

The Girl Who Stepped on the Bread

You have, of course, heard about the girl who stepped on a loaf of bread so as not to soil her little shoes, and you have heard how badly she fared afterward. About this it has been written and printed.

She was poor, but proud and haughty. In her, as they say, were bad inclinations. As a toddler she loved to catch flies and tear off their wings; she liked that the flies, from flying insects, became crawling ones. She also caught May beetles and dung beetles, impaled them on pins, and placed under their legs a green leaflet or a scrap of paper. The poor insect would clutch the paper with its legs, twist and contort itself, trying to free itself from the pin, while Inge laughed:

"A May beetle is reading! Just look how it turns the page!"

As she grew older she became worse rather than better; unfortunately, she was exceedingly pretty, and though she received flicks on the head, they were never such as she deserved.

"A strong flick is needed for this head!" her own mother used to say. "As a child you often trampled my apron; I fear that when you grow up you will trample my heart!"

So it came to pass.

Inge entered service with noble people, in a manor house. The masters treated her as their own daughter, and in her new dresses Inge seemed even more beautiful, yet her pride grew and grew.

She lived a whole year with her employers, and then they said to her:

"You ought to visit your old folks, Inge!"

Inge set out, but only to show herself to her relatives in all her finery. She had already reached the edge of her native village, when suddenly she saw that by the pond stood girls and lads chatting, and not far away, resting on a stone, was her mother with an armful of brushwood gathered in the forest. Inge turned straight back: she was ashamed that she, such a finely dressed young lady, should have such a ragged mother, who moreover carried brushwood from the forest herself. Inge did not even regret that she had not seen her parents; she was merely vexed.

Another half year passed.

"You must visit your old folks, Inge!" her mistress said again. "Here is a white loaf for you; take it to them. How glad they will be to see you!"

Inge put on her very best dress, donned new shoes, lifted her skirt slightly, and walked carefully along the road, trying not to soil her little shoes—well, for that one cannot blame her. But then the path turned onto marshy ground; one had to cross a muddy puddle. Without thinking long, Inge threw her loaf into the puddle so as to step on it and cross without wetting her feet. But scarcely had she placed one foot on the bread and lifted the other, preparing to step onto dry ground, when the bread began to sink with her deeper and deeper into the earth—only black bubbles rose across the puddle!

Such is the story!

Where then did Inge end up? At the Bog Woman's brewery. The Bog Woman is aunt to the wood-sprites and forest maidens; these are known to all: about them books have been written, songs composed, and they have often been depicted in paintings, but very little is known of the Bog Woman; only when in summer mist rises over the meadows do people say, "The Bog Woman is brewing beer!" So it was into her brewery that Inge fell, and one cannot endure there long! A cesspool is a bright, luxurious chamber compared with the Bog Woman's brewery! From each vat comes such a stench that it makes a person sick, and there are countless such vats, standing tightly packed one beside another; if between some of them a tiny crack can be found, there one immediately stumbles upon shriveled, huddled wet toads and fat frogs. Yes, this is where Inge ended up! Finding herself amidst this cold, sticky, disgusting living mess, Inge trembled and felt her body beginning to stiffen. The bread clung firmly to her feet and dragged her down with it, like an amber bead draws a straw.

The Bog Woman was at home; her brewery was visited that day by guests: the Devil and his great-grandmother, a venomous old woman. She is never idle; even when visiting she brings along some handiwork: either she sews leather shoes which, when worn, make a person restless, or she embroiders slander, or finally knits rash words that slip from people's tongues—all to harm and ruin mankind! Yes, the Devil's great-grandmother is a master at sewing, embroidering, and knitting!

She saw Inge, adjusted her spectacles, looked at her again, and said:

"This one has inclinations! I ask you to yield her to me in memory of today's visit! She will make an excellent statue for the hall of my great-grandson!"

The Bog Woman yielded Inge to her, and the girl fell into hell—people with inclinations can get there not by the direct path, but by a roundabout one!

The hall occupied an endless space; look forward—your head spins, look backward—the same. The entire hall was crowded with exhausted sinners awaiting the moment when the doors of mercy would open. They had to wait a long time! Enormous, fat spiders, waddling from side to side, entangled their legs with thousand-year-old cobwebs; these squeezed them like pincers, bound them tighter than copper chains. Moreover, the souls of the sinners were tormented by eternal, agonizing anxiety. A miser, for example, was tormented by having left the key in the lock of his money chest, others... indeed, there would be no end if we began to enumerate the torments and sufferings of all the sinners!

