

What's the Use of It?

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German

Intermediate
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In a village that was close to the great forest, though it had already become the suburb of a large town, lived a little girl named Hansi Herzchen. She was the seventh child of a family of seven, and she lived at No 7 — Street. So you see she was a lucky child, for seven is always a lucky number; but nothing had happened to prove her luck as yet.

Her father was a clerk in the post office at the neighbouring town. He would have found it hard to make two ends meet with seven little mouths to fill, but that his wife had brought him substantial help. She was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer peasant and had a considerable dowry when she married. Moreover she was extremely thrifty and industrious. She never spent a halfpenny without carefully considering if a farthing would not do as well. Better £1 in the pocket than 19s. 11½d., she used to say. She drove wonderful bargains at the market. She had no eyes for the artistic and ornamental, though her house was so spick and span, that it was good to look at in its cleanliness and order. She had stored up everything she had possessed since her early youth, and was said to use pins that were at least twenty years old. She managed to put everything to use, and the boys' knickers were sometimes made of queer materials.

One expression little Hansi often heard at home and that was the word "useful." When she brought in a fresh bunch of darling, pink-tipped daisies and wanted to find a corner for them and a tiny drop of water to put them in, the whole family would exclaim: "Throw them away, what do you want with those half-dead weeds; they're of no use." If one of the neighbours gave her a ball or toy, it was the same story: "We've no room for such

rubbish here.” Each child possessed a money-box, and every coin was immediately put in. They had never had a penny to spend in their lives.

The garden was planted solely with vegetables and potatoes and herbs of the most useful character. The scarlet beans in summer, however, would brighten it up, and field poppies and dandelions sprang up in a quite miraculous way to Hansi’s delight. For in each flower was a jolly little fairy, who talked to her and told her stories, because of her being a seventh child and living at No. 7. Perhaps, too, because Hansi’s natural disposition made her look out for wonders, and her loving heart included the field flowers among her friends.

Christmas was coming on; a pig had been killed. Hansi’s father and mother and big brother Paul stayed up all night making sausages, and the children had sausage soup for dinner during the next week.

In preparation for Christmas, Hansi’s mother baked large cakes (called Stollen) of a plain quality, with currants few and far between. Food had become very expensive during the last few years, and no one could deny that seven children were a handful.

She went in to town and returned by electric tram, with the useful things that were intended for Christmas presents for the children, namely:

A pair of boots for Paul,
A school-cape for Marie,
Handkerchiefs for Fritz with his name
embroidered on them in red cotton,
Stockings for Emma,
A warm hood for Gretchen,
An oilcloth pinafore for Karlchen,
who had a special talent for getting dirty,
And lastly a new pinafore for Hansi.

“Now we might be said to have everything ready for Christmas,” said Mrs Herzchen, on her return home, “if it were not for the Christmas tree. I suppose we shall have to pay at least one and six for it, and then there are the candles and apples, balls and sweets. It does seem absurd to waste good money on such rubbish. What can be the use of it?”

She talked away in this manner, until she made up her mind to do without the tree for once.

“Your father has no time to see about it,” she said to the children. “He is taken up with looking after other people’s rubbishing letters and parcels, and I can’t be bothered—so put the idea out of your heads, you won’t get a tree this year.”

The seven children felt very indignant; for it is almost a disgrace in Germany to have no tree; it is worse than going without a pudding on Christmas Day in England. The very poorest families manage somehow to have their tree to light on Christmas Eve. Still they were trained to implicit obedience and respect for their mother, and did not dare grumble much openly.

Mrs Herzchen did not consult her husband about it; so he expected his tree as usual. The good woman felt rather uncomfortable, as if she had either done something wrong, or omitted doing what was right; but she justified herself by saying continually to herself “What’s the use of it?”

Hansi dreamt that night of a beautiful Christmas tree that reached up to the sky and was covered with shining silver, like cobwebs in the frost, and lit by real stars. She determined that somehow or other they should have

their Christmas tree as usual.

