

The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf

Hans Christian Andersen

You have quite likely heard of the girl who trod on a loaf so as not to soil her pretty shoes, and what misfortunes this brought upon her. The story has been written and printed, too.

She was a poor child, but proud and arrogant, and people said she had a bad disposition. When but a very little child, she found pleasure in catching flies, to pull off their wings and make creeping insects of them. And she used to stick May bugs and beetles on a pin, then put a green leaf or piece of paper close to their feet, so that the poor animals clung to it, and turned and twisted as they tried to get off the pin.

"The May bug is reading now," little Inger would say. "See how it turns the leaves!"

As she grew older she became even worse instead of better; but she was very pretty, and that was probably her misfortune. Because otherwise she would have been disciplined more than she was.

"You'll bring misfortune down upon you," said her own mother to her. "As a little child you often used to trample on my aprons; and when you're older I fear you'll trample on my heart."

And she really did.

Then she was sent into the country to be in the service of people of distinction. They treated her as kindly as if she had been their own child and dressed her so well that she looked extremely beautiful and became even more arrogant.

When she had been in their service for about a year, her mistress said to her, "You ought to go back and visit your parents, little Inger."

So she went, but only because she wanted to show them how fine she had become. But when she reached the village, and saw the young men and girls gossiping around the pond, and her mother sat resting herself on a stone near by, with a bundle of firewood she had gathered in the forest, Inger turned away; she was ashamed that one dressed as smartly as she should have for a mother such a poor, ragged woman who gathered sticks for burning. It was without reluctance that she turned away; she was only annoyed.

Another half year went by.

"You must go home someday and visit your old parents, little Inger," said her mistress. "Here's a large loaf of white bread to take them. They'll be happy to see you again."

So Inger put on her best dress and her fine new shoes and lifted her skirt high and walked very carefully, so that her shoes would stay clean and neat, and for that no one could blame her. But when she came to where the path crossed over marshy ground, and there was a stretch of water and mud before her, she threw the bread into the mud, so that she could use it as a steppingstone and get across with dry shoes. But just as she placed one foot on the bread and lifted the other up, the loaf sank in deeper and deeper, carrying her down until she disappeared entirely, and nothing could be seen but a black, bubbling pool! That's the story.

But what became of her? She went down to the Marsh Woman, who brews down there. The Marsh Woman is an aunt of the elf maidens, who are very well known. There have been poems written about them and pictures painted of them, but nobody knows much about the Marsh Woman, except that when the meadows begin to reek in the summer the old woman is at her brewing down below. Little Inger sank into this brewery, and no one could stand it very long there. A cesspool is a wonderful palace compared with the Marsh

Woman's brewery. Every vessel is reeking with horrible smells that would turn a human being faint, and they are packed closely together; but even if there were enough space between them to creep through, it would be impossible because of the slimy toads and the fat snakes that are creeping and slithering along. Into this place little Inger sank, and all the horrible, creeping mess was so icy cold that she shivered in every limb. She became more and more stiff, and the bread stuck fast to her, drawing her as an amber bead draws a slender thread.

The Marsh Woman was at home, for the brewery was being visited that day by the devil and his great-grandmother, the latter a very poisonous old creature who was never idle. She never goes out without taking some needlework with her, and she had brought some this time. She was sewing bits of leather to put in people's shoes, so that they should have no rest. She embroidered lies, and worked up into mischief and slander thoughtless words that would otherwise have fallen harmlessly to the ground. Yes, she could sew, embroider, and weave, that old great-grandmother!

She saw Inger, then put on her spectacles and looked again at her. "That girl has talent," she said. "Let me have her as a souvenir of my visit here; she will make a suitable statue in my great-grandchildren's antechamber." And she was given to her!

Thus little Inger went to hell! People don't always go directly down there; they can go by a roundabout way, when they have the necessary talent.

It was an endless antechamber. It made one dizzy to look forward and dizzy to look backward, and there was a crowd of anxious, exhausted people waiting for the gates of mercy to be opened for them. They would have long to wait. Huge, hideous, fat spiders spun cobwebs, of thousands of years' lasting, over their feet, webs like foot screws or manacles, which held them like copper chains; besides this, every soul was filled with everlasting unrest, an unrest of torment and pain. The miser stood there, lamenting that he had forgotten the key to his money box. Yes, it would take too long to repeat all the tortures and troubles of that place.

Inger was tortured by standing like a statue; it was as if she were fastened to the ground by the loaf of bread.

"This is what comes of trying to have clean feet," she said to herself. "Look at them stare at me!"

