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Our Little German Cousin



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Preface

When the word Germany comes to our minds, we think at once of ruined castles, fairies, music, and soldiers. Why is it?

First, as to the castles. Here and there along the banks of the River Rhine, as well as elsewhere throughout the country, the traveller is constantly finding himself near some massive stone ruin. It seems ever ready to tell stories of long ago, – of brave knights who defended its walls, of beautiful princesses saved from harm, of sturdy boys and sweet-faced girls who once played in its gardens. For Germany is the home of an ancient and brave people, who have often been called upon to face powerful enemies.

Next, as to the fairies. It seems as though the dark forests of Germany, the quiet valleys, and the banks of the beautiful rivers, were the natural homes of the fairy-folk, the gnomes and the elves, the water-sprites and the sylphs. Our German cousins listen with wonder and delight to the legends of fearful giants and enchanted castles, and many of the stories they know so well have been translated into other languages for their cousins of distant lands, who are as fond of them as the blue-eyed children of Germany.

As to the music, it seems as though every boy and girl in the whole country drew in the spirit of song with the air they breathe. They sing with a love of what they are singing, they play as though the tune were a part of their very selves. Some of the finest musicians have been Germans, and their gifts to the world have been bountiful.

As for soldiers, we know that every man in Germany must stand ready to defend his country. He must serve his time in drilling and training for war. He is a necessary part of that Fatherland he loves so dearly.

Our fair-haired German cousins are busy workers and hard students. They must learn quite early in life that they have duties as well as pleasures, and the duties cannot be set aside or forgotten. But they love games and holidays as dearly as the children of our own land.

CHAPTER I. CHRISTMAS

"Don't look! There, now it's done!" cried Bertha.

It was two nights before Christmas. Bertha was in the big living-room with her mother and older sister. Each sat as close as possible to the candle-light, and was busily working on something in her lap.

But, strange to say, they did not face each other. They were sitting back to back.

"What an unsociable way to work," we think. "Is that the way Germans spend the evenings together?"

No, indeed. But Christmas was near at hand, and the air was brimful of secrets.

Bertha would not let her mother discover what she was working for her, for all the world. And the little girl's mother was preparing surprises for each of the children. All together, the greatest fun of the year was getting ready for Christmas.

"Mother, you will make some of those lovely cakes this year, won't you?" asked Bertha's sister Gretchen.

"Certainly, my child. It would not be Christmas without them. Early to-morrow morning, you and Bertha must shell and chop the nuts. I will use the freshest eggs and will beat the dough as long as my arms will let me."

"Did you always know how to make those cakes, mamma?" asked Bertha.

"My good mother taught me when I was about your age, my dear. You may watch me to-morrow, and perhaps you will learn how to make them. It is never too early to begin to learn to cook."

"When the city girls get through school, they go away from home and study housekeeping don't they?" asked Gretchen.

"Yes, and many girls who don't live in cities. But I hardly think you will ever be sent away. We are busy people here in our little village, and you will have to be contented with learning what your mother can teach you.

"I shall be satisfied with that, I know. But listen! I can hear father and Hans coming."

"Then put up your work, children, and set the supper-table."

The girls jumped up and hurriedly put the presents away. It did not take long to set the supper-table, for the meals in this little home were very simple, and supper was the simplest of all. A large plate of black bread and a pitcher of sour milk were brought by the mother, and the family gathered around the table.

The bread wasn't really black, of course. It was dark brown and very coarse. It was made of rye meal. Bertha and Gretchen had never seen any white bread in their lives, for they had never yet been far away from their own little village. Neither had their brother Hans.

They were happy, healthy children. They all had blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and fair hair, like their father and mother.

"You don't know what I've got for you, Hans," said Bertha, laughing and showing a sweet little dimple in her chin.

Hans bent down and kissed her. He never could resist that dimple, and Bertha was his favourite sister.

"I don't know what it is, but I do know that it must be something nice," said her brother.

When the supper-table had been cleared, the mother and girls took out their sewing again, while Hans worked at some wood-carving. The father took an old violin from its case and began to play some of the beautiful airs of Germany.