When she came out of school at eleven o'clock, she trotted along in the opposite way to home, along the wide high road leading to the woods, with the twisted apple-trees on either side. She made a little bobbing curtsy, and said "good day" to everyone she met who noticed her at all; for she had been taught to be polite and friendly.

The ground was frozen and sparkled brightly; the air brought the fresh colour into her cheeks. She had on a warm hood and cape and a woollen scarf—for her mother was kind-hearted at the bottom and looked well after their material comforts. Hansi's pretty fair curls peeped out from under the red hood, her blue eyes with their dark lashes were more starry than usual from excitement.

The fir woods looked purple-black against the white fields, and as she came near, she saw the fir-trees covered with silver hoar frost "almost like the tree in my dream," she thought. Her heart beat faster for a moment as she entered the shade of the solemn evergreen trees, but she did not feel naughty to be running away from home. She felt rather as if she were fulfilling a mission that had been laid upon her.

Meanwhile her mother was worrying and wondering what could have happened that her little girl did not return at the usual time. Then she remembered that Hansi often went home with her friend Barbara Arndt, and then they did their lessons together before dinner. That doubtless accounted for her non-appearance.

Hansi wandered on and on, and the woods seemed deserted. She picked up fir cones and beech nuts and acorns and filled her pinafore with them, also frosted fern leaves and dry grasses exquisitely outlined with hoar frost went into her apron.

At last she stopped before a little fir-tree. This was just the beautiful little tree she wanted. It spread out its branches symmetrically on all sides, and was slender and straight at the top. "That will just do for me! If only I could get it home," she thought. She tugged at it with her little hands, dropping some of her treasures, but of course it would not move. Just then she heard something stir, and looking round she saw a squirrel peeping at her from behind a big oak-tree near by. This was a wonder in itself if she had known; for squirrels are usually fast asleep in the cold weather, and only wake once or twice to eat some of their store of nuts.

"O, Mr Squirrel, can't you help me," Hansi said. Off he went, round and round the trunk, and then suddenly,

with a great spring and his tail spread out for a sail, he alighted on Hansi's tree. He stared at her in a friendly way, and then stretched out one of his dear little paws and offered her a nut, politely cracking it for her first with his sharp teeth which had grown very long whilst he was asleep. She ate it at once, but looked anxious. "O, Mr Squirrel, do cut down this tree for me, and help me to carry it home," she said, "or else we shall have no Christmas tree, and that would be dreadful!"

Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. Mr Squirrel looked at her with his bright eyes, twisted round suddenly, like a cat trying to catch its own tail, and offered her another nut.

"O, Mr Squirrel, do," she said again.

He offered her a third nut, and then he whistled shrilly; it sounded more like a baby crying than a whistle. Then to her surprise, as she looked down the wood path, Hansi saw a troop of little men, such as you see on Christmas cards in Germany, with red caps and green jackets and wooden shoes turned up at the toes. "Real Heinzelmenn and no mistake," thought Hansi delightedly, "they can help me, if anyone can." She counted them, they were seven in number, like Snowdrop's dwarfs. They made quite a noise as they marched up in order, whistling a merry tune. When they saw Hansi, they took off their red caps, and their white hair flew about them like a mist, till Hansi could hardly see them any more. The squirrel screamed and shouted at them, and they answered him; but Hansi could not understand at first what it was all about. She thought they must be talking English; she knew a lady who lived near them, and who could only talk English, poor thing. All of a sudden the earth trembled—was it an earthquake? Hansi held tight on to the fir-tree, though its needles hurt her hands. All she saw was the seven little men disappearing into the ground down a long slide such as firemen use, when they are called suddenly from sleep, and are carried by a new mechanical apparatus direct from one floor to the other. The earth closed up again, and Hansi thought it must be all a dream; but in two seconds they were back again with silver hatchets and silver pails. With the hatchets they immediately began to hack away at the tree. They made tremendous efforts, and became quite red in the face. The last moment before it was finally felled, the squirrel bounded off, and tossed a nut to Hansi, who caught it cleverly in her pinafore.

