

## STICK! LITTLE FISH

Once upon a time there were three brothers who lost their mother. After a time, their father remarried a cold-hearted and bad tempered woman. Their stepmother found fault with everything they said and did. She fed them poorly, worked them as hard as the beasts, and beat them even harder. They often said to themselves “if only our *real* mother was here”, but only one — Hans, the youngest — said it out loud. The heartless stepmother didn’t like any of the children, but she liked Hans the least of all. She gave his brothers cake on their birthdays, but always seemed to forget his birthday. Occasionally, if his older brothers did something well she might be grateful, but in her eyes Hans never did anything well. She always gave him the hardest and most difficult tasks. His only rewards were insults and complaints if he managed to do them — or a beating if he failed.

Very early one Spring morning, as the sun was rising and the birds were singing, his stepmother gave him a large sieve which they used to winnow the corn. She said “Take this and fetch water from the stream. Make sure it is full and don’t spill any, or there will be trouble.” Hans knew it was an impossible task. He stood there, shaking with fear. She just stared at him said “Are you going to go, boy? Or do I have to set the dog on you?”

Hans took the sieve from her, and made his way to the spring where the stream came out of the hillside in a little waterfall. He tried many times to fill the sieve by holding it under the running water. Even though it splashed around inside, the water just ran through the holes at the bottom, and the sieve stayed empty. He knew it was hopeless, and he cried bitterly, because he knew that he couldn’t go home with it empty. While he was standing there, not knowing what he was going to do, an old woman appeared as if out of nowhere. She was very old, nearly bent double, and supported herself with a thick staff. Her hands and face were very wrinkled and like leather. Her nose which was like a beak, overhung a toothless mouth, and her small black birdlike eyes penetrated the little boy’s soul.

“What are you doing, Hans?” cawed the old woman, in a voice like a crow. Hans was shocked, and more than a little frightened, to hear the strange old woman call him by name. “Don’t be afraid” she croaked, a little more softly, “I won’t harm you. What are you trying to do?”

Hans took a deep breath, and started to tell her everything. He told her that his stepmother had sent him with a sieve to fetch water. He told her that the water just ran through the bottom of the sieve. He told her that he couldn’t go home with it empty. Then he started crying again, and couldn’t say any more.

“Hush!” interrupted the old woman gently “There is no need to cry any more. I have counted every one of your tears, and I can help you.” She told him that

he would grow up to be a great man, if he continued to be good and kept his kind heart.

Then she called out “Little Fish! Little Fish!” and plunged her hand into the stream. When she brought it out, flapping in her wrinkled palm was a tiny little fish. It was bright blue and dotted with golden red markings like little flowers.

“Take the little fish which sticks” she said to Hans “and look after it well. Use its magic wisely and carefully. When you say to it ‘Stick! Little Fish’, then whatever and whoever touches it will stick, and will have to follow you. Nobody, not even the Emperor himself, can break free.” Then she took the jewelled pin out of her cloak, and gave it to Hans, and said “But, you can free him, when you touch him with the point of this pin.”

“And now for the water!” exclaimed the old woman, as Hans looked on nervously. She threw the little blue fish with golden red flowers into the sieve, and told Hans to hold it under the running water. The water splashed around inside the sieve, but none of it ran through the holes in the bottom. Soon it was full and overflowing.

The old woman turned to the little boy who was standing open mouthed, and said gently “Now Hans, take your things, and go home. It is getting late.” He turned to pick up the sieve full of water, and when he turned back she had vanished. The only signs that she had been there at all were the cloak pin in his hand, and the little fish swimming happily in the sieve. Hans ran back home with the sieve full of water without spilling a drop.

From that day on, his stepmother started being a little kinder to Hans and his brothers. Maybe it was the little fish, maybe she was frightened of the old witch, or maybe her heart just softened a little after hearing the story. Hans had told her about the old woman and the filling of the sieve, but didn’t mention the little fish which sticks, which was now in his pocket. He carried it with him everywhere he went, and at night he slept with it under his pillow. This went on for many years, but Hans never said “Stick! Little Fish” and nothing ever stuck, until...