Inge had to experience the full horror of being a statue; her feet seemed screwed to the loaf of bread.

"So try to be neat! I did not wish to soil my shoes, and see what has become of me now!" she said to herself. "Just look how they stare at me!" Indeed, all the sinners gazed at her; evil passions shone in their eyes, which spoke without words; horror seized one at the mere sight of them!

"Well, at least I am pleasant to look upon!" thought Inge. "I am pretty myself and dressed finely!" And she cast her eyes upon herself—her neck would not turn. Ah, how she had smeared herself in the Bog Woman's brewery! Of this she had not thought! Her dress was entirely covered with slime, an adder had tangled itself in her hair and slapped her neck, and from every fold of her dress peered forth toads, barking like fat, hoarse pug dogs. It was terribly unpleasant! "Well, the others here look no better than I!" Inge consoled herself.

Worst of all was the feeling of terrible hunger. Could she not bend down and break off a piece of the bread on which she stood? No, her back would not bend, her arms and legs would not move; she seemed entirely turned to stone and could only move her eyes in all directions, around, even wrench them from their sockets and look backward. Ugh, how disgusting that was! And on top of everything else, flies appeared and began crawling back and forth over her eyes; she blinked, but the flies did not fly away—their wings had been plucked, and they could only crawl. What torment! And then this hunger! Eventually Inge began to feel as though her innards had devoured themselves, and inside her it became empty, terribly empty!

"Well, if this continues long, I shall not endure it!" said Inge, but endure she had to: no change came.

Suddenly a hot tear dropped onto her head, rolled down her face onto her breast, and then onto the bread; after it another, a third, a whole hail of tears. Who could be weeping for Inge?

Did she not still have a mother on earth? Bitter tears shed by a mother for her child always reach him, but they do not free him; they only burn, increasing his suffering. Yet the terrible, unbearable hunger was worst of all! To tread bread underfoot and be unable to break off even a piece of it! It seemed to her that everything inside her had devoured itself, and she became a thin, hollow reed, drawing in every sound. She distinctly heard all that was said about her up above, and what was said was nothing but bad. Even her mother, though bitterly and sincerely mourning her, nevertheless repeated: "Pride leads to no good! Pride ruined you, Inge! How you grieved me!"

Both Inge's mother and everyone up there already knew of her sin; they knew that she had stepped on the bread and sunk through the earth. One shepherd had seen it all from a hill and told others.

"How you grieved your mother, Inge!" her mother repeated. "I expected nothing else!"

"Better had I never been born into the world!" thought Inge. "What good is it that my mother now sobs over me!"

She heard also the words of her masters, respectable people who had treated her as a daughter: "She is a great sinner! She did not honor the gifts of God, but trampled them underfoot! Not soon will the doors of mercy open for her!"

"They brought me up

"If only they had treated me better, more strictly!" thought Inge. "They should have driven the vices out of me, if any were lurking within!"

She also heard the song people had composed about her, a song about the arrogant girl who stepped on bread so as not to soil her shoes. Everyone sang it.

"When I think of all I have had to hear and suffer for my transgression!" thought Inge. "Let others pay for theirs too! And how many would have to! Oh, how I am tormented!"

And Inge's soul became even coarser, harder than her shell.

"In such company as this, one does not get better! Besides, I do not want to! Look how they stare at me!" she said, growing completely hardened and embittered

against all people. "They are delighted; now they have found something to chatter about! Oh, how I am tormented!"

She also heard how her story was told to children, and the little ones called her an atheist.

"She is so wicked! Let her suffer properly now!" the children said.

Inge heard nothing but evil about herself from the lips of children. But once, while tormented by hunger and malice, she heard her name and her story again. It was being told to an innocent little girl, and the child suddenly burst into tears over the arrogant, vain Inge.

"And will she never return up here?" asked the little one.

"Never!" was the answer.

"But if she asks forgiveness, promises never to do so again?"

"But she does not want to ask forgiveness at all!"

"Oh, how I wish she would ask forgiveness!" said the girl, and for a long time she could not be comforted. "I would give away my dollhouse, just so she might be allowed to return to earth! Poor, poor Inge!"

These words reached Inge's heart, and she felt somewhat lighter: for the first time, a living soul had said, "Poor Inge!" without adding a single word about her sin. A small, innocent girl had wept and pleaded for her! A strange feeling seized Inge's soul; she felt as though she herself wanted to weep, but could not, and this was a new torment.