"Dear little men," she said, "may I have the tree? Will you bring it home for me, and I will give you all my Christmas cake? But I have nothing to hang on it, and make it pretty," she continued. The dwarfs began to chatter again like so many girls, all trying to say the same thing at once. Then they marched along, dragging

the tree with them.

“O, Mr Dwarf, that’s the wrong way home, I’m sure,” said Hansi. But she followed them all the same. They came to where a crystal stream leapt over a little group of rocks. The dwarfs held their buckets under the cascade, and caught some drops. The drops turned into silver fish, each with a little loop on the end of its tail, all ready to hang on the tree.

They then took Hansi’s pine cones and ferns and grasses, and even collected the frozen cobwebs from the bushes and let the spray from the waters fall on them, and lo and behold the most exquisite gems were ready for the decoration of the Christmas tree.

“You live at No 7, and you are seven years old,” said the eldest of the dwarfs, addressing Hansi. (“However could he have known that?” she thought.) “Perhaps you can tell me what seven times seven makes?”

Hansi considered a moment. “No, we have not got so far as that in our arithmetic,” she replied. “Twice seven is fourteen, that I know.”

“Seven times seven is forty-nine and is the square of seven,” said the dwarf. “Always remember that, for it is a most important fact in magic!”

Rummaging in his pocket, he took out a note-book and handed a leaf to her with this diagram and inscription on it: “To Hansi from her friend and well-wisher.”

“Thank you very much,” said Hansi, feeling duly impressed, and she never forgot this difficult fact in the multiplication table again, although she didn’t quite understand the diagram, and in fact lost it on the way home.

The dwarfs set up the tree on a clear part of the path, and made a little stand for it of boughs cleverly intertwined and moss between. With many a hop, skip and jump of delight, they hung the silver fish and cones and nuts on it; the cobwebs spread themselves out all over the tree. Then they took red holly berries, and stuck them on the boughs where they turned into red candles. All red and silver was this loveliest of Christmas trees!

When it was finished, there was a momentary thrill, and they all cried “Ah!” in tones of wonder.

Then Hansi noticed that a noble herd of deer had approached; the gentle creatures were looking on with the deepest interest.

The woodbirds came flying from all directions, and sang as if it were summer.

“Dear little men, I think I really ought to be going home,” said Hansi anxiously.

“Come along then,” said Himself. “You must go back along the high road as you came; we are going to play hide-and-seek; but don’t be afraid, you shall have your tree all right, even if it disappears sometimes.”

They now marched along in the homeward direction; but as soon as they came to the road leading out of the woods they vanished without a word of leave-taking. However, Hansi had not gone far down the road, when she saw a Christmas tree that appeared to be walking by itself across the fields. Other people noticed it too, from the road, and thought how queer it looked. “But of course, there is someone behind carrying it,” they said to themselves, and thought no more of the matter. People expect the usual before the unusual, naturally enough, and yet sometimes the unusual is the most probable, as in this case.

Hansi was late for dinner, and had a fine scolding.

“At all events, I suppose you have done your lessons,” said her mother.

“No, mother, I’m afraid not.”

“Well, I never, playing again, I suppose? Now, what can be the use of playing, I should like to know?”

This was an exceptionally stupid question; for most people know that little folk cannot grow mentally without play, any more than flowers can grow without sunshine. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” is not only a proverb, but it is true as well.

It was Christmas Eve. Hansi trembled with excitement. “What’s the use of getting so lively, Hansi?” said her big brother Paul despondently. “You know quite well that we are not to have any tree this year. I shall get a new pair of boots, and you a pinafore; these we should have to have anyway. That’s not what I call a merry Christmas.”

“But the bells are ringing, don’t you hear them? and don’t you think you can see just a glimmer of silver through the door?” said Hansi.

The children looked—well, really, perhaps there was a tree there after all.

Just then their father came in tired, but jolly. “Is everything ready? It is late, I have been detained so long,” he said. “Can we go in at once?”

