

Soup from Sausage Skewer

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Intermediate

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We had such an excellent dinner yesterday,” said an old lady-mouse to another who had not been present at the feast. “I sat number twenty-one below the mouse-king, which was not a bad place. Shall I tell you what we had? Everything was excellent—moldy bread, tallow candle, and sausage.

“Then, when we had finished that course, the same came on all over again; it was as good as two feasts. We were very sociable, and there was as much joking and fun as if we had been all of one family circle. Nothing was left but the sausage skewers, and this formed a subject of conversation till at last some one used the expression, ‘Soup from sausage sticks’; or, as the people in the neighboring country call it, ‘Soup from a sausage skewer.’

“Every one had heard the expression, but no one had ever tasted the soup, much less prepared it. A capital toast was drunk to the inventor of the soup, and some one said he ought to be made a relieving officer to the poor. Was not that witty?

“Then the old mouse-king rose and promised that the young lady-mouse who should learn how best to prepare this much-admired and savory soup should be his queen, and a year and a day should be allowed for the purpose.”

“That was not at all a bad proposal,” said the other mouse; “but how is the soup made?”

“Ah, that is more than I can tell you. All the young lady-mice were asking the same question. They wish very much to be the queen, but they do not want to take the trouble to go out into the world to learn how to make soup, which it is absolutely necessary to do first.

“It is not every one who would care to leave her family or her happy corner by the fireside at home, even to be made queen. It is not always easy in foreign lands to find bacon and cheese rind every day, and, after all, it is not pleasant to endure hunger and perhaps be eaten alive by the cat.”

Probably some such thoughts as these discouraged the majority from going out into the world to collect the required information. Only four mice gave notice that they were ready to set out on the journey.

They were young and sprightly, but poor. Each of them wished to visit one of the four divisions of the world, to see which of them would be most favored by fortune. Each took a sausage skewer as a traveler’s staff and to remind her of the object of her journey.

They left home early in May, and none of them returned till the first of May in the following year, and then only three of them. Nothing was seen or heard of the fourth, although the day of decision was close at hand. “Ah, yes, there is always some trouble mingled with the greatest pleasure,” said the mouse-king. But he gave orders that all the mice within a circle of many miles should be invited at once.

They were to assemble in the kitchen, and the three travelers were to stand in a row before them, and a sausage skewer covered with crape was to stand in the place of the missing mouse. No one dared express an opinion until the king spoke and desired one of them to proceed with her story. And now we shall hear what she said.

WHAT THE FIRST LITTLE MOUSE SAW AND HEARD ON HER TRAVELS

“When I first went out into the world,” said the little mouse, “I fancied, as so many of my age do, that I already knew everything—but it was not so. It takes years to acquire great knowledge.

“I went at once to sea, in a ship bound for the north. I had been told that the ship’s cook must know how to prepare every dish at sea, and it is easy enough to do that with plenty of sides of bacon, and large tubs of salt

meat and musty flour. There I found plenty of delicate food but no opportunity to learn how to make soup from a sausage skewer.

“We sailed on for many days and nights; the ship rocked fearfully, and we did not escape without a wetting. As soon as we arrived at the port to which the ship was bound, I left it and went on shore at a place far towards the north. It is a wonderful thing to leave your own little corner at home, to hide yourself in a ship where there are sure to be some nice snug corners for shelter, then suddenly to find yourself thousands of miles away in a foreign land.

“I saw large, pathless forests of pine and birch trees, which smelt so strong that I sneezed and thought of sausage. There were great lakes also, which looked as black as ink at a distance but were quite clear when I came close to them. Large swans were floating upon them, and I thought at first they were only foam, they lay so still; but when I saw them walk and fly, I knew directly what they were. They belonged to the goose species. One could see that by their walk, for no one can successfully disguise his family descent.

“I kept with my own kind and associated with the forest and field mice, who, however, knew very little—especially about what I wanted to know and what had actually made me travel abroad.

