Alenoushka and Her Brother

Arthur Ransome

Once upon a time there were two orphan children, a little boy and a little girl. Their father and mother were dead, and they had not even an old grandfather to spend his time in telling them stories. They were alone. The little boy was called Vanoushka,[3] and the little girl's name was Alenoushka.[3]

They set out together to walk through the whole of the great wide world. It was a long journey they set out on, and they did not think of any end to it, but only of moving on and on, and never stopping long enough in one place to be unhappy there.

They were travelling one day over a broad plain, padding along on their little bare feet. There were no trees on the plain, no bushes; open flat country as far as you could see, and the great sun up in the sky burning the grass and making their throats dry, and the sandy ground so hot that they could scarcely bear to set their feet on it. All day from early morning they had been walking, and the heat grew greater and greater towards noon.

"Oh," said little Vanoushka, "my throat is so dry. I want a drink. I must have a drink--just a little drink of cool water."

"We must go on," said Alenoushka, "till we come to a well. Then we will drink."

They went on along the track, with their eyes burning and their throats as dry as sand on a stove.

But presently Vanoushka cried out joyfully. He saw a horse's hoofmark in the ground. And it was full of water, like a little well.

"Sister, sister," says he, "the horse has made a little well for me with his great hoof, and now we can have a drink; and oh, but I am thirsty!"

"Not yet, brother," says Alenoushka. "If you drink from the hoofmark of a horse, you will turn into a little foal, and that would never do."

"I am so very thirsty," says Vanoushka; but he did as his sister told him, and they walked on together under the burning sun.

A little farther on Vanoushka saw the hoofmark of a cow, and there was water in it glittering in the sun.

"Sister, sister," says Vanoushka, "the cow has made a little well for me, and now I can have a drink."

"Not yet, brother," says Alenoushka. "If you drink from the hoofmark of a cow, you will turn into a little calf, and that would never do. We must go on till we come to a well. There we will drink and rest ourselves. There will be trees by the well, and shadows, and we will lie down there by the quiet water and cool our hands and feet, and perhaps our eyes will stop burning."

So they went on farther along the track that scorched the bare soles of their feet, and under the sun that burned their heads and their little bare necks. The sun was high in the sky above them, and it seemed to Vanoushka that they would never come to the well.

But when they had walked on and on, and he was nearly crying with thirst, only that the sun had dried up all his tears and burnt them before they had time to come into his eyes, he saw another footprint. It was quite a tiny footprint, divided in the middle--the footprint of a sheep; and in it was a little drop of clear water, sparkling in the sun. He said nothing to his sister, nothing at all. But he went down on his hands and knees and drank that water, that little drop of clear water, to cool his burning throat. And he had no sooner drunk it than he had turned into a little lamb...

"A little white lamb," said Maroosia.

"With a black nose," said Vanya.

A little lamb, said old Peter, a little lamb who ran round and round Alenoushka, frisking and leaping, with its little tail tossing in the air.

Alenoushka looked round for her brother, but could not see him. But there was the little lamb, leaping round her, trying to lick her face, and there in the ground was the print left by the sheep's foot.

She guessed at once what had happened, and burst into tears. There was a hayrick close by, and under the hayrick Alenoushka sat down and wept. The little lamb, seeing her so sad, stood gravely in front of her; but not for long, for he was a little lamb, and he could not help himself. However sad he felt, he had to leap and frisk in the sun, and toss his little white tail.

Presently a fine gentleman came riding by on his big black horse. He stopped when he came to the hayrick. He was very much surprised at seeing a beautiful little girl sitting there, crying her eyes out, while a white lamb frisked this way and that, and played before her, and now and then ran up to her and licked the tears from her face with its little pink tongue.

"What is your name," says the fine gentleman, "and why are you in trouble? Perhaps I may be able to help you."

"My name is Alenoushka, and this is my little brother Vanoushka, whom I love." And she told him the whole story.

"Well, I can hardly believe all that," says the fine gentleman, "But come with me, and I will dress you in fine clothes, and set silver ornaments in your hair, and bracelets of gold on your little brown wrists. And as for the lamb, he shall come too, if you love him. Wherever you are there he shall be, and you shall never be parted from him."

And so Alenoushka took her little brother in her arms, and the fine gentleman lifted them up before him on the big black horse, and galloped home with them across the plain to his big house not far from the river. And when he got home he made a feast and married Alenoushka, and they lived together so happily that good people rejoiced to see them, and bad ones were jealous. And the little lamb lived in the house, and never grew any bigger, but always frisked and played, and followed Alenoushka wherever she went.

And then one day, when the fine gentleman had ridden far away to the town to buy a new bracelet for Alenoushka, there came an old witch. Ugly she was, with only one tooth in her head, and wicked as ever went about the world doing evil to decent folk. She begged from Alenoushka, and said she was hungry, and Alenoushka begged her to share her dinner. And she put a spell in the wine that Alenoushka drank, so that Alenoushka fell ill, and before evening, when the fine gentleman came riding back, had become pale, pale as snow, and as thin as an old stick.

"My dear," says the fine gentleman, "what is the matter with you?"

"Perhaps I shall be better to-morrow," says Alenoushka.