“I haven’t got a tree this year,” whispered his wife in an anxious voice. “I thought we couldn’t afford it. What’s the use of a Christmas tree? We can spend our money in a more practical way!”

“What nonsense. No Christmas tree! but of course you are joking,” said her husband. “I will slip in, and light the candles.” And with these words he disappeared into the inner room, now so mysterious to the waiting children.

Poor Mrs Herzchen nearly began to cry. If only she had not been so silly! Never, never would she neglect to get a tree again! She ought to have considered other people’s prejudices, and Christmas—O well, Christmas only comes once a year.

“I’ve got a surprise for mother,” whispered Gretel, aged ten. “I am going to recite a Christmas poem.” “And I am going to tell the Christmas story from the Bible,” said Hansi. “I have made a letter-box for father,” said Fritz.

“Hush, hush! the bells are ringing—don’t you hear them across the snow?” the children whispered to one another. “But what is that other bell, so soft, so musical and clear!” “That is the summons for us all to enter,” said Paul.

The door flew open, and there stood the most lovely Christmas tree they had ever seen or imagined, all dazzling with silver; silver cones, silver fish, silver nuts and acorns, and red candles, and over all an exquisitely spun cobweb of frost. “That’s my surprise for you all,” said Hansi, who could hardly contain herself for joy. “I found the tree, and the dear, darling Heinzelman brought it home for me.”

Mrs Herzchen was speechless with astonishment, and her husband not less so. “How very extravagant,” they

said, “but how elegant and beautiful! Who can have given it to us?”

But now the children began to sing the sweet German carol sung in every house on Christmas Eve: “O peaceful night, O holy night,” and then, in her earnest, childish way, Hansi told the story of the birth of the Christ-child in the Manger of Bethlehem.

Gretel then stood up eagerly to recite the carol she had learnt at school.

THE CHILDREN’S KING.

“Dear children come
On Christmas night,
Put on your gowns
Of purest white.

Speak not a word
Until you see
The sweet Christ child
On Mary’s knee.

There lies the Babe
An Infant frail.
Is this the King
Whom nations hail?

A helpless King!
His mother’s arm
Must hold him safe
From threatened harm.

A tender King,
Most young and sweet,
With dimpled hands

And tiny feet!

A Baby King:

Yet cherubim

Veil their bright eyes

To look on Him.

A mighty King!

For God above

Has crowned Him Lord

And King of Love.

Come kneel and pray,

Ye children dear,

The children's King

Is lying here!"

A glow of warmth and happiness illumined the whole family, and they felt nearer to one another than ever before. The tears actually came into their mother's eyes, when she realised that they had so nearly missed this moment of supreme joy.

She felt a little ashamed of her presents, and for once in a way suspected herself of having been too sensible.

"We are not so very poor after all," she thought. "I might have bought a few toys that would have delighted the children's hearts, and not have cost much money. But now it is too late!"

But to her surprise, she did not see her presents at all. For each child there was a gingerbread cake with his or her name on it, and then the most lovely surprises—a beautiful doll for Hansi with real eyelashes, fretwork tools for Paul, a doll's kitchen for Gretel, and so on. For every one of the family there was some delightful gift.

"Thank you, thank you, dear Heinzelmennchen," said Hansi, clasping her hands in ecstasy.

There was a big paper parcel addressed to Mrs Herzchen in a very queer handwriting. She opened it with much excitement, thinking it would contain a silk dress, at least. But lo and behold, all the presents that she had intended for her children, tied together with red tape and a card between, on which this verse was written:

“Useful things
For little folk
Are sensible,
But not a joke.”
Signed Himself!

How the children laughed! and even Mrs Herzchen laughed too, though she felt silly and a little disappointed. “It is all very well to play tricks on me,” she said. “Just look at the Müller children next door. They have plenty of toys and are always sucking sweets; but they never have comfortable, warm clothes on, and they look half fed.”

“Of course, mother, you are right,” said the children, “and you were really joking about the tree. We have never had one half so lovely!”