One day, many years later when Hans and his brothers had all grown into strong handsome young men, and their father and stepmother had become old and grey. The brothers were harvesting cabbages and Hans was loading the cart to take them home. While he was doing this, the neighbour’s geese kept biting at the cabbage leaves and honking at him. When he had finished loading, and started pulling the cart behind him, every one of the whole flock of twenty five geese waddled after it screaming “Honk! Honk!”

Hans had finally had enough of the troublesome birds, and decided to teach them a lesson. He whispered to his little fish “Stick! Little Fish”. As soon as the gander’s beak touched the next cabbage, it stuck! Then the next goose’s bill stuck to the gander’s tail. And then the next one stuck to it, and then the next one, until all twenty five birds were strung out like white pearls following behind

the cart. Honk, honk went the procession as it moved on. As they passed the neighbour's house, the farmer's wife heard the noise. She came outside and was astonished to see all of *her* geese following the neighbour's boy to *his* farm. She grabbed a broomstick and tried to drive them back. But, Hans saw her and whispered "Stick! Little Fish". As soon as the brush head touched the hindmost goose it stuck, and the farmer's wife became stuck to its handle.

Honk, honk went the procession as it moved on. First came Hans, pulling the green cabbages, followed by the white geese, dragging the red-faced farmer's wife. They passed the mill, where the miller was leading his grey donkey by its harness. "Help!" cried the farmer's wife and reached out to him.

The miller grabbed her hand, but Hans saw him and said "Stick! Little Fish". In an instant, the miller and his donkey were stuck.

Honk, honk went the procession as it moved on. First came Hans, pulling the green cabbages, followed by the white geese, dragging the red-faced farmer's wife, then the dusty grey miller and his grey donkey, who accompanied the honking of the geese and the cursing of his master with a loud heehaw. They passed the school, where the schoolmaster was standing proudly outside with holding his long cane and wearing high starched collar. The miller cried out to him "Drive the donkey away, so that I can get free."

The teacher stepped forward and raised his cane to whip the donkey. But, Hans saw him and said "Stick! Little Fish". At the first stroke the cane stuck, and the schoolmaster's hand became stuck to it. Honk, honk went the procession as it moved on. First came Hans, pulling the green cabbages, followed by the white geese, dragging the red-faced farmer's wife, then the dusty grey miller and his grey donkey, and finally the stiff-collared schoolmaster with his cane trotting along in a most undignified manner. Honk, honk, heehaw, they passed the bakery, where the baker was loading at his oven. He came into street, still carrying a tray of unbaked bread, to watch the strange show.

"Give me your hand" the teacher asked him.

He did, but Hans saw him and said "Stick! Little Fish". The baker stuck to the teacher, the tray to his other hand, and the bread stuck to the tray.

Honk, honk, heehaw. The strange procession moved loudly through the village. People came to their doors and opened their windows to watch, and everybody laughed to see them. First came Hans, pulling the green cabbages, followed by the white geese, dragging the red-faced farmer's wife, then the dusty grey miller and his grey donkey, then the stiff-collared schoolmaster, and finally the short fat baker waving the tray of bread. In the street, they passed a grand carriage, pulled by six white horses. Inside sat a beautiful unsmiling young lady. She was the king's daughter who, from the day of her birth, had never been seen to smile or heard to laugh. Hearing the disturbance, she raised the blinds and looked out of the carriage window. What she saw was: a chain of honking white geese joined beak to tail, a red-faced woman chasing the last

goose with a broom and holding hands with a miller leading a braying grey donkey; a stiff-collared schoolmaster poking the donkey's hind quarters with his cane; and a fat baker performing acrobatics with a bread tray — all being led by a handsome young man pulling a cart full of cabbages. It was very strange, and very funny! For the first time in her life, she laughed out loud, and her eyes sparkled.

The baker rested his tray on the drawbar of the coach between the two lead horses, but Hans saw him and said "Stick! Little Fish". The carriage stuck, and the procession moved on. First came Hans, pulling the green cabbages, followed by the white geese, dragging the red-faced farmer's wife, then the dusty grey miller and his grey donkey, then the stiff-collared schoolmaster, the short fat baker, and finally the six white horses leading the grand carriage with the happy princess inside.