“The idea that soup could be made from a sausage skewer was so startling to them that it was repeated from one to another through the whole forest. They declared that the problem would never be solved—that the thing was an impossibility. How little I thought that in this place, on the very first night, I should be initiated into the manner of its preparation!

“It was the height of summer, which the mice told me was the reason that the forest smelt so strong, and that the herbs were so fragrant, and that the lakes with the white, swimming swans were so dark and yet so clear.

“On the margin of the wood, near several houses, a pole as large as the mainmast of a ship had been erected, and from the summit hung wreaths of flowers and fluttering ribbons. It was the Maypole. Lads and lasses danced round it and tried to outdo the violins of the musicians with their singing. They were as gay as ever at sunset and in the moonlight, but I took no part in the merrymaking. What has a little mouse to do with a Maypole dance? I sat in the soft moss and held my sausage skewer tight. The moon shone particularly bright on one spot where stood a tree covered with very fine moss. I may almost venture to say that it was as fine and soft

as the fur of the mouse-king, but it was green, which is a color very agreeable to the eye.

“All at once I saw the most charming little people marching towards me. They did not reach higher than my knee, although they looked like human beings but were better proportioned. They called themselves elves, and wore clothes that were very delicate and fine, for they were made of the leaves of flowers, trimmed with the wings of flies and gnats. The effect was by no means bad.

“They seemed to be seeking something—I knew not what, till at last one of them espied me. They came towards me, and the foremost pointed to my sausage skewer, saying: ‘There, that is just what we want. See, it is pointed at the top; is it not capital?’ The longer he looked at my pilgrim’s staff the more delighted he became.

“I will lend it to you,’ said I, ‘but not to keep.’

“Oh, no, we won’t keep it!’ they all cried. Then they seized the skewer, which I gave up to them, and dancing with it to the tree covered with delicate moss, set it up in the middle of the green. They wanted a Maypole, and the one they now had seemed made especially for them. This they decorated so beautifully that it was quite dazzling to look at. Little spiders spun golden threads around it, and it was hung with fluttering veils and flags, as delicately white as snow glittering in the moonlight. Then they took colors from the butterfly’s wing, sprinkling them over the white drapery until it gleamed as if covered with flowers and diamonds, and I could no longer recognize my sausage skewer. Such a Maypole as this has never been seen in all the world.

“Then came a great company of real elves. Nothing could be finer than their clothes. They invited me to be present at the feast, but I was to keep at a certain distance because I was too large for them. Then began music that sounded like a thousand glass bells, and was so full and strong that I thought it must be the song of the swans. I fancied also that I heard the voices of the cuckoo and the blackbird, and it seemed at last as if the whole forest sent forth glorious melodies—the voices of children, the tinkling of bells, and the songs of the birds. And all this wonderful melody came from the elfin Maypole. My sausage peg was a complete peal of bells. I could scarcely believe that so much could have been produced from it, till I remembered into what hands it had fallen. I was so much affected that I wept tears such as a little mouse can weep, but they were tears of joy.

“The night was far too short for me; there are no long nights there in summer, as we often have in this part of

the world. When the morning dawned and the gentle breeze rippled the glassy mirror of the forest lake, all the delicate veils and flags fluttered away into thin air. The waving garlands of the spider's web, the hanging bridges and galleries, or whatever else they may be called, vanished away as if they had never been. Six elves brought me back my sausage skewer and at the same time asked me to make any request, which they would grant if it lay in their power. So I begged them, if they could, to tell me how to make soup from a sausage skewer.

“How do we make it?” asked the chief of the elves, with a smile. ‘Why, you have just seen us. You scarcely knew your sausage skewer again, I am sure.’

“They think themselves very wise,’ thought I to myself. Then I told them all about it, and why I had traveled so far, and also what promise had been made at home to the one who should discover the method of preparing this soup.

“What good will it do the mouse-king or our whole mighty kingdom,’ I asked, ‘for me to have seen all these beautiful things? I cannot shake the sausage peg and say, “Look, here is the skewer, and now the soup will come.” That would only produce a dish to be served when people were keeping a fast.’