Mrs Herzchen felt rather embarrassed at this praise. She called her husband’s attention to the things on the tree. “They can’t be made of chocolate,” she said, trying to bite off the corner of a fir cone. It was quite hard. “I do believe they are all solid silver!” she said.

On closer examination, they found a little lion imprinted on each which proved them without doubt to be of real silver.

“I shall sell them at once, or they may vanish away,” she said.

“I should strongly advise you not to do so,” her husband replied, and the children said, “Oh Mother, do let us keep them always, they are so beautiful?”

“But of what use are they?” said the incorrigible mother who, you see, was not yet quite cured.

Meanwhile the story was noised abroad that Hansi had found a treasure in the forest.

The very next day, Christmas Day, as they were eating their goose, stuffed with apples, there was a ring at the

bell—in walked a very pompous Prussian policeman with fierce moustaches.

“Mrs Herzchen here?” he asked abruptly.

“What do you want?” asked that lady, much indignant at being disturbed during her Christmas dinner.

“Young person answering to the name of Hansi Herzchen here?”

“Yes, sir. Please, sir, that’s me,” said Hansi, rising and curtsying, and growing very red.

The policeman produced a paper in which he entered all sorts of memoranda.

“Age and date of birth?” he demanded of Hansi.

“Seven years old, of course,” answered Hansi. “My birthday is on February 27th, if you want to know. It was on a Sunday last year.”

“That’s beside the question.” He looked severe.

“February 27th, 1897,” said Hansi, prompted by her mother.

Residence—temporary or otherwise ——.

Baptism —— date of ——.

Vaccinated ——.

All these facts Hansi’s mother supplied at once. They are so constantly demanded in Germany that she had them always ready at hand, tied up in seven different packets for each child.

Married or single?

Here Hansi giggled, and he entered solemnly the word “spinster.”

“Is that something horrid?” asked Hansi anxiously.

“No, it only means unmarried,” said Paul laughing. “What a fool he is!”

Occupation?

“Please sir, I go to school and learn my lessons, but I play a good deal too.”

“We will write ‘spinster,’” he said, frowning fiercely.

“Now listen to me, child, if you do not wish to go to prison.” The whole family shuddered with horror.

“Take all those silver things off the tree. They are ‘found treasure,’ and belong to the State. You ought to have declared them at once, and saved me all this trouble,” he said.

Hansi began to cry.

Mrs Herzchen was very angry, “Why don’t you mind your own business?” she said. “These things are our property. You will come and demand the clothes off our backs next.”

“Be thankful that I do not accuse you of stealing these valuables,” answered the fellow in a terrible voice.

“But are you sure they are not chocolate after all?” he said. “They look remarkably like it, covered with silver paper, you know.”

He examined them carefully and ejaculating, “Well, I never,” tossed them all into a leather wallet that he had brought with him.

Mrs Herzchen poured forth such a storm of abuse, that he threatened her with an action for libel; but she literally turned him out of doors. Her parting words were: “Get out! Go along and make a fool of yourself if you like.”

Some days afterwards, the man took his treasures to the office and gave them up with a self-important flourish, only to be laughed at for his pains. The cones were just common, ordinary fir cones, and the silver fish had turned into little dead trout, smelling very unpleasant.

He chucked them all away in the street, and this was an episode in his dignified career that he did not like to be reminded of.

Although Hansi's mother still always preferred useful things to artistic and ornamental ones, still she realised that the useful and ornamental may often be combined, and as she dearly loved her children, and saved up money merely on their account, she determined that they should have a merry Christmas every year, without any special help from the kind little Heinzelmén.

And did Hansi give the cake to her dwarf friends as she had promised to do? Why, of course, she did. The children went all together to the forest on New Year's Eve, and found the actual spot where the tree had stood. They placed a large piece of cake on the old stump. But they did not see the Heinzelmén or even the squirrel, although they repeated seven times seven is forty-nine in the hope of attracting them.

Now a dear little Heinzelman, whom I met out for a walk, told me this story "himself"; but he vanished at this point, and so must I. I wish Hansi and all her brothers and sisters a very merry Christmas, and so, I am sure, do you.

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