On earth, years flew like an arrow, but underground everything remained as before. Inge heard her name less and less frequently; on earth, people remembered her less and less. But one day a sigh reached her:

"Inge! Inge! How you have grieved me! I always foresaw this!" It was Inge's mother dying.

Sometimes she also heard her name from the lips of her former masters.

The mistress, however, always spoke humbly: "Perhaps we shall yet meet again, Inge! No one knows where they will end up!"

But Inge knew well that her respectable lady would not end up where she herself had.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, time crept on.

Then Inge heard her name again and saw two bright stars shine above her: a pair of gentle eyes had closed on earth. Many years had passed since the little girl had wept inconsolably for "poor Inge": the child had grown up, grown old, and had been called by God to Himself. In the last moment, when memories of a whole life flash brightly in the soul, the dying woman remembered her bitter tears for Inge, so vividly that she involuntarily exclaimed:

"Lord, perhaps I, like Inge, unknowingly trampled upon Your most gracious gifts; perhaps my soul was infected with pride, and only Your mercy prevented me from falling lower, but upheld me! Do not abandon me in my final hour!"

And the physical eyes of the dying woman closed, while her spiritual eyes opened; and since Inge was her last thought, she beheld with her spiritual sight what was hidden from earthly vision—she saw how low Inge had fallen. At this sight, the pious soul burst into tears and appeared before the throne of the Heavenly King, weeping and praying for the sinful soul as sincerely as she had wept as a child. These sobs and pleas echoed in the empty shell that enclosed the tormented soul, and Inge's soul was, as it were, overwhelmed by this unexpected love for her from heaven. An angel of God wept for her! What had she done to deserve this? The exhausted soul looked back upon her entire life, upon all she had done, and burst into tears such as Inge had never known. Pity for herself filled her: it seemed to her that the doors of mercy would remain locked against her for all eternity! And scarcely had she realized this with contrition when a ray of light penetrated the subterranean abyss, stronger than the sun that melts a snowman built by boys in the yard, and faster than a snowflake melts on the warm lips of a child, Inge's petrified shell dissolved. A little bird shot like lightning from the depths into freedom. But finding itself in the white light, it shrank with fear and shame—it feared everyone, was ashamed of everyone, and hastily hid in a dark crack in some half-ruined wall. There it sat, huddled, trembling all over, making no sound—for it had no voice. Long it sat thus before daring to look around and admire the magnificence of God's world. Yes, magnificent was God's world! The air was fresh and soft, the moon shone brightly, trees and bushes exuded fragrance; in the corner where the bird had taken shelter, it was so cozy, and its little dress was so clean and pretty. What love, what beauty was diffused throughout God's world! And all the thoughts stirring in the bird's breast were ready to pour forth in song, but the bird could not sing, however much it wished to; it could neither cuckoo like a cuckoo nor chirp like a nightingale! But God hears even the mute praise of a worm, and He heard this voiceless praise that rose mentally to heaven like a psalm sounding in David's breast before he found words and melody for it.

The bird's mute praise grew day by day and only awaited an opportunity to express itself in a good deed.

Christmas Eve arrived. A peasant set up a pole by the fence and tied an unthreshed sheaf of oats to its top—so that the birds too might joyfully celebrate the birth of the Savior!

On Christmas morning, the sun rose and illuminated the sheaf; chirping birds flew lively to the feast. From the crack in the wall came also: "Peep! Peep!" The thought poured forth in sound; the weak squeak was a true hymn of joy: the thought was preparing to embody itself in a good deed, and the bird flew out from its hiding place. In heaven, they knew what bird this was.

Winter stood severe; the waters were bound by thick ice; hard times had come for birds and forest beasts. The little bird flew over the road, searching and finding in the snowy furrows made by sleds some grains, and near the feeding places for horses—crumbs of bread; but it itself always ate only one grain, one crumb, and then called other hungry sparrows to feed. It flew into towns as well, looking all around, and spotting pieces of bread crumbs thrown from a window by a merciful hand, it too ate only one, giving all the rest to others.

During the winter, the bird gathered and distributed such a quantity of bread crumbs that altogether they weighed exactly as much as the loaf of bread upon which Inge had stepped so as not to soil her shoes. And when the last crumb was found and given away, the little bird's gray wings turned white and spread wide.

"There flies a sea swallow!" said the children, seeing the white bird.

The bird now dived into the waves, now soared up to meet the sunbeams—and suddenly vanished in that radiance. No one saw where it went.

"It has flown to the sun!" said the children.