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Hans Brinker
or
The Silver Skates



Chapter 1

HANS AND GRETEL

ON A BRIGHT DECEMBER morning long ago, two thinly clad children were kneeling upon the bank of a frozen canal in Holland.

The sun had not yet appeared, but the grey sky was parted near the horizon, and its edges shone crimson with the coming day. Most of the good Hollanders were enjoying a placid morning nap – even Mynheer van Stoppelnoze, that worthy old Dutchman, was still slumbering “in beautiful repose”.

Now and then some peasant woman, poising a well-filled basket upon her head, came skimming over the glassy surface of the canal, or a lusty boy, skating to his day’s work in the town, cast a good-natured grimace towards the shivering pair as he flew along.

Meanwhile, with many a vigorous puff and pull, the brother and sister, for such they were, seemed to be fastening something upon their feet – not skates, certainly, but clumsy pieces of wood narrowed and smoothed at their lower edge, and pierced with holes, through which were threaded strings of rawhide.

These queer-looking affairs had been made by the boy, Hans. His mother was a poor peasant woman – too poor even to think of such a thing as buying skates for her little ones. Rough as these were, they had afforded the children many a happy hour upon the ice; and now, as with cold, red fingers our young Hollanders tugged at the strings, their solemn faces bending closely over their knees, no vision of impossible iron runners came to dull the satisfaction glowing within.

In a moment the boy arose, and with a pompous swing of the arms and a careless “Come on, Gretel”, glided easily across the canal.

“Ah, Hans,” called his sister plaintively, “this foot is not well yet. The strings hurt me on last market day, and now I cannot bear them tied in the same place.”

“Tie them higher up, then,” answered Hans, as without looking at her he performed a wonderful cat’s-cradle step on the ice.

“How can I? The string is too short.”

Giving vent to a good-natured Dutch whistle – the English of which was that girls were troublesome creatures – he steered towards her.

“You are foolish to wear such shoes, Gretel, when you have a stout leather pair. Your clogs would be better than these.”

“Why, Hans! Do you forget? Father threw my beautiful new shoes in the fire. Before I knew what he had done, they were all curled up in the midst of the burning peat. I can skate with these, but not with my wooden ones. Be careful now...”

Hans had taken a string from his pocket. Humming a tune as he knelt beside her, he proceeded to fasten Gretel’s skate with all the force of his strong young arm.

“Oh! Oh!” she cried in real pain.

With an impatient jerk, Hans unwound the string. He would have cast it upon the ground in true big-brother style had he not just then spied a tear trickling down his sister’s cheek.

“I’ll fix it – never fear,” he said with sudden tenderness, “but we must be quick: Mother will need us soon.”

Then he glanced enquiringly about him – first at the ground, next at some bare willow branches above his head and finally at the sky, now gorgeous with streaks of blue, crimson and gold.

Finding nothing in any of these localities to meet his need, his eye suddenly brightened as, with the air of a fellow who knew what he was about, he took off his cap, and removing the tattered lining, adjusted it in a smooth pad over the top of Gretel's worn-out shoe.

"Now," he cried triumphantly, at the same time arranging the strings as briskly as his benumbed fingers would allow, "can you bear some pulling?"

Gretel drew up her lips as if to say "Hurt away", but made no further response.

In another moment they were laughing together as, hand in hand they flew along the canal, never thinking whether the ice would bear or not, for in Holland ice is generally an all-winter affair. It settles itself upon the water in a determined kind of way, and so far from growing thin and uncertain every time the sun is a little severe upon it, it gathers its forces day by day, and flashes defiance to every beam.

Presently, "squeak! squeak!" sounded something beneath Hans's feet. Next his strokes grew shorter, ending oft-times with a jerk, and finally he lay sprawling upon the ice, kicking against the air with many a fantastic flourish.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Gretel. "That was a fine tumble!" But a tender heart was beating under her coarse blue jacket, and, even as she laughed, she came with a graceful sweep close to her prostrate brother.