When he came to the "Watch on the Rhine," the mother's work dropped from her hands as she and the children joined in the song that stirs every German heart.

"Oh, dear! it seems as though Christmas Eve never would come," sighed Bertha, as she settled herself for sleep beside her sister.

It was quite a cold night, but they were cosy and warm. Why shouldn't they be? They were covered with a down feather bed. Their mother had the same kind of cover on her own bed, and so had Hans.

But Christmas Eve did come at last, although it seemed so far off to Bertha the night before. Hans and his father brought in the bough of a yew-tree, and it was set up in the living-room.

The decorating came next. Tiny candles were fastened on all the twigs. Sweetmeats and nuts were hung from the branches.

"How beautiful! How beautiful!" exclaimed the children when it was all trimmed, and they walked around it with admiring eyes.

None of the presents were placed on the tree, for that is not the fashion in Germany. Each little gift had been tied up in paper and marked with the name of the one for whom it was intended.

When everything was ready, there was a moment of quiet while the candles were being lighted. Then Bertha's father began to give out the presents, and there was a great deal of laughing and joking as the bundles were opened.

There was a new red skirt for Bertha. Her mother had made it, for she knew the child was fond of pretty dresses. Besides this, she had a pair of warm woollen mittens which Gretchen had knit for her. Hans had made and carved a doll's cradle for each of the girls.

Everybody was happy and contented. They sang songs and cracked nuts and ate the Christmas cakes to their hearts' content.

"I think I like the ones shaped like gnomes the best," said Hans. "They have such comical little faces. Do you know, every time I go out in the forest, it seems as though I might meet a party of gnomes hunting for gold."

"I like the animal cakes best," said Bertha. "The deer are such graceful creatures, and I like to bite off the horns and legs, one at a time."

"A long time ago," said their father, "they used to celebrate Christmas a little different from the way we now do. The presents were all carried to a man in the village who dressed himself in a white robe, and a big wig made of flax. He covered his face with a mask, and then went from house to house. The grown people received him with great honours. He called for the children and gave them the presents their parents had brought to him.

"But these presents were all given according to the way the children had behaved during the year. If they had been good and tried hard, they had the gifts they deserved. But if they had been naughty and disobedient, it was not a happy time for them."

"I don't believe the children were very fond of him," cried Hans. "They must have been too much afraid of him."

"That is true," said his father. "But now, let us play some games. Christmas comes but once a year, and you have all been good children."

The room soon rang with the shouts of Hans and his sisters. They played "Blind Man's Buff" and other games. Their father took part in all of them as though he were a boy again. The good mother looked on with pleasant smiles.

Bedtime came only too soon. But just before the children said good night, the father took Hans one side and talked seriously yet lovingly with him. He told the boy of the faults he must still fight against. He spoke also of the improvement he had made during the year.

At the same time the mother gave words of kind advice to her little daughters. She told them to keep up good courage; to be busy and patient in the year to come.

"My dear little girls," she whispered, as she kissed them, "I love to see you happy in your play. But the good Lord who cares for us has given us all some work to do in this world. Be faithful in doing yours."

CHAPTER II. TOY-MAKING

"Wake up, Bertha. Come, Gretchen. You will have to hurry, for it is quite late," called their mother. It was one morning about a week after Christmas.

"Oh dear, I am so sleepy, and my bed is nice and warm," thought Bertha.

But she jumped up and rubbed her eyes and began to dress, without waiting to be called a second time. Her mother was kind and loving, but she had taught her children to obey without a question.

Both little girls had long, thick hair. It must be combed and brushed and braided with great care. Each one helped the other. They were soon dressed, and ran down-stairs.

As soon as the breakfast was over and the room made tidy, every one in the family sat down to work. Bertha's father was a toy-maker. He had made wooden images of Santa Claus all his life. His wife and children helped him.

When Bertha was only five years old, she began to carve the legs of these Santa Claus dolls. It was a queer sight to see the little girl's chubby fingers at their work. Now that she was nine years old, she still carved legs for Santa Claus in her spare moments.

