

Detective Gretel

by

PJ Brackston

Gretel shifted her not inconsiderable weight, adjusting her position minutely so as to best enjoy the plumpness of the cushions on her beloved daybed. She was of the belief that a person could never be in possession of a surfeit of cushions, so long as they were of the right quality. She was just drifting off beneath imaginary fluffy clouds, across a sea of slumber, upon a raft constructed entirely of those very soft, very elegant, very expensive, very cushions when the slamming of the front door propelled her back to reality.

'Home, sister mine!' Hans announced on his way towards the kitchen. 'Provisions acquired, at no small effort and risk to life and limb, I might add.'

'You have been shopping at the Gesternstadt weekly market, Hans, not deer stalking in the Black Forest.'

'Ordinarily a place of gentle jostling and neighbourly bonhomie, I grant you. *Ordinarily.*' He stood in the doorway of the living room, clutching his butcher's parcel.

Gretel sighed. She was presented with a choice; remain silent and wait, in the hope that Hans would then continue on his journey to the kitchen and begin cooking, or play the game and ask the question that would undoubtedly set him off on a meandering story that she could happily do without. She took in the expectant look on his face and the strangely poised angle of his body - no small feat given its size - and knew that in truth she had no choice in the matter at all.

'Very well,' she said, 'do tell me, what was it that made today's market in any way out of the ordinary?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'I do, which is why I asked.'

'Ah, yes, but I know how you feel about gossip.'

'And so you should. I have made my feelings plain on that score on numerous occasions. Gossip is the refuge of the bored and the ignorant; the pastime of the dimwitted and the mean spirited, and I will not tolerate it under my roof.'

'Thing is, Gretel, gossip is at the epicentre of today's events. Its very core. Like the ice-cream in a *bombe surprise*. Or the lamb in a lamb *en crouste*, or the strawberry jam in a donut, or the...'

Gretel closed her eyes. 'Hans, just tell me what happened.'

'Well, you'll never guess. Scandal! Illicit love! Burglary! Reputations ruined. Lives lambasted.'

'The facts, Hans. Stick to the facts. Names. Dates. Places. Things that actually happened.'

Hans paused. Gretel opened her eyes again and saw his expression start off at wary, travel through perplexed, veer past undecided and come to a halt at conflicted.

'Thing is,' he said carefully, 'if I tell you all that, names, dates, and whatnot, well, won't that be gossip? And then won't I be gossiping? And if I'm doing it with you, won't you be gossiping too?'

'Very well, you may maintain the anonymity of those involved. That way we cannot be considered to be engaging in frivolous and malicious conversation based upon hearsay, in other words: gossip. So, Frau X, Herr Y, and so on.'

'Ooh, sounds like a code! Right you are, let me see now, Frau X has caught out her husband, Herr X, having clandestine liaisons with Fraulein Y.'

'So far so humdrum.'

'There's more. Herr X denies all...'

'Unsurprisingly.'

'As does Fraulein Y, but Frau X has proof.'

'Does she indeed?'

'This very morning, at said market, while perusing the wares on the butcher's stall - and rather fine they were too. Bought some first class wurst myself, see?' He held up the paper-wrapped bundle, sniffing it lovingly.

'Which I pray you will soon prepare for our elevenses, but wurst later, news first...'

'Among the sausages, Frau X spotted Fraulein Y wearing a gold necklace of such singularity that she recognised it at once as her own. She had noted its absence from her jewellery box earlier this morning and reported the possible burglary to none other than Kingsman Kapitan Strudel himself.'

'Presumably in the hope that he will break the habit of a lifetime and the record of his career and actually solve a case?'

'Presumably. Though she clearly wasn't content to leave all to him, for then and there, in front of the good people of Gesternstadt, she grabbed the fraulein by her slender arm, calling her all manner of blush-inducing names, and rounded on Herr X, accusing him of all manner of unmentionable acts.'

'Only you would balk at giving the salacious details.'

'Ain't salaciousness the very heart of gossip? Its epicentre? Its marrow?'

'Don't start that again.'

'So, Fraulein Y said she had received the gewgaw from an anonymous admirer, and today being Valentine's Day, this seemed to all who were craning their necks to see and cocking their ears to hear to be a reasonable and believable explanation.'

Gretel gave a shudder. The date had slipped her mind. Every year she did her best to ignore what she considered to be the most fatuous and idiotic festival on the calendar, finding as she did the pseudo romantic antics of otherwise sane and sensible people quite nauseating. The fact that she herself never received a card or token of love to mark the day she believed showed discernment on the part of any man who might count as a secret admirer. Indeed, they were expert at remaining secret. Whoever they were. Utterly secret.