Yes, they all stared at her, with evil passions glaring from their eyes, and spoke without a sound coming from their mouths. They were frightful to look at!

"It must be a pleasure to look at me," thought little Inger. "I have a pretty face and nice clothes." And then she turned her eyes; her neck was too stiff to move. My, how soiled she had become in the Marsh Woman's brewery! Her dress was covered with clots of nasty slime; a snake had wound itself in her hair and dangled over her neck; and from every fold of her dress an ugly toad peeped out, barking like an asthmatic lap dog. It was most disagreeable. "But all the others down here look horrible, too," was the only way she could console herself.

Worst of all was the dreadful hunger she felt. Could she stoop down and break off a bit of the bread on which she was standing? No, her back had stiffened, her arms and hands had stiffened, her whole body was like a statue of stone. She could only roll her eyes, but these she could turn entirely around, so she could see behind her, and that was a horrid sight. Then the flies came and crept to and fro across her eyeballs. She blinked her eyes, but the flies did not fly away, for they could not; their wings had been pulled off, and they had become creeping insects. That was another torment added to the hunger, and at last it seemed to her as if part of her insides were eating itself up; she was so empty, so terribly empty.

"If this keeps up much longer, I won't be able to stand it!" she said.

But she had to stand it; her sufferings only increased.

Then a hot tear fell upon her forehead. It trickled over her face and neck, down to the bread at her feet. Then another tear fell, and many more followed. Who could be weeping for little Inger? Had she not a mother up there on earth? A mother's tears of grief for her erring child always reach it, but they do not redeem; they only burn, and they make the pain greater. And this terrible hunger, and being unable to snatch a mouthful of the bread she trod underfoot! She finally had a feeling that everything inside her must have eaten itself up. She became like a thin, hollow reed, taking in every sound.

She could hear distinctly everything that was said about her on the earth above, and what she heard was harsh and evil. Though her mother wept sorrowfully, she still said, "Pride goes before a fall. It was your own ruin, Inger. How you have grieved your mother!" Her mother and everyone else up there knew about her sin, that she had trod upon the bread and had sunk and stayed down; the cowherd who had seen it all from the brow of the hill told them.

"How you have grieved your mother, Inger!" said the mother. "Yes, I expected this!"

"I wish I had never been born!" thought Inger. "I would have been much better off. My mother's tears cannot help me now."

She heard how her employers, the good people who had been like parents to her, spoke. "She was a sinful child," they said. "She did not value the gifts of our Lord, but trampled them underfoot. It will be hard for her to have the gates of mercy opened to let her in."

"They ought to have brought me up better," Inger thought. "They should have beaten the nonsense out of me, if I had any."

She heard that a song had been written about her, "the haughty girl who stepped on a loaf to keep her shoes clean," and was being sung from one end of the country to the other.

"Why should I have to suffer and be punished so severely for such a little thing?" she thought. "The others certainly should be punished for their sins, too! But then, of course, there would be many to punish. Oh, how I am suffering!"

Then her mind became even harder than her shell-like form.

"No one can ever improve in this company! And I don't want to be any better. Look at them glare at me!"

Her heart became harder, and full of hatred for all mankind.

"Now they have something to talk about up there. Oh, how I am suffering!"

When she listened she could hear them telling her story to children as a warning, and the little ones called her "the wicked Inger." "She was so very nasty," they said, "so nasty that she deserved to be punished." The children had nothing but harsh words to speak of her.

But one day, when hunger and misery were gnawing at her hollow body, she heard her name mentioned and her story told to an innocent little girl, who burst into tears of pity for the haughty, clothes-loving Inger.

"But won't she ever come up again?" the child asked.

"She will never come up again," they answered her.

"But if she would ask forgiveness and promise never to be bad again?"

"But she will not ask forgiveness," they said.

"Oh, how I wish she would!" the little girl said in great distress. "I'd give my doll's house if she could come up! It's so dreadful for poor Inger!"

These words reached right down to Inger's heart and seemed almost to make her good. For this was the first time anyone had said, "Poor Inger," and not added anything about her faults. An innocent little child had wept and prayed for her, and she was so touched by it that she wanted to weep herself, but the tears would not come, and that was also a torture.

The years passed up there, but down below there was no change. Inger heard fewer words from above; there was less talk about her. At last one day she heard a deep sigh, and the cry, "Inger, Inger, how miserable you have made me! I knew that you would!" Those were the dying words of her mother.