The procession ended at a royal villa, just outside the village, where the king was staying. On hearing the strange noises in his grounds, he rushed to the window. What he saw was a wonderful procession of a cart full of cabbages, twenty five geese, a red-faced farmer's wife with broom, a grey miller and his grey donkey, a stiff-collared schoolmaster, a baker, a grand carriage with six white horses, and his beautiful daughter — laughing! This made him very happy, and he started laughing too. He called Hans to him, and asked him how he had created this spectacle. After, Hans had told his story, the king said "Young man, you have done what no other person has been able to do. You have made my unhappy daughter laugh. You may name your own reward. Whatever I can give you, I will."

Hans thought carefully, and answered "the last thing caught by the little fish". The king understood his meaning, and didn't seem too happy with idea, so Hans prepared to move on with his procession. But for a king, a promise is a promise, so he agreed and asked Hans to unstick his daughter. Hans took the cloak pin, and went around the procession. Stick, stick, stick, went the pin, sometimes harder and sometimes softer. Everything and everybody flew apart, like the chaff from a winnowing sieve. The princess laughed again when she saw this, and Hans led her to her father. She was the very last thing the little fish ever caught, and in time they were married.

The princess smiled every time she saw the handsome young man who led her in a strange procession, and laughed when she talked with him. This made her father, the king, happy, and every time he met Hans, *he* liked him more and more. Hans became a duke, and the king gave his daughter's hand in marriage to him in a grand wedding ceremony, and a joyful celebration afterwards. The duke and princess were continually smiling at each other and laughing. And nobody who saw them would believe that, throughout her childhood, she never once smiled or laughed.

In his coat of arms of the duke, the duke stuck a little blue fish decorated with golden red flowers. To this day, none of his descendants have been able to remove it, and none would wish to try. They know that it will bring their house

good luck if they are good and keep their hearts kind, like Hans who became king when the old king died. He was a good and kind king who never let anybody be hurt or mistreated. He had had enough of that in his own childhood.

## THE BLACKSMITH OF RUMPELBACH

The blacksmith of Rumpelbach was an honest hardworking craftsman, who had the misfortune that his customers didn't pay. It wasn't because they were short of money, they just preferred to keep it. So, for all his hard work all he had was an empty stomach and a bad temper. One night, he was so angry with his customers that he really swore aloud that somebody should give them a potion, or work some other magic, to make them loosen their grip on their purses. *Somebody* heard him.

The next morning, he was still in a bad mood when he went into the forge and, lost in thought, started work. He had just picked up his hammer, when the door opened and *somebody* walked in. The strange gentleman was dressed for hunting in a green jacket, with a knife in his belt and a gun over his shoulder.

"Hello smithy, how are things this morning?" he enquired in a friendly tone.

The blacksmith answered honestly "How are things? Too much work and no payment."

As if making fun of him, the hunter replied "That's not good. 'Too much work and no payment' is like not reaping what you sow."

The smith, who was not in the mood for light conversation with a fancy gentleman, said harshly "What good is it talking to you? You can't do anything!"

"Me, not do anything?" asked the gentleman. "What makes you think that?" he said as he pushed his hat back a little. On his forehead, the blacksmith could see the roots of a pair of twisted little horns.

"Well, if you really are who you seem to be" said the blacksmith, politely removing his cap, "then, maybe we could do a little business."

"Why not?" replied his visitor "But, remember that, whatever I do for you will cost you your soul. And, if you don't know, I will collect it in only seven years."

The Devil's terms, especially the seven years, gave the blacksmith pause for thought. He stood there open mouthed without saying word. He wanted to bargain, but didn't think it wise to argue with Old Nick. His visitor looked on contemptuously and, after a while, adjusted his hat and turned to the door. The blacksmith called him back, and said "So, let me tell you what my soul will cost you?" The Devil turned back and looked at him.

The smith said "I want to put a bench outside, by the door to the forge." He continued "I want that whoever sits on this bench will have to stay sitting there until I, and I alone, allow them to stand up —"

“That I can easily give you” interrupted the Devil “so let’s make a deal?”

“Not so fast” said the smith “my soul is worth more than just a bench. I also want a cherry tree in my garden with the juiciest and sweetest fruit. I want that whoever climbs this tree will have to stay there until I, and I alone, allow them to come down. —“

“That I can also easily give you” interrupted the Devil “so let’s make a deal?”