Gretchen always made arms, while Hans worked on a still different part of the bodies. The father and mother carved the heads and finished the little images that afterward gave such delight to children in other lands.

Bertha lives in the Black Forest. That name makes you think at once of a dark and gloomy place. The woods on the hills are dark, to be sure, but the valleys nestling between are bright and cheerful when the sun shines down and pours its light upon them.

Bertha's village is in just such a valley. The church stands on the slope above the little homes. It seems to say, "Look upward, my children, to the blue heavens, and do not fear, even when the mists fill the valley and the storm is raging over your heads."

All the people in the village seem happy and contented. They work hard, and their pay is small, but there are no beggars among them.

Toys are made in almost every house. Every one in a family works on the same kind of toy, just as it is in Bertha's home.

The people think: "It would be foolish to spend one's time in learning new things. The longer a person works at making one kind of toy, the faster he can make them, and he can earn more money."

One of Bertha's neighbours makes nothing but Noah's Arks. Another makes toy tables, and still another dolls' chairs.

Bertha often visits a little friend who helps her father make cuckoo-clocks. Did you ever see one of these curious clocks? As each hour comes around, a little bird comes outside the case. Then it flaps its wings and sings "cuckoo" in a soft, sweet voice as many times as there are strokes to the hour. It is great fun to watch for the little bird and hear its soft notes.

Perhaps you wonder what makes the bird come out at just the right time. It is done by certain machinery inside the clock. But, however it is, old people as well as children seem to enjoy the cuckoo-clocks of Germany.

"Some day, when you are older, you shall go to the fair at Easter time," Bertha's father has promised her.

"Is that at Leipsic, where our Santa Claus images go?" asked his little daughter.

"Yes, my dear, and toys from many other parts of our country. There you will see music-boxes and dolls' pianos and carts and trumpets and engines and ships. These all come from the mining-towns.

"But I know what my little Bertha would care for most. She would best like to see the beautiful wax dolls that come from Sonneberg."

"Yes, indeed," cried Bertha. "The dear, lovely dollies with yellow hair like mine. I would love every one of them. I wish I could go to Sonneberg just to see the dolls."

"I wonder what makes the wax stick on," said Gretchen, who came into the room while her father and Bertha were talking.

"After the heads have been moulded into shape, they are dipped into pans of boiling wax," her father told her. "The cheap dolls are dipped only once, but the expensive ones have several baths before they are finished. The more wax that is put on, the handsomer the dolls are."

"Then comes the painting. One girl does nothing but paint the lips. Another one does the cheeks. Still another, the eyebrows. Even then Miss Dolly looks like a bald-headed baby till her wig is fastened in its place."

"I like the yellow hair best," said Bertha. "But it isn't real, is it, papa?"

"I suppose you mean to ask, 'Did it ever grow on people's heads?' my dear. No. It is the wool of a kind of goat. But the black hair is real hair. Most dolls, however, wear light wigs. People usually prefer them."

"Do little girls in Sonneberg help make the dolls, just as Bertha and I help you on the Santa Claus images?" asked Gretchen.

"Certainly. They fill the bodies with sawdust, and do other easy things. But they go to school, too, just as you and Bertha do. Lessons must not be slighted."

"If I had to help make dolls, just as I do these images," said Gretchen to her sister as their father went out and left the children together, "I don't believe I'd care for the handsomest one in the whole toy fair. I'd be sick of the very sight of them."

"Look at the time, Bertha. See, we must stop our work and start for school," exclaimed Gretchen.

It was only seven o'clock in the morning, but school would begin in half an hour. These little German girls had to study longer and harder than their American cousins. They spent at least an hour a day more in their schoolrooms.

As they trudged along the road, they passed a little stream which came trickling down the hillside.

"I wonder if there is any story about that brook," said Bertha. "There's a story about almost everything in our dear old country, I'm sure."

"You have heard father tell about the stream flowing down the side of the Kandel, haven't you?" asked Gretchen.

"Yes, I think so. But I don't remember it very well. What is the story, Gretchen?"