“Then the elf dipped his finger into the cup of a violet and said, ‘Look, I will anoint your pilgrim's staff, so that when you return to your home and enter the king's castle, you have only to touch the king with your staff and violets will spring forth, even in the coldest winter time. I think I have given you something worth carrying home, and a little more than something.’”

Before the little mouse explained what this something more was, she stretched her staff toward the king, and as it touched him the most beautiful bunch of violets sprang forth and filled the place with their perfume. The smell was so powerful that the mouse-king ordered the mice who stood nearest the chimney to thrust their tails into the fire that there might be a smell of burning, for the perfume of the violets was overpowering and not the sort of scent that every one liked.

“But what was the something more, of which you spoke just now?” asked the mouse-king.

“Why,” answered the little mouse, “I think it is what they call ‘effect.’” Thereupon she turned the staff round, and behold, not a single flower was to be seen on it! She now held only the naked skewer, and lifted it up as a

conductor lifts his baton at a concert.

“Violets, the elf told me,” continued the mouse, “are for the sight, the smell, and the touch; so we have only to produce the effect of hearing and tasting.” Then, as the little mouse beat time with her staff, there came sounds of music; not such music as was heard in the forest, at the elfin feast, but such as is often heard in the kitchen—the sounds of boiling and roasting. It came quite suddenly, like wind rushing through the chimneys, and it seemed as if every pot and kettle were boiling over.

The fire shovel clattered down on the brass fender, and then, quite as suddenly, all was still,—nothing could be heard but the light, vapory song of the teakettle, which was quite wonderful to hear, for no one could rightly distinguish whether the kettle was just beginning to boil or just going to stop. And the little pot steamed, and the great pot simmered, but without any regard for each other; indeed, there seemed no sense in the pots at all. As the little mouse waved her baton still more wildly, the pots foamed and threw up bubbles and boiled over, while again the wind roared and whistled through the chimney, and at last there was such a terrible hubbub that the little mouse let her stick fall.

“That is a strange sort of soup,” said the mouse-king. “Shall we not now hear about the preparation?”

“That is all,” answered the little mouse, with a bow.

“That all!” said the mouse-king; “then we shall be glad to hear what information the next may have to give us.”

WHAT THE SECOND MOUSE HAD TO TELL

“I was born in the library, at a castle,” said the second mouse. “Very few members of our family ever had the good fortune to get into the dining room, much less into the storeroom. To-day and while on my journey are the only times I have ever seen a kitchen. We were often obliged to suffer hunger in the library, but we gained a great deal of knowledge. The rumor reached us of the royal prize offered to those who should be able to make soup from a sausage skewer.

“Then my old grandmother sought out a manuscript,—which she herself could not read, to be sure, but she had heard it read,—and in it were written these words, ‘Those who are poets can make soup of sausage skewers.’ She asked me if I was a poet. I told her I felt myself quite innocent of any such pretensions. Then she said I

must go out and make myself a poet. I asked again what I should be required to do, for it seemed to me quite as difficult as to find out how to make soup of a sausage skewer. My grandmother had heard a great deal of reading in her day, and she told me that three principal qualifications were necessary—understanding, imagination, and feeling. ‘If you can manage to acquire these three, you will be a poet, and the sausage-skewer soup will seem quite simple to you.’

“So I went forth into the world and turned my steps toward the west, that I might become a poet. Understanding is the most important matter of all. I was sure of that, for the other two qualifications are not thought much of; so I went first to seek understanding. Where was I to find it?

“Go to the ant and learn wisdom,’ said the great Jewish king. I learned this from living in a library. So I went straight on till I came to the first great ant hill. There I set myself to watch, that I might become wise. The ants are a very respectable people; they are wisdom itself. All they do is like the working of a sum in arithmetic, which comes right. ‘To work, and to lay eggs,’ say they, ‘and to provide for posterity, is to live out your time properly.’ This they truly do. They are divided into clean and dirty ants, and their rank is indicated by a number. The ant-queen is number One. Her opinion is the only correct one on everything, and she seems to have in her the wisdom of the whole world. This was just what I wished to acquire. She said a great deal that was no doubt very clever—yet it sounded like nonsense to me. She said the ant hill was the loftiest thing in the world, although close to the mound stood a tall tree which no one could deny was loftier, much loftier. Yet she made no mention of the tree.

