

## 2: Das Eichhörnchen

The following day, Maria woke from a deep sleep. But when Gretel barked, dashing past her window after a squirrel, she grinned and jumped from Bett. Her nightdress still on, she flew around the corner, through the kitchen, and out the back door. Mutti's hands were in a ball of dough on the table, and she made a grump of shock as she passed through.

Maria giggled excitedly as the *Eichhörnchen* scampered up a tree trunk and perched itself on a low branch. It barked at the dog, its tail twitching with each sound. Gretel jumped up excitedly, her front paws leaning and scratching on the bark. Soon she'd stretched her four-legged furry body out to its maximum length. Still, the Eichhörnchen's tail swished like a scarf, taunting, teasing, and frustrating the dog. When Maria giggled out loud, the squirrel darted up to the safety of higher branches. She walked to the tree and looked into its high branches.

Gretel trotted to Maria, her tongue hanging out, and a noticeable smile on the little dog's face from the early morning chase. Maria took both hands and ruffled Gretel's furry neck.

"Oh, Gretel, when have you ever caught one of those pests? Never, right? But you love the thrill, do you not?" She knew Mutti wouldn't want her to play outside for long, especially before breakfast. And in her nightclothes! "Come to the back door and see what I will give you," Maria teased, walking to the back of the house. With Gretel following in blind faith, she asked Mutti if there was a piece of last night's bread for the dog. Mutti gave Maria some scraps of bread for Gretel, then told her to come inside to get dressed and have some oatmeal.

As Maria pulled her coarse overalls up over her thin legs, she thought of the walk she loved to take each morning to school, where the sunlight streamed between the tree branches. The *Sonnenlicht*, like a knife, slicing through the woods. The anticipation of this adventure came over her each day, because school would begin again soon.

Then Maria sighed, thinking her only nice outfit would be a blue blouse and dark skirt she'd worn many times last year. She would polish her shoes, but the scuffs would probably show. The pair had picked up many scuffs in the years she'd worn them. She didn't want to tell Mutti that they were beginning to hurt her toes because she was afraid there was no money for shoes. But the pain is worth it. The lessons are what I love. And the challenge of learning.

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