She heard her name mentioned now and then by her former mistress, and it was in the mildest way that she spoke: "I wonder if I will ever see you again, Inger! One never knows where one is to go!" But Inger knew that her kindly mistress would never descend to the place where *she* was.

Again a long time passed, slowly and bitterly. Then Inger heard her name again, and she beheld above her what seemed to be two bright stars shining down on her. They were two mild eyes that were closing on earth. So many years had passed since a little girl had wept over "Poor Inger" that that child had become an old woman, now being called by the Lord to Himself. At that last hour, when the thoughts and deeds of a lifetime pass in review, she remembered very clearly how, as a tiny child, she had wept over the sad story of Inger. That time and that sorrow were so intensely in the old woman's mind at the moment of death that she cried with all her heart, "My Lord, have I not often, like poor Inger, trampled underfoot Your blessed gifts and counted them of no value? Have I not often been guilty of the sin of pride and vanity in my inmost heart? But in Your mercy You did not let me sink into the abyss, but did sustain me! Oh, forsake me not in my final hour!"

Then the old woman's eyes closed, but the eyes of her soul were opened to things formerly hidden; and as Inger had been so vividly present in her last thoughts she could see the poor girl, see how deeply she had sunk. And at that dreadful sight the gentle soul burst into tears; in the kingdom of heaven itself she stood like a child and wept for the fate of the unhappy Inger. Her tears and prayers came like an echo down to the hollow, empty shape that held the imprisoned, tortured soul. And that soul was overwhelmed by all that unexpected love from above. One of God's angels wept for her! Why was this granted her?

The tormented soul gathered into one thought all the deeds of its earthly life, and trembled with tears, such tears as Inger had never wept before. Grief filled her whole being. And as in deepest humility she thought that for her the gates of mercy would never be opened, a brilliant ray penetrated down into the abyss to her; it was a ray more powerful than the sunbeams that melt the snowmen that boys make in their yards. And under this ray, more swiftly than the snowflake falling upon a child's warm lips melts into a drop of water, the petrified figure of Inger evaporated; then a tiny bird arose and followed the zigzag path of the ray up to the world of mankind.

But it seemed terrified and shy of all about it; as if ashamed and wishing to avoid all living creatures, it hastily concealed itself in a dark hole in a crumbling wall. There it sat trembling all over, and could utter no sound, for it had no voice. It sat for a long time before it dared to peer out and gaze at the beauty about; yes, there was beauty indeed. The air was so fresh and soft; the moon shone so clearly; the trees and flowers were so fragrant; and the bird sat in such comfort, with feathers clean and dainty. How all creation spoke of love and beauty! The bird wanted to sing out the thoughts that filled its breast, but it could not; gladly would it have sung like the nightingale or the cuckoo in the springtime. Our Lord, who hears the voiceless hymn of praise even from a worm, understood the psalm of thanksgiving that swelled in the heart of the bird, as the psalm echoed in the heart of David before it took shape in words.

For weeks these mute feelings of gratitude increased. Someday surely they would find a voice, perhaps with the first stroke of the wing performing some good deed. Could not this happen?

Now came the feast of holy Christmas. Close by the wall a farmer set up a pole and tied an unthreshed bundle of oats on it, that the fowls of the air might also have a merry Christmas, and a joyous meal in this, the day of our Saviour.

Brightly the sun rose that Christmas morning and shone down upon the oats and all the chirping birds that gathered around the pole. Then from the wall there came a faint "tweet, tweet." The swelling thoughts had at last found a voice, and the tiny sound was a whole song of joy as the bird flew forth from its hiding place; in the realm of heaven they well knew who this bird was.

The winter was unusually severe. The ponds were frozen over thickly; the birds and wild creatures of the forest had very little food. The tiny bird flew about the country roads, and whenever it chanced to find a few grains of corn fallen in the ruts made by the sleds, it would eat but a single grain itself, while calling the other hungry birds, that they might have some food. Then it would fly into the towns and search closely, and wherever kindly hands had strewed bread crumbs outside the windows for the birds, it would eat only a single crumb and give all the rest away.

By the end of the winter the bird had found and given away so many crumbs of bread that they would have equaled in weight the loaf upon which little Inger had stepped to keep her fine shoes from being soiled; and when it had found and given away the last crumb, the gray wings of the bird suddenly became white and expanded.

"Look, there flies a sea swallow over the sea!" the children said as they saw the white bird. Now it seemed to dip into the water; now it rose into the bright sunshine; it gleamed in the air; it was not possible to see what became of it; they said that it flew straight into the sun.