"Are you hurt, Hans? Oh, you are laughing! Catch me now!" And she darted away, shivering no longer, but with cheeks all aglow and eyes sparkling with fun.

Hans sprang to his feet and started in brisk pursuit, but it was no easy thing to catch Gretel. Before she had travelled very far, her skates too began to squeak.

Believing that discretion was the better part of valour, she turned suddenly and skated into her pursuer's arms.

"Ha! Ha! I've caught you!" cried Hans.

"Ha! Ha! I caught *you*," she retorted, struggling to free herself.

Just then a clear, quick voice was heard calling: "Hans! Gretel!"

"It's Mother," said Hans, looking grave in an instant.

By this time the canal was gilt with sunlight. The pure morning air was very delightful, and skaters were gradually increasing in numbers. It was hard to obey the summons, but Gretel and Hans were good children: without a thought of yielding to the temptation to linger, they pulled off their skates, leaving half the knots still tied. Hans, with his great square shoulders and bushy yellow hair, towered high above his blue-eyed little sister as they trudged homewards. He was fifteen years old, and Gretel was only twelve. He was a solid, hearty-looking boy, with honest eyes and a brow that seemed to bear a sign, "Goodness Within" – just as the little Dutch summer house wears a motto over its portal. Gretel was lithe and quick – her eyes had a dancing light in them, and while you looked at her cheek, the colour paled and deepened, just as it does upon a bed of pink and white blossoms when the wind is blowing.

As soon as the children turned from the canal, they could see their parents' cottage. Their mother's tall form, arrayed in jacket and petticoat and close-fitting cap, stood, like a picture, in the crooked frame of the doorway. Had the cottage been a mile away, it would still have seemed near. In that flat country every object stands out plainly in the distance – the chickens show as distinctly as the windmills. Indeed, were it not for the dykes and the high banks of the canals, one could stand almost anywhere in middle Holland without seeing a mound or a ridge between the eye and the "jumping-off place".

None had better cause to know the nature of these same dykes than Dame Brinker and the panting youngsters now running at her call. But before stating *why*, let me ask you to take a rocking-chair trip with me to that far country, where you may see, perhaps for the first time, some curious things that Hans and Gretel saw every day.



Chapter 2

HOLLAND

HOLLAND IS ONE OF the queerest countries under the sun. It should be called Odd-land or Contrary-land, for in nearly everything it is different from the other parts of the world. In the first place, a large portion of the country is lower than the level of the sea. Great dykes or bulwarks have been erected, at a heavy cost of money and labour, to keep the ocean where it belongs. On certain parts of the coast it sometimes leans with all its weight against the land, and it is as much as the poor country can do to stand the pressure. Sometimes the dykes give way, or spring a leak, and the most disastrous results ensue. They are high and wide, and the tops of some of them are covered with buildings and trees. They have even fine public roads upon them, from which horses may look down upon wayside cottages. Often the keels of floating ships are higher than the roofs of the dwellings. The stork clattering to her young on the house peak may feel that her nest is lifted far out of danger, but the croaking frog in neighbouring bulrushes is nearer the stars than she. Water bugs dart backwards and



Chapter 3

THE SILVER SKATES

DAME BRINKER EARNED a scanty support for her family by raising vegetables, spinning and knitting. Once she had worked on board the barges plying up and down the canal, and had occasionally been harnessed with other women to the towing rope of a *pakschuyt* plying between Broek and Amsterdam. But when Hans had grown strong and large, he had insisted upon doing all such drudgery in her place. Besides, her husband had become so very helpless of late that he required her constant care. Although not having as much intelligence as a little child, he was yet strong of arm and very hearty, and Dame Brinker had sometimes great trouble in controlling him.

“Ah! children, he was so good and steady,” she would sometimes say, “and as wise as a lawyer. Even the burgomaster would stop to ask him a question, and now, alack! he don’t know his wife and little ones. You remember Father, Hans, when he was himself – a great brave man – don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed, Mother – he knew everything, and could do anything under the sun. And how he would sing! Why, you