his anger on him. When the two others came home from hunting, Fir-twister said nothing to them of the old mannikin and of the blows which he himself had received, and thought, "When they stay at home, they may just try their chance with the little scrubbing-brush;" and the mere thought of that gave him pleasure already.

The next day Rock-splitter stayed at home, and he fared just as Fir-twister had done, he was very ill-treated by the dwarf because he was not willing to give him any meat. When the others came home in the evening, Fir-twister easily saw what he had suffered, but both kept silence, and thought, "Hans also must taste some of that soup."

Hans, who had to stay at home the next day, did his work in the kitchen as it had to be done, and as he was standing skimming the pan, the dwarf came and without more ado demanded a bit of meat. Then Hans thought, "He is a poor wretch, I will give him some of my share, that the others may not run short," and handed him a bit. When the dwarf had devoured it, he again asked for some meat, and good-natured Hans gave it to him, and told him it was a handsome piece, and that he was to be content with it. But the dwarf begged again for the third time. "Thou art shameless!" said Hans, and gave him none. Then the malicious dwarf wanted to spring on him and treat him as he had treated Fir-twister and Rock-splitter, but he had got to the wrong man. Hans, without exerting himself much, gave him a couple of blows which made him jump down the castle steps. Hans was about to run after him, but fell right over him, for he was so tall. When he rose up again, the dwarf had got the start of him. Hans hurried after him as far as the forest, and saw him slip

into a hole in the rock. Hans now went home, but he had marked the spot. When the two others came back, they were surprised that Hans was so well. He told them what had happened, and then they no longer concealed how it had fared with them. Hans laughed and said, "It served you quite right; why were you so greedy with your meat? It is a disgrace that you who are so big should have let yourselves be beaten by the dwarf." Thereupon they took a basket and a rope, and all three went to the hole in the rock into which the dwarf had slipped, and let Hans and his club down in the basket. When Hans had reached the bottom, he found a door, and when he opened it a maiden was sitting there who was lovely as any picture, nay, so beautiful that no words can express it, and by her side sat the dwarf and grinned at Hans like a sea-cat! She, however, was bound with chains, and looked so mournfully at him that Hans felt great pity for her, and thought to himself, "Thou must deliver her out of the power of the wicked dwarf," and gave him such a blow with his club that he fell down dead. Immediately the chains fell from the maiden, and Hans was enraptured with her beauty. She told him she was a King's daughter whom a savage count had stolen away from her home, and imprisoned there among the rocks, because she would have nothing to say to him. The count had, however, set the dwarf as a watchman, and he had made her bear misery and vexation enough. And now Hans placed the maiden in the basket and had her drawn up; the basket came down again, but Hans did not trust his two companions, and thought, "They have already shown themselves to be false, and told me nothing about the dwarf; who knows what design they may have against me?" So he put his club in the basket, and it was lucky he did; for when the basket was half-way up, they let it fall again, and if Hans had really been sitting in it he would have been killed. But now he did not know how he was to work his way out of the depths, and when he turned it over and over in his mind he found no counsel. "It is indeed sad," said he to himself, "that I have to waste away down here," and as he was thus walking backwards and forwards, he once more came to the little chamber where the maiden had been sitting, and saw that the dwarf had a ring on his finger which shone and sparkled. Then he drew it off and put it on, and when he turned it round on his finger, he suddenly heard something rustle over his head. He looked up and saw spirits of the air hovering above, who told him he was

their master, and asked what his desire might be? Hans was at first struck dumb, but afterwards he said that they were to carry him above again. They obeyed instantly, and it was just as if he had flown up himself. When, however, he was above again, he found no one in sight. Fir-twister and Rock-splitter had hurried away, and had taken the beautiful maiden with them. But Hans turned the ring, and the spirits of the air came and told him that the two were on the sea. Hans ran and ran without stopping, until he came to the sea-shore, and there far, far out on the water, he perceived a little boat in which his faithless comrades were sitting; and in fierce anger he leapt, without thinking what he was doing, club in hand into the water, and began to swim, but the club, which weighed a hundredweight, dragged him deep down until he was all but drowned. Then in the very nick of time he turned his ring, and immediately the spirits of the air came and bore him as swift as lightning into the boat. He swung his club and gave his wicked comrades the reward they merited and threw them into the water, and then he sailed with the beautiful maiden, who had been in the greatest alarm, and whom he delivered for the second time, home to her father and mother, and married her, and all rejoiced exceedingly.

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