“Not yet.” said the smith “Wishes come in threes! For my third wish, I want a huge sack to store the things in my workshop. I want that whoever is in this sack will have to stay there until I, and I alone, allow them to come out.”

“Is that all?” asked the Devil.

“Yes, if you bring me these three things, I will sign my soul over to you.”

Happily the Devil pulled a giant ledger out of one pocket, and a tiny pen knife out of another. The bill of sale had to be signed in blood — they used the blacksmith’s. When the deal was concluded, the Devil vanished. He returned after a few moments with the sack, the bench and the cherry tree. Together, they found a place for the sack in the workshop, set the bench in front of the forge by the door, and planted the tree in the garden. When they were done, the Devil said “see you in seven years”, waved cheerily and left.

Not long afterwards, the blacksmith saw a well-known gossip walking by. She was married to a local farmer who often felt the need to have his tools mended and his horse shod, but never felt the need to pay. He called out to her and asked for news of the village. She stopped, came over to him, and he invited her to sit down.

It wasn’t late and she had a lot of news, so she sat down with the smith on his new bench outside the forge. She really did have a lot of news, and went on and on. She talked all afternoon, about everybody from Anna to Zacharias and everything from agriculture to zoology. The blacksmith didn’t need to say another word, he just listened patiently and smiled appreciatively.

Eventually, as the light was fading and the moon rose above the mountains, she realised how late it was. She had been gossiping for hours, and now must hurry home. But, however hard she tried, she couldn’t leave. She could shift her position, lift her legs, and move her arms, but she just couldn’t stand up. But the blacksmith could. He jumped up and, laughing, cried out “Now I’ve got you! You’ll have to stay sitting on this bench until your husband pays his bills.” He left her sitting outside, while he went inside, closed the forge for the day, ate his supper, and went to bed.

The next morning he was awakened early by a loud banging on the door. It was the husband of the, now quiet, woman sitting on his bench outside. The farmer offered the blacksmith three times what he owed, if he would

immediately release his unfortunate wife. The smith happily accepted, and the red-faced pair hurried home.

Not long afterwards, the smith found a boy in his garden looking at the cherries on the tree. He was the son of another farmer who owed the blacksmith money. The smith shouted out to him “Don’t you like cherries?”

“Of course I like cherries.” answered the boy “Can I have some?”

“I’m not going to pick them for you” replied the smith. “You’ll have to climb up and get them”

The boy didn’t need to be told twice. He shinned up the trunk, grabbed a branch, and swung himself up onto it. The smith smiled as he watched him scuttling around in the branches like a squirrel, and eating all the fruit he could grab. But when he had eaten all he could, however hard he tried, he couldn’t get down. He could move his hands from branch to branch and swing his legs. He could even climb higher, but whatever he did, he just couldn’t get past the lowest branch.

After working all morning, the blacksmith went into the garden to see how the boy was getting on in the cherry tree. He was sitting on the lowest branch crying, and, knowing he was trapped, plaintively asked the smith to let him get down. The smith refused, telling him “You will have to stay in the cherry tree until your father pays his bills.”

In the afternoon, the father came looking for his son. When he saw him in the tree he was angry and ordered the greedy boy to come down immediately. The boy whimpered “I can’t” and tried again. His father saw that, however hard, and whatever, he tried, the boy just couldn’t get past the lowest branch.

The blacksmith came out of the forge laughing, and said “It looks like I’ve caught a little bird! If you don’t pay up, and quickly, your boy will be eating nothing but cherries for a long time.” The farmer offered the blacksmith three times what he owed, if he would immediately release his unfortunate son. The boy dropped lightly to the ground, and with his equally red-faced father hurried home.

The blacksmith pocketed the money, and was thinking about how he could use the sack when a cheerful young lady came by. She was happy because, as the gossiping farmer’s wife had told the smith, she had just become engaged to be married. What she didn’t know is that her young man was one of the people who never paid the blacksmith. She wished him a very friendly good afternoon, and they started talking about her wedding and marriage. He said to her “In my workshop I have sack big enough to hold all the things in your bottom drawer. Come and have a look.”