“One evening an ant lost herself on this tree. She had crept up the stem, not nearly to the top but higher than any ant had ever ventured, and when at last she returned home she said that she had found something in her travels much higher than the ant hill. The rest of the ants considered this an insult to the whole community, and condemned her to wear a muzzle and live in perpetual solitude.

“A short time afterwards another ant got on the tree and made the same journey and the same discovery. But she spoke of it cautiously and indefinitely, and as she was one of the superior ants and very much respected, they believed her. And when she died they erected an egg-shell as a monument to her memory, for they cultivated a great respect for science.

“I saw,” said the little mouse, “that the ants were always running to and fro with their burdens on their backs.

Once I saw one of them, who had dropped her load, try very hard to raise it again, but she did not succeed. Two others came up and tried with all their strength to help her, till they nearly dropped their own burdens. Then they were obliged to stop a moment, for every one must think of himself first. The ant-queen remarked that their conduct that day showed that they possessed kind hearts and good understanding. ‘These two qualities,’ she continued, ‘place us ants in the highest degree above all other reasonable beings. Understanding must therefore stand out prominently among us, and my wisdom is greatest.’ So saying, she raised herself on her two hind legs, that no one else might be mistaken for her. I could not, therefore, have made a mistake, so I ate her up. We are to go to the ants to learn wisdom, and I had secured the queen.

“I now turned and went nearer to the lofty tree already mentioned, which was an oak. It had a tall trunk, with a wide-spreading top, and was very old. I knew that a living being dwelt here, a dryad, as she is called, who is born with the tree and dies with it. I had heard this in the library, and here was just such a tree and in it an oak maiden. She uttered a terrible scream when she caught sight of me so near to her. Like women, she was very much afraid of mice, and she had more real cause for fear than they have, for I might have gnawed through the tree on which her life depended.

“I spoke to her in a friendly manner and begged her to take courage. At last she took me up in her delicate hand, and I told her what had brought me out into the world. She told me that perhaps on that very evening she would be able to obtain for me one of the two treasures for which I was seeking. She told me that Phantæsus, the genius of the imagination, was her very dear friend; that he was as beautiful as the god of love; that he rested many an hour with her under the leafy boughs of the tree, which then rustled and waved more than ever. He called her his dryad, she said, and the tree his tree, for the grand old oak with its gnarled trunk was just to his taste. The root, which spread deep into the earth, and the top, which rose high in the fresh air, knew the value of the drifting snow, the keen wind, and the warm sunshine, as it ought to be known. ‘Yes,’ continued the dryad, ‘the birds sing up above in the branches and talk to each other about the beautiful fields they have visited in foreign lands. On one of the withered boughs a stork has built his nest—it is beautifully arranged, and, besides, it is pleasant to hear a little about the land of the pyramids. All this pleases Phantæsus, but it is not enough for him. I am obliged to relate to him of my life in the woods and to go back to my childhood, when I was little and the tree so small and delicate that a stinging nettle could overshadow it, and I have to tell everything that has happened since then until now, when the tree is so large and strong. Sit you

down now under the green bindwood and pay attention. When Phantæsus comes I will find an opportunity to lay hold of his wing and to pull out one of the little feathers. That feather you shall have. A better was never given to any poet, and it will be quite enough for you.'

"And when Phantæsus came the feather was plucked," said the little mouse, "and I seized and put it in water and kept it there till it was quite soft. It was very heavy and indigestible, but I managed to nibble it up at last. It is not so easy to nibble oneself into a poet, there are so many things to get through. Now, however, I had two of them, understanding and imagination, and through these I knew that the third was to be found in the library.