"You know the Kandel is one of the highest peaks in the Black Forest. You've seen it, Bertha."

"Yes, of course, but tell the story, Gretchen."

"Well, then, once upon a time there was a poor little boy who had no father or mother. He had to tend cattle on the side of the Kandel. At that time there was a deep lake at the summit of the mountain. But the lake had no outlet."

"The people who lived in the valley below often said, 'Dear me! how glad we should be if we could only have plenty of fresh water. But no stream flows near us. If we could only bring some of the water down from the lake!'"

"They were afraid, however, to make a channel out of the lake. The water might rush down with such force as to destroy their village. They feared to disturb it."

"Now, it came to pass that the Evil One had it in his heart to destroy these people. He thought he could do it very easily if the rocky wall on the side of the lake could be broken down. There was only one way in which this could be done. An innocent boy must be found and got to do it."

"It was a long time before such an one could be found. But at last the Evil One came across an orphan boy who tended cattle on the mountainside. The poor little fellow was on his way home. He was feeling very sad, for he was thinking of his ragged clothes and his scant food.

"Ah ha!" cried the Evil One to himself, 'here is the very boy.'

"He changed himself at once so he had the form and dress of a hunter, and stepped up to the lad with a pleasant smile.

"Poor little fellow! What is the matter? And what can I do for you?" he said, in his most winning manner.

"The boy thought he had found a friend, and told his story.

"Do not grieve any longer. There is plenty of gold and silver in these very mountains. I will show you how to become rich," said the Evil One. 'Meet me here early to-morrow morning and bring a good strong team with you. I will help you get the gold.'

"The boy went home with a glad heart. You may be sure he did not oversleep the next morning. Before it was light, he had harnessed four oxen belonging to his master, and started for the summit of the mountain.

"The hunter, who was waiting for him, had already fastened a metal ring around the wall that held in the waters of the lake.

"Fasten the oxen to that ring," commanded the hunter, 'and the rock will split open.'

"Somehow or other, the boy did not feel pleased at what he was told to do. Yet he obeyed, and started the oxen. But as he did so, he cried, 'Do this in the name of God!'

"At that very instant the sky grew black as night, the thunder rolled and the lightning flashed. And not only this, for at the same time the mountain shook and rumbled as though a mighty force were tearing it apart."

"What became of the poor boy?" asked Bertha.

"He fell senseless to the ground, while the oxen in their fright rushed headlong down the mountainside. But you needn't get excited, Bertha, no harm was done. The boy was saved as well as the village, because he had pulled in the name of God.

"The rock did not split entirely. It broke apart just enough to let out a tiny stream of water, which began to flow down the mountainside.

"When the boy came to his senses, the sky was clear and beautiful once more. The sun was shining brightly, and the hunter was nowhere to be seen. But the stream of water was running down the mountainside.

"A few minutes afterward, the boy's master came hurrying up the slope. He was frightened by the dreadful sounds he had heard. But when he saw the waterfall, he was filled with delight.

"Every one in the village will rejoice," he exclaimed, 'for now we shall never want for water.'

"Then the little boy took courage and told the story of his meeting the hunter and what he had done.

"It is well you did it in the name of the Lord," cried his master. 'If you had not, our village would have been destroyed, and every one of us would have been drowned.'"

"See! the children are going into the schoolhouse, Gretchen. We must not be late. Let's run," said Bertha.

The two little girls stopped talking, and hurried so fast that they entered the schoolhouse and were sitting in their seats in good order before the schoolmaster struck his bell.

CHAPTER III.

THE WICKED BISHOP

"The Rhine is the loveliest river in the world. I know it must be," said Bertha.

"Of course it is," answered her brother. "I've seen it, and I ought to know. And father thinks so, too. He says it is not only beautiful, but it is also bound into the whole history of our country. Think of the battles that have been fought on its shores, and the great generals who have crossed it!"

"Yes, and the castles, Hans! Think of the legends father and mother have told us about the beautiful princesses who have lived in the castles, and the brave knights who have fought for them! I shall be perfectly happy if I can ever sail down the Rhine and see the noted places on its shores."

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