They went into the forge and the smith dragged the sack out of the place in the workshop which he and his visitor had found for it. “It’s as big as a tent!”



she exclaimed and, laughing, said “We could fit the whole wedding party inside it.”

“Try it!” said the smith as he threw the sack over her head, covering her completely. Now she was inside and couldn’t get out. No amount of begging and pleading could persuade the blacksmith to let her out. She had to stay there, in the dark, until her young man settled his debts.

That same evening her young man wanted to take her to a dance at the village inn. He had already spent all afternoon looking for her to ask her when he arrived at the blacksmith’s forge. He heard her crying, but couldn’t see her. “What’s wrong? Where are you?” he asked as he stood in the empty workshop. A louder cry came from a large sack in the corner. As he approached it, the blacksmith came into the room.

“It looks like it’s in the bag! If you don’t pay up, your girl will never see the light of day again.” said the blacksmith sternly. The young man realised that his future wife was trapped in the sack. He offered the blacksmith three times what he owed, if he would immediately let her out. When he paid, the sack fell open and the young couple hurried away.

With more tricks like these, the blacksmith had no trouble in getting his customers to pay on time, and in full. By the time the seventh year was coming to an end, he had become a rich man. But, it would soon be time for the Devil to return and carry him off. On the first day of the eighth year, the fancy gentlemen in the green coat walked into the forge, and invited the smith to go with him.

“I’m almost ready” said the blacksmith “I just want to finish this horseshoe. You’ve had a long journey, so please have a seat outside while you wait.” The Devil must have been a little careless, because he sat on the only bench by the door. It was *his* own bench, the one he had given the blacksmith seven years earlier. As soon as he sat down he recognised it, but it was too late. He could only get up if the blacksmith, and only the blacksmith, allowed it! But the blacksmith was not going to set his guest free without something in return. He told him “I’ll only release you if you promise to leave me alone for another seven years”. The Devil was not happy, but he eventually agreed to the terms, and left.

In the next seven years the blacksmith made good use of the bench, the cherry tree, and the sack. He became even richer, but the years passed quickly. On the first day of the eighth year, the fancy gentleman in the green coat walked into the forge and, smiling, said “Now, master smithy, it really is time. Shall we go?”

“I need about a quarter of an hour” replied the blacksmith “to finish making this chain. If you’re hungry and thirsty after your long journey I have some juicy sweet cherries growing in the garden. I don’t have time to pick them for you, but there’s a ladder next to the tree, so you can help yourself.”

The tree must have grown very large, because the Devil didn't recognise the only cherry tree in the garden. It was *his* tree, the one he had given the blacksmith fourteen years earlier. In an instant he was up the ladder, and immediately realised his mistake, but it was too late. He could only get down if the blacksmith, and only the blacksmith, allowed it! Once again he had to promise to leave him alone for another seven years, and then he left.

In the next seven years the blacksmith made good use of the bench, the cherry tree, and the sack. Nobody dared to not settle their bills with the blacksmith promptly, and he became the richest man for miles around. The only thing which worried him was whether he could trap the Devil for a third time. The day soon came when the fancy gentleman in the green coat walked into the forge and said "Now, master smithy, it's been another seven years. Shall we go and visit my grandmother today?"

The blacksmith replied "Why not, but could you wait a moment? I promised my neighbour that I would shoe his horse today. I've already made the shoes, so it would be stupid of me not to keep my promise. It will be quicker if you can get the nails while I bring the horse. They're somewhere in that sack there, I'll need thirty two of them."

The Devil had to crawl deep into the sack to find all the nails. As soon as he was inside, he realised that it was *his* sack, the one he had given the blacksmith twenty one years earlier, but it was too late. He could only get out if the blacksmith, and only the blacksmith, allowed it! When the smith returned with the horse, he heard the Devil shouting from inside the sack "Help! I can't get out! Let me out! I'll give you anything you want if you let me out!"

"If you promise to give up every claim you have on my person and soul" answered the smith "then I will release you. If you don't promise, then you can stay in the sack forever, and every morning you will get a beating."

The Devil cried out loudly and angrily "Yes! Yes! I agree! Let me out. I want to have nothing to do with you ever again." The sack fell open, and the Devil flew noisily away leaving a foul smelling cloud of smoke.