"A great man has said and written that there are novels whose sole and only use appears to be to attempt to relieve mankind of overflowing tears—a kind of sponge, in fact, for sucking up feelings and emotions. I remembered a few of these books. They had always appeared tempting to the appetite, for they had been much read and were so greasy that they must have absorbed no end of emotions in themselves.

"I retraced my steps to the library and literally devoured a whole novel—that is, properly speaking, the interior, or soft part of it. The crust, or binding, I left. When I had digested not only this, but a second, I felt a stirring within me. I then ate a small piece of a third romance and felt myself a poet. I said it to myself and told others the same. I had headache and backache and I cannot tell what aches besides. I thought over all the stories that may be said to be connected with sausage pegs; and all that has ever been written about skewers, and sticks, and staves, and splinters came to my thoughts—the ant-queen must have had a wonderfully clear understanding. I remembered the man who placed in his mouth a white stick, by which he could make himself and the stick invisible. I thought of sticks as hobbyhorses, staves of music or rime, of breaking a stick over a man's back, and of Heaven knows how many more phrases of the same sort, relating to sticks, staves, and skewers. All my thoughts ran on skewers, sticks of wood, and staves. As I am at last a poet and have worked terribly hard to make myself one, I can of course make poetry on anything. I shall therefore be able to wait upon you every day in the week with a poetical history of a skewer. And that is my soup."

"In that case," said the mouse-king, "we will hear what the third mouse has to say."

"Squeak, squeak," cried a little mouse at the kitchen door. It was the fourth, and not the third, of the four who were contending for the prize, the one whom the rest supposed to be dead. She shot in like an arrow and overturned the sausage peg that had been covered with crape. She had been running day and night, for

although she had traveled in a baggage train, by railway, yet she had arrived almost too late. She pressed forward, looking very much ruffled.

She had lost her sausage skewer but not her voice, and she began to speak at once, as if they waited only for her and would hear her only—as if nothing else in the world were of the least consequence. She spoke out so clearly and plainly, and she had come in so suddenly, that no one had time to stop her or to say a word while she was speaking. This is what she said.

WHAT THE FOURTH MOUSE, WHO SPOKE BEFORE THE THIRD, HAD TO TELL

“I started off at once to the largest town,” said she, “but the name of it has escaped me. I have a very bad memory for names. I was carried from the railway, with some goods on which duties had not been paid, to the jail, and on arriving I made my escape, running into the house of the keeper. He was speaking of his prisoners, especially of one who had uttered thoughtless words. These words had given rise to other words, and at length they were written down and registered. ‘The whole affair is like making soup of sausage skewers,’ said he, ‘but the soup may cost him his neck.’

“Now this raised in me an interest for the prisoner,” continued the little mouse, “and I watched my opportunity and slipped into his apartment, for there is a mousehole to be found behind every closed door.

“The prisoner, who had a great beard and large, sparkling eyes, looked pale. There was a lamp burning, but the walls were so black that they only looked the blacker for it. The prisoner scratched pictures and verses with white chalk on the black walls, but I did not read the verses. I think he found his confinement wearisome, so that I was a welcome guest. He enticed me with bread crumbs, with whistling, and with gentle words, and seemed so friendly towards me that by degrees I gained confidence in him and we became friends. He divided his bread and water with me and gave me cheese and sausage, and I began to love him. Altogether, I must own that it was a very pleasant intimacy. He let me run about on his hand, on his arm, into his sleeve, and even into his beard. He called me his little friend, and I forgot for what I had come out into the world; forgot my sausage skewer, which I had laid in a crack in the floor, where it is still lying. I wished to stay with him always, for I knew that if I went away, the poor prisoner would have no one to be his friend, which is a sad thing.

“I stayed, but he did not. He spoke to me so mournfully for the last time, gave me double as much bread and

cheese as usual, and kissed his hand to me. Then he went away and never came back. I know nothing more of his history.

“The jailer took possession of me now. He said something about soup from a sausage skewer, but I could not trust him. He took me in his hand, certainly, but it was to place me in a cage like a treadmill. Oh, how dreadful it was! I had to run round and round without getting any farther, and only to make everybody laugh.