Hans continued. 'But old man... erm, X, he insisted he had not given the girl the necklace, and knew nothing of how it came to be in her possession, whereupon his wife declared that either he *had* given it - proving that the two were indulging in some sort of carrying-on - or that the girl herself had stolen it. Fraulein Y was understandably put out at this...'

'Understandably.'

'... and insisted she had received the thing in the bouquet of flowers that had been left on her doorstep. Whereupon young Herr Z...'

'Ah, we haven't heard from him before.'

'No, he's new. Herr Z piped up and said it was he who had left the flowers. Next thing he's down on one knee declaring his undying love for Fraulein Y.'

'A popular girl, whichever way you cut it.'

'Frau X was having none of it. Nor was Herr X, who promptly declared Herr Z to be the thief and had Strudel arrest him before anyone could so much as speak the words golden pig.'

'And why would they want to do that?'

'Because it was. A pig. A gold one. The necklace. Rather charming, point of fact,' he added with a coy smile. 'Cheerful little fellow, round cheeks, you know the sort of thing?'

'Sadly I do, Hans. Another Valentine's custom with no fathomable rhyme nor reason attached to it. The giving of pigs, images of pigs, cards depicting pigs, biscuits made into pigs... whoever started all this nonsense should be taken to the top of the nearest alp and left there. But we digress, and I grow hungry. The upshot is a marriage in danger of collapse, a young man incarcerated, and a young girl in disgrace.'

'That's about it. Do you want grainy mustard with your weisswurst?' he asked, his growling stomach confirming it was indeed time to cook.

'Do you need to ask? Really, Hans, I support you in your indolent and comfortable existence in order to benefit from your expertise in the kitchen. If you are going to start forgetting which mustard I prefer I may be forced to have you replaced.'

'Huh,' said Hans as he headed into the kitchen. 'I'd like to see you find anyone as capable with a sausage as me.'

Gretel sank back into the embrace of her daybed, more than a little wearied by the predictability of things. That a long-married couple should come to doubt each other and spit accusations in public. That a young pretty girl should live beneath a constant bombardment of suspicion and lust in equal measures. That a young man should be foolish enough to get himself locked away from the very object of his desire. That

everyone else should enjoy a good gloat. It seemed to her that people in pretty provincial towns revelled in the misfortunes of others in a way that was wholly without compassion. Call it schadenfreude, call it sangfroid, call it spite, call it what you would, it was the national pastime. And nowhere more so than in the quaintly gabled, over window-boxed, gaily painted, cutely cobbled, smiley faced little town of Gesternstadt. Outwardly all was sunny and happy and respectable and lovely. But within... ah, within. In Gretel's experience the brighter and shinier the exterior of a thing - town, marriage, gift - oftentimes the less appealing its interior. Of course she had failed to explain to Hans that this did not apply to the beautiful clothes she insisted on wearing. There was all the difference in the world between superficial gloss and an object of true quality. Depressingly, she would not be indulging in any of the latter if their finances did not take a steep and altogether unlikely upward turn. The money she and her brother had acquired on the back of their modest fame was all but gone. In their youth people had still wanted to hear their story of being abandoned in the woods, of outwitting the witch, and of their escape, and had been prepared to pay for it. Now, with she and Hans grown into their large and largely lazy thirties, that curiosity had waned. There was no getting away from the fact; one of them would have to find a way to make a living.

Outside the day was brashly bright, despite it being February. Sunshine bounced off the snow-coated roofs and unswept cobbles of the streets. Gretel had, as was her habit, favoured fashion over practicality, so that she stumbled as she picked her wobbly way wearing the very latest kitten heeled and silver buckled shoes - made of the finest Italian leather, naturally - when all about her people less committed to following trends stomped through the snow in painfully ugly ankle boots. The small town of Gesternstadt was quietly busy doing what it did best; looking picturesque and quaint, exuding cheerfulness and good humour even in its wintry state. Gretel clenched her teeth against the relentless sugariness of it all, and for the hundredth time wondered silently how she had ended up in such a provincial backwater when

her soul cried out for the sophistication of the city. Well, there would not be so much as a day trip to Munich in the foreseeable future if she didn't do something about her lack of funds. She needed a plan, which required thinking, and aside from food a little smartening up was the best thing she knew for sharpening her mental processes. She would observe a secret tradition of her own and take herself off to Madame Renoir's Beauty Salon, where she would treat herself to her customary Valentine's Day Mascara.

