

Christmas in the Forest

From the book "The Fairy Doll and Other Plays for Children"

By Netta Syrett

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Characters:

-Hans

-Gretchen

-Spring Fairies

-Summer Fairies

-Autumn and Winter Fairies

(The Summer and Autumn fairies should be played by girls older than those who represent the fairies of Spring and Winter.)

Scene: A cottage room, quaintly furnished, lighted only by a faint glow from the fire. Door on stage right leading to the rest of the house. Door left opens into the forest.

(Enter Hans and Gretchen, hand in hand)

GRETCHEN: Hush! We must be very quiet.

HANS: It's so dark. I'll light the candles. *(Takes stick from the fire, and with it lights candles on the chimney-piece, and on table. The children, who are dressed like German children of the olden time, are seen to have wooden shoes in their hands.)*

GRETCHEN: You put your shoes on *that* side of the hearth, and I'll put mine here. So!

(They place the shoes as she suggests.)

HANS: *(Shivering.)* It's very cold for fairies. Do you think they'll really come?

GRETCHEN: Yes, I'm sure they will. This is an enchanted cottage; the Poet said so.

HANS: Who is the Poet?

GRETCHEN: He's a nice man, who stayed here all the summer.

HANS: Why did he say this was an enchanted cottage?

GRETCHEN: Because it's right in the middle of the forest. All cottages in the middle of a forest are magic ones, he says.

HANS: Did he write poetry, here in this room?

GRETCHEN: Yes, and lovely fairy stories too. I used to come and talk to him, and tell him all about you.

HANS: What did you tell him?

GRETCHEN: Oh! I told him how you were coming here to stay at Christmas, and how you're going to write books too, when you're grown up.

HANS: What did he say?

GRETCHEN: See! I've got a letter from him. (*She takes it from her pocket.*) It came this morning, and there's something about you in it.

HANS: About me?

GRETCHEN: Listen! I'll read it to you. He's written round and big, on purpose so that I can understand.

(*The children sit by the fire, and she reads*) :

GRETCHEN: "How is the little cousin Hans who lives in the big city where I hope one day to meet him? If he is with you for the Christmas visit, tell him, when he's a man, to write his books in your enchanted cottage." (*Looking up from the letter.*) There! You see.

HANS: Go on.

GRETCHEN: "Tell him that all the fairies come and visit it, and I'm not at all surprised, when they find a cottage like a bird's nest in the middle of the forest. Say that the fairies came to *me*, as I sat writing at the open door with the trees bending down to watch me, and the squirrels whisking in and out at the window. They whispered all sorts of things to me, and I'm going to write some of their secrets in a book, and send it to you. Don't forget to put your shoes by the fireside on Christmas Eve—you and Hans; for on that night, if only you were there to see, the door which leads into the forest will open and your little room will be full of fairies, and when they see the shoes on the hearth—" (*She breaks off.*) So that's why I wanted you to come down tonight, when everyone had gone to bed.

HANS: (*Slowly.*) Yes, when I'm a man, I'll come and write here too.

GRETCHEN: Mother doesn't believe in the fairies, you know, and father doesn't either. He says he's never seen any.

HANS: Perhaps they only come to poets.

GRETCHEN: Then *we* shan't see them—we're not poets.

HANS: No, but we want to be.

GRETCHEN: Can't we do anything to please them?

HANS: Let's put the Poet's letter on the doorstep. That may remind the fairies that he lived here all the summer.

GRETCHEN: (*Eagerly.*) Yes, and wrote the loveliest tales about them. He used to read them to me. Oh, Hans! That's a good plan. I'm sure they'll come directly once they see his letter.

(The children run to the door and open it.)

HANS: Oh, see how bright the moonlight makes the snow!

GRETCHEN: And don't the trees look dark and tall? I'm sure they're listening, Hans! (*Gretchen stoops and puts the letter outside.*)

HANS: Now shut the door and wait. (*In whisper.*) See! It's nearly twelve o'clock.

GRETCHEN: And everyone's asleep but us. (*Drawing closer to him.*) Are you frightened, Hans?