“The jailer’s granddaughter was a charming little thing. She had merry eyes, curly hair like the brightest gold, and such a smiling mouth.

“‘You poor little mouse,’ said she one day, as she peeped into my cage, ‘I will set you free.’ She then drew forth the iron fastening, and I sprang out on the window-sill, and from thence to the roof. Free! free! that was all I could think of, and not of the object of my journey.

“It grew dark, and as night was coming on I found a lodging in an old tower, where dwelt a watchman and an owl. I had no confidence in either of them, least of all in the owl, which is like a cat and has a great failing, for she eats mice. One may, however, be mistaken sometimes, and I was now, for this was a respectable and well-educated old owl, who knew more than the watchman and even as much as I did myself. The young owls made a great fuss about everything, but the only rough words she would say to them were, ‘You had better go and try to make some soup from sausage skewers.’ She was very indulgent and loving to her own children. Her conduct gave me such confidence in her that from the crack where I sat I called out ‘Squeak.’

“This confidence pleased her so much that she assured me she would take me under her own protection and that not a creature should do me harm. The fact was, she wickedly meant to keep me in reserve for her own eating in the winter, when food would be scarce. Yet she was a very clever lady-owl. She explained to me that the watchman could only hoot with the horn that hung loose at his side and that he was so terribly proud of it that he imagined himself an owl in the tower, wanted to do great things, but only succeeded in small—soup from a sausage skewer.

“Then I begged the owl to give me the recipe for this soup. ‘Soup from a sausage skewer,’ said she, ‘is only a proverb amongst mankind and may be understood in many ways. Each believes his own way the best, and, after all, the proverb signifies nothing.’ ‘Nothing!’ I exclaimed. I was quite struck. Truth is not always

agreeable, but truth is above everything else, as the old owl said. I thought over all this and saw quite plainly that if truth was really so far above everything else, it must be much more valuable than soup from a sausage skewer. So I hastened to get away, that I might be in time and bring what was highest and best and above everything—namely, the truth.

“The mice are enlightened people, and the mouse-king is above them all. He is therefore capable of making me queen for the sake of truth.”

“Your truth is a falsehood,” said the mouse who had not yet spoken. “I can prepare the soup, and I mean to do so.”

HOW IT WAS PREPARED

“I did not travel,” said the third mouse, “I stayed in this country; that was the right way. One gains nothing by traveling. Everything can be acquired here quite as easily, so I stayed at home. I have not obtained what I know from supernatural beings; I have neither swallowed it nor learned it from conversing with owls. I have gained it all from my own reflections and thoughts. Will you now set the kettle on the fire—so? Now pour the water in, quite full up to the brim; place it on the fire; make up a good blaze; keep it burning, that the water may boil, for it must boil over and over. There, now I throw in the skewer. Will the mouse-king be pleased now to dip his tail into the boiling water and stir it round with the tail? The longer the king stirs it the stronger the soup will become. Nothing more is necessary, only to stir it.”

“Can no one else do this?” asked the king.

“No,” said the mouse; “only in the tail of the mouse-king is this power contained.”

And the water boiled and bubbled, as the mouse-king stood close beside the kettle. It seemed rather a dangerous performance, but he turned round and put out his tail, as mice do in a dairy when they wish to skim the cream from a pan of milk with their tails and afterwards lick it off. But the mouse-king’s tail had only just touched the hot steam when he sprang away from the chimney in a great hurry, exclaiming:

“Oh, certainly, by all means, you must be my queen. We will let the soup question rest till our golden wedding, fifty years hence, so that the poor in my kingdom who are then to have plenty of food will have something to

look forward to for a long time, with great joy.”

And very soon the wedding took place. Many of the mice, however, as they were returning home, said that the soup could not be properly called “soup from a sausage skewer,” but “soup from a mouse’s tail.” They acknowledged that some of the stories were very well told, but thought that the whole might have been managed differently.

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