She had got no further than the town square, however, before the agony in her feet forced her to find a place on which to sit and rest. The dual effects of the snow working its way to her toes and the pinching of new shoes had rendered her lame. She dusted snow off a bench on the sunny side of the plaza and sat down. The bustle of the market had subsided, so that now people ambled or meandered, pausing to exchange pleasantries, in no particular hurry to get on with their unparticular lives. Gretel noted that none of the players of the morning's drama were present. For all that Hans had entered into the game of hiding the identities of those involved, Gretel was confident she knew who was who. It had been the golden pig that gave them away. She recalled the first time she had seen Frau Pfeifer wearing it around her skinny-with-a-tendency-to-appear-scrawny-in-certain-lights neck. She had thought then that any woman prepared to be seen in public sporting an accessory of such unfashionable and downright nasty design was clearly desperate to please the person who had given it her, ie Herr Pfeifer. Such desperation must surely be born of a fear of losing both her looks and her husband, and that fear could easily lead to suspicion. Gretel had to allow, however, that on this occasion her suspicions had grounds. Fraulein Vogel - for it could be none other, there being only five single, young and pretty women who frequented the market, and four of them, to Gretel's certain knowledge, being away at a yodelling festival - had brazenly worn the offending pendant in public. How could she have come by the thing if Herr Pfeifer had not given it to her? How indeed. But then, surely a man of any wits - and Herr Pfeifer was a notary, so must lay claim to at least some - would not present his mistress with a piece of jewellery belonging to his wife. So must young Herr Bader have stolen it? Gretel knew the lovestruck youth in

the story to be Eric Bader as his unrequited passion for Eva Vogel was a matter of public knowledge. That his persistent pursuit of her relied entirely upon dogged determination, given his complete lack of wealth, position, good looks or sparkling personality had earned him a modicum of respect from Gretel. She did not see him as a thief. Nor a liar. And yet he would be condemned as both if someone did not get to the truth.

Gretel's thoughts were interrupted by a raucous cawing in the tree above her. A magpie, its white patches all but lost against the snowy branches, was sounding the alarm as a large ginger cat circled the trunk of the tree. Gretel disliked cats for their association with witches, and this one wore a disturbing, squinty-eyed, hungry expression. She felt that, had she been a bird, she might have squawked at it too. She noticed that the boughs on the left side of the tree extended over the doorstep that belonged to none other than Eva Vogel herself. She also noticed that the branches on the right side of the tree stretched in the direction of the tall, somewhat ostentatious home of the Pfeifers.

A notion came trotting into her mind. It gave a frisky snort, pranced to and fro for a moment, tail held high, and then cantered off again. If it was to be caught and examined, she must first test out a theory. And to do that she required the cover of darkness.

Gretel went straight home and threw wide the doors of her wardrobe. Her needs were peculiar and specific, but her lovingly selected collection of clothing had never failed her yet. Just this once she would be forced to place practicality over panache and frugality over flair. She needed to be stealthy and nimble, which meant she required all the assistance her clothes could offer her. She chose with care, pausing now and again to breathe in the comforting scents of damask and satin and silk. At last she was ready, evening had descended, and she hurried down stairs.

In the hallway she encountered Hans, himself on the point of going out. At the sight of his sister he exclaimed.

'Good heavens! Has someone died?'

'No, they have not.'

'Then why are you dressed for a funeral? I've only ever seen you wear black to bury somebody.'

Gretel bustled past him with a dismissive wave of her hand. 'Black is the new powder blue, hadn't you heard? No, of course you hadn't. Don't pretend you know anything about fashion, Hans. You are a man who sincerely believes Lederhosen to be flattering, ergo you are not qualified to so much as comment upon my manner of dress.'

'Have it your own way,' he harrumphed, shrugging on his checked woollen coat. 'I'm for the Inn.'

'Try not to squander your entire allowance in one evening.'

'Squander indeed! Thursday night is poker night: I intend doubling my money.' He jammed his hat on his head and went muttering on his way.

Gretel waited at the door until he had reached the other side of the street and entered the Inn. She did not want him questioning her further on the what and the why of her actions.

The night was lit by myriad stars in a cloudless, velvety sky. The snow on the cobbles had frozen afresh, making it more crunchy but less slippery. Gretel trod heavily in her sensible shoes, reminding herself that the whole point of her garb was to pass unnoticed, so she need not concern herself with how dowdy she looked. In any case, there were few people abroad, most wisely choosing to be indoors on such a cold night.

Gesternstadt boasted few street lamps, but the square itself had three on each side. As luck would have it, none of these was anywhere close to the tree that was of interest to Gretel, so that she was able to begin climbing it without being noticed. It was not that she was engaged in anything unlawful, but she knew the townsfolk well enough to be certain one of them at least would find something to complain about if they knew what she was doing. Public spaces, community funds, shared amenities, possibly trespass and invasion of privacy, who knew on what pretext they would

object. Best not to give anyone the opportunity to protest and hamper her investigations.