HANS: Listen! Hush! They're coming. (*Faint music, drawing nearer, heard outside.*)

GRETCHEN: (*Suddenly, clinging to Hans.*) Oh, Hans! I'm frightened. Let's hide. Let's hide.

(The children run behind the settle.)

(The door is flung open. Enter the Spring Fairies. They are clad in robes of filmy green, and carry branches of blossom and spring flowers. One of them says, or sings, the following) :

Hans and Gretchen called to us,
And directly, it was Spring.
Hans and Gretchen called to us.
All the birds began to sing.

Daffodils shone in the grass,
Frozen streams began to run.
Hans and Gretchen called to us.
All at once, out flashed the sun.

Blue sky laughed between the trees,
Blossom decked the happy land.
Hans and Gretchen called to us,
That was why, you understand!

(Music again without. Enter the Summer Fairies, some in rose-color robes, some all in white, like lilies. They bear armfuls of lilies and roses. One of them says, or sings, the lines which follow) :

Bring in the lilies and roses of Summer,
Bring in its fragrance, color, and bloom,
Scatter the roses, strew the white lilies,
Sweet as the thoughts that were born in this room.

Into this quiet room stars have come crowding.
It has been filled with the murmur of streams,
Glittering rainbows have arched it with splendor,
It was the room of a dreamer of dreams.

(They join the Spring Fairies.)

(Music without. The Autumn Fairies enter, in robes of russet and yellow, like autumn leaves. One of them sings, or says) :

Here the dreamer sang of us,
Fairies of the dying year.
All the squirrels gathering nuts,
Crowded round the door to hear.

All the golden Autumn trees
Listened through the quiet days.
Here the Poet dwelt, and we
Come tonight to sing his praise.

A SUMMER FAIRY: *(To the Spring Fairies)* Sister, who called to you?

A SPRING FAIRY: The children called to us. Where are the children? For their sake we are here.

SUMMER FAIRY: The Poet called to us. Here, in this little room, he told the world all the sweet secrets of the summer.

AN AUTUMN FAIRY: We also came because the Poet called. Far off, in the great noisy city, he sits tonight, and thinks of this, his quiet room, where he has sung of all the beauty of the dying year.

A SPRING FAIRY: And of the children we are here to please. Where are the children?

ANOTHER SPRING FAIRY: Listen! Here come the Winter Fairies. They too are for the children, and they bring the Christmas gifts.

(Music without. Enter the Winter Fairies, little creatures in white robes. Between them they bear a Christmas tree, covered with tapers. As they enter, they look round them for the children.)

Little Hans and Gretchen,

Do not hide away,
We are Winter fairies,
And it's Christmas Day!

On either side the fire
Stands a little shoe.
Little Hans and Gretchen,
Somewhere, then, are *you*!

See, we bring you presents,
As the Poet said;
Books and dolls and sweetmeats,
Nuts and apples red.

Little Hans and Gretchen,
Ah! Come out and see;
Best of all your many gifts
Is the Christmas tree!

(The children, Hans holding Gretchen's hand, come from behind the settle.)

THE FAIRIES: The children! Here are the children!

HANS: *(Shyly.)* Thank you very much for coming.

GRETCHEN: *(Running to look at her shoe.)* Oh, Hans! What lovely things. *(Looking round the room.)* I wish the Poet knew.

A SUMMER FAIRY: He does know. He's dreaming the same dream.

HANS: *(Puzzled.)* But this is not a dream!

SUMMER FAIRY: *(Smiling.)* How do you know, Hans?

(Music. The Fairies dance, while the children sit together in a big chair, watching. Presently the Fairies take hands in a ring, and dance slowly round them. The children gradually fall asleep while a Summer Fairy sings, or says, the following) :

Sleep, children, rest and sleep,
Stars shall through the window peep,
Silver moon shall lend her light,
Through the still, enchanted night.

Sleep, children, sleep and rest,
Of Life's dreams you know the best.
Other dreams will fill the years,

Dreams of sorrow, hopes and fears.

Yet when all the dreams are past,
You will smile and say at last,
“We have waked from love and fame—
Once, at least, the fairies came.”

(The Fairies steal from the room, first scattering their flowers round the sleeping children. Music gradually dies away in the distance.)

CURTAIN