The blacksmith lived happily for many years afterwards, and became richer everyday. He rarely thought about dying, but one day, at a great age, he did. When his spirit left this world, he first went down below. In life, he may have been honest and hardworking in his trade, but he had been harsh on his debtors and had cheated — three times — a certain gentleman in a green coat. He also thought that, down there, it would be livelier and more fun than up above. When he came to the great gates of Hell, he banged on the door with his hammer. He hit it so hard that it nearly came off its hinges, and the noise woke the gentleman's grandmother who was alone at home. She limped angrily to the door and asked "Who is it?"

"The blacksmith of Rumpelbach" came the answer.

“What?” she screamed through the door. “You cheat! You trickster! Do you think you can make a fool of my grandson and then come here? Take yourself off, we want nothing to do with you!” She had already started barricading the door with cauldrons and brimstone so that he couldn’t break in, but the smith had already turned away.

He thought that if they wouldn’t let him in downstairs, then he would have to try up above. It was a long and steep climb, but he soon found himself in front of the gates of Heaven. He knocked politely, and the heavenly gatekeeper, Saint Peter, asked “Who is there?”

“The blacksmith of Rumpelbach” came the answer.

“What?” said Saint Peter harshly “Do you think that, up here in Heaven, we want sinners who make a pact with the Devil? Get down below.”

The smith turned away and started back down, muttering angrily to himself that he would never have believed that he wasn’t good enough for either Heaven or Hell. When he arrived back at the doors of Hell, the whole family of devils and demons was at home. On hearing that the Rumpelbach blacksmith was at the door, all of them, great and small, cried “Don’t let him in! It will be bad for us if you let him in.”

Once again the poor smith had to turn around. He climbed the long steep path to try his luck a second time at the heavenly gates. He knocked politely, and, when Saint Peter answered, asked to be let in. The heavenly gatekeeper, refused him in even stronger terms than before.

“Then, at least, please, let me look inside before I go?” he pleaded, taking off his cap.

“If that is what it takes to get rid of you, then I will let you see inside” grumbled Saint Peter, and he opened a crack in the golden doors. The gap wasn’t very wide, but the blacksmith threw his cap cleanly through it.

Saint Peter was about fetch the cap and return it, but the smith said “I should get it myself”. So Saint Peter let him in. Instead of picking up the cap, he sat down on it and said merrily “Now I am on my own property” — and nobody could evict him.

And, to this day, the blacksmith of Rumpelbach is looking down from Heaven, where he is sitting on his cap listening to the heavenly music.

## THE DEVIL AND THE SEAMSTRESS

Many, many, years ago there was a seamstress who was so expert with a needle and thread that nobody in her lifetime, or long afterwards knew anyone better. She was rightly proud of her skill, and one day, half in jest, she unwisely said that she could beat the Devil himself in a sewing competition.

Now the Devil has very good hearing, especially when somebody is up to mischief or is talking about him. From deep underground he can hear the quietest whisper in the noisiest tavern in the furthest town. Of course, he heard the seamstress's challenge, and he decided to accept. He appeared before her in all his finery, with his thimble at the ready. Although she was afraid, the seamstress now had no choice but to accept his challenge to make a shirt faster than him. If she lost, then he would take her away with him, forever.

The contest started with measuring and cutting the cloth. In no time at all, both had cut all the pieces and were ready to start stitching. Nobody was ahead, but that was about to change.

To save time rethreading his needle, the Devil used almost a whole skein of thread at once — and he didn't waste time tying a knot in the end. His thread was so long that, to pull each stitch through, he had take his needle and run three times around the house. Then, because he hadn't tied a knot in the end, the first stitch pulled completely out, and he had to start again.

The expert seamstress worked as she always did, with the same length of thread in her needle, tied neatly at the end. She started sewing, stitch after stitch, and didn't look up from her work until she had finished the shirt. She threw the finished shirt at the Devil as he rushed in from running another three times around the house. His pitch black face turned bright red and then he slunk back down below. He had lost the contest! The seamstress had completed a whole shirt before he had finished the first seam.

Since that day nobody has ever heard of him challenging anybody else to a sewing competition. But, nowadays people still say when somebody starts a job badly that, like the Devil in this story, they are going three times around the house to get it done.