Well, the next day the gentleman rode into the fields, and the old hag came again while he was out.

"Would you like me to cure you?" says she. "I know a way to make you as well as ever you were. Plump you will be, and pretty again, before your husband comes riding home."

"And what must I do?" says Alenoushka, crying to think herself so ugly.

"You must go to the river and bathe this afternoon," says the old witch. "I will be there and put a spell on the water. Secretly you must go, for if any one knows whither you have gone my spell will not work."

So Alenoushka wrapped a shawl about her head, and slipped out of the house and went to the river. Only the little lamb, Vanoushka, knew where she had gone. He followed her, leaping about, and tossing his little white tail. The old witch was waiting for her. She sprang out of the bushes by the riverside, and seized Alenoushka, and tore off her pretty white dress, and fastened a heavy stone about her neck, and threw her from the bank into a deep place, so that she sank to the bottom of the river. Then the old witch, the wicked hag, put on Alenoushka's pretty white dress, and cast a spell, and made herself so like Alenoushka to look at that nobody could tell the difference. Only the little lamb had seen everything that had happened.

The fine gentleman came riding home in the evening, and he rejoiced when he saw his dear Alenoushka well again, with plump pink cheeks, and a smile on her rosy lips.

But the little lamb knew everything. He was sad and melancholy, and would not eat, and went every morning and every evening to the river, and there wandered about the banks, and cried, "Baa, baa," and was answered by the sighing of the wind in the long reeds.

The witch saw that the lamb went off by himself every morning and every evening. She watched where he went, and when she knew she began to hate the lamb; and she gave orders for the sticks to be cut, and the iron cauldron to be heated, and the steel knives made sharp. She sent a servant to catch the lamb; and she said to the fine gentleman, who thought all the time that she was Alenoushka, "It is time for the lamb to be killed, and made into a tasty stew."

The fine gentleman was astonished.

"What," says he, "you want to have the lamb killed? Why, you called it your brother when first I found you by the hayrick in the plain. You were always giving it caresses and sweet words. You loved it so much that I was sick of the sight of it, and now you give orders for its throat to be cut. Truly," says he, "the mind of woman is like the wind in summer."

The lamb ran away when he saw that the servant had come to catch him. He heard the sharpening of the knives, and had seen the cutting of the wood, and the great cauldron taken from its place. He was frightened, and he ran away, and came to the river bank, where the wind was sighing through the tall reeds. And there he sang a farewell song to his sister, thinking he had not long to live. The servant followed the lamb cunningly, and crept near to catch him, and heard his little song. This is what he sang:--

"Alenoushka, little sister,
They are going to slaughter me;
They are cutting wooden fagots,

They are heating iron cauldrons,
They are sharpening knives of steel."

And Alenoushka, lamenting, answered the lamb from the bottom of the river:--

"O my brother Ivanoushka,
A heavy stone is round my throat,
Silken grass grows through my fingers,
Yellow sand lies on my breast."

The servant listened, and marvelled at the miracle of the lamb singing, and the sweet voice answering him from the river. He crept away quietly, and came to the fine gentleman, and told him what he had heard; and they set out together to the river, to watch the lamb, and listen, and see what was happening.

The little white lamb stood on the bank of the river weeping, so that his tears fell into the water. And presently he sang again:--

"Alenoushka, little sister,
They are going to slaughter me;
They are cutting wooden fagots,
They are heating iron cauldrons,
They are sharpening knives of steel."

And Alenoushka answered him, lamenting, from the bottom of the river:--

"O my brother Ivanoushka,
A heavy stone is round my throat,
Silken grass grows through my fingers,
Yellow sand lies on my breast."

The fine gentleman heard, and he was sure that the voice was the voice of his own dear wife, and he remembered how she had loved the lamb. He sent his servant to fetch men, and fishing nets and nets of silk. The men came running, and they dragged the river with fishing nets, and brought their nets empty to land. Then they tried with nets of fine silk, and, as they drew them in, there was Alenoushka lying in the nets as if she were asleep.

They brought her to the bank and untied the stone from her white neck, and washed her in fresh water and clothed her in white clothes. But they had no sooner done all this than she woke up, more beautiful than ever she had been before, though then she was pretty enough, God knows. She woke, and sprang up, and threw her arms round the neck of the little white lamb, who

suddenly became once more her little brother Vanoushka, who had been so thirsty as to drink water from the hoofmark of a sheep. And Vanoushka laughed and shouted in the sunshine, and the fine gentleman wept tears of joy. And they all praised God and kissed each other, and went home together, and began to live as happily as before, even more happily, because Vanoushka was no longer a lamb. But as soon as they got home the fine gentleman turned the old witch out of the house. And she became an ugly old hag, and went away to the deep woods, shrieking as she went.

"And did she ever come back again?" asked Ivan.

"No, she never came back again," said old Peter. "Once was enough."

"And what happened to Vanoushka when he grew up?"

"He grew up as handsome as Alenoushka was pretty. And he became a great hunter. And he married the sister of the fine gentleman. And they all lived happily together, and ate honey every day, with white bread and new milk."

[3] That means that they were called Ivan and Elena. Vanoushka and Alenoushka are affectionate forms of these names.

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