As Gretel reached for the lower branches and hauled herself, puffing somewhat, upwards, she pondered the unexpected smoothness of the trunk and gnarled knots upon the boughs. She had never much concerned herself with the different characteristics of the many varieties of trees. Since her adventures as a child, lost among the towering pines, she had experienced infrequent but vivid dreams about dark forests. She had no wish to study the things. A tree was a tree. Beyond shade or shelter it might yield fruit, firewood or furniture. Or, as in this instance, a vantage point. She gasped as knee knocked against wood and her arm and calf muscles began to burn with the effort of the climb. She was painfully aware that she did not have a physique that leant itself to the scaling of arboreal plants, but needs must when the devil cracked his whip. She and Hans were all but penniless, and it was left to her to do something about it. Neither she nor he were trained for any trade or profession, and it was unlikely either of them could find, charm and marry a wealthy spouse in the time given. Wit and courage were needed. Used boldly, information could be obtained for which Gretel was convinced people would pay handsomely.

After no small struggle, she reached the height she had been aiming for and sat heavily on the point of connection between a branch and the trunk of the tree. Once her heart rate and breathing had steadied she leaned to one side and peered in the direction of the town house nearest to her. The tall and well-appointed town house of Herr and Frau Pfeifer. She squinted into the lamp light that glowed within the main bed chamber. Frau Pfeifer, true to her habit, even on such a chilly night, had left her shutters and window open, the better, presumably, to assault her senses with the wintry Bavarian air. Gretel was delighted to find that she could clearly see the dressing table, and upon it a large, marquetry jewellery box. She gave a little cry of satisfaction. Which did not please the magpie slumbering in its nest only inches to her left. The bird squawked. Gretel squawked. The bird flapped its wings. Gretel flapped her arms. The bird lifted into the air, cawing loudly. Gretel fell through the air, cursing like a stevedore. She might have become wedged in a narrow vee of the tree,

but instead she plummeted. On her way down she fell heavily upon a slender branch. There was a brief hiatus, followed by a sickening splintering sound, whereupon the laws of physics applied themselves: the mass of one substantial Bavarian frau exerted its weight upon the slight resistance of one insubstantial Bavarian bough and gravity did the rest.

It was Gretel's good fortune to land in a deep pile of snow which was the result of Herr Pfeifer diligently sweeping his doorstep. Her fall was also broken by the quality and quantity of her petticoats and skirts, not to mention her own ample padding. The sound of the snapping branches and her shouts and curses brought people running from their houses. The townsfolk hurried to make sense of the floundering figure in the snow and the damaged tree, both so suspiciously close to the open window of a wealthy family.

The Pfeifers themselves emerged accompanied by none other than Kingsman Kapitan Strudel himself, who had, it later transpired, been taking further statements from the couple regarding the matter of the stolen jewellery. As Gretel struggled to right herself there were cries of Thief! and Burglar! and Vandal! She was quick to point out that she had taken nothing, was not trying to gain entry to the house, and was better dressed even in her workaday attire than any vandal anyone might care to present.

Kapitan Strudel was unconvinced and narrowed his already unsettlingly narrow eyes at her. 'So what were you doing in that tree?' he wanted to know.

'Your job,' Gretel told him. 'And I've a good mind to charge you for my services.'

'Bribery!' he yapped.

'No, that would be *me* offering to give *you* money, not the other way around. Has Hans leant you his brain for the evening?' She stood up stiffly, dusting snow from her bruised derrière and dignity. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I am in need of a soothing bath. My work here is done.'

'Your work?' Herr Pfeifer was confused.

'I have solved the matter of the golden pig,' Gretel announced. The crowd gasped.

Strudel was incensed. 'How solved? What did you find in that tree? What makes you think you know who took the necklace?'

'All in good time, Herr Kapitan. I am happy to reveal my findings to all interested parties tomorrow morning at my home at ten of the clock. Now, I bid you all goodnight,' she said, and strode somewhat unevenly away across the cobbled square, leaving the assembled company to exchange guesses and conjecture without her.

The next day Gretel had Hans stoke up the fire in the living room, and cajoled him into applying a feather duster here and there. She was not a lover of housework, but appreciated a pleasant environment in which to live and work. Which meant her brother had to be first trained and then prodded into action. Happily, he had been successful at cards the night before, and so was in a cheerful and cooperative mood. Gretel chose a dress of finest silver-grey wool, shot through with threads of cerise, neatly tailored to give an elegant yet business-like look. By ten thirty she was standing with her back to the hearth, facing the room, in which were seated Herr and Frau Pfeifer, Kapitan Strudel, Herr Bader's lawyer, and Fraulein Vogel. The young woman wore a slightly troubled look, which only served to make her more winsomely pretty. Gretel found she did not enjoy seeing someone so youthful, slender, and beautiful sitting on her precious daybed, but consoled herself with the thought that it was better than having Strudel on it. She had permitted Hans to be present only after extracting from him a promise of silence and good behaviour on pain of no Inn for a week.

The lawyer spoke up first.

'My client is anxious to hear reports of what you have learned, Fraulein.'

'He might not be,' put in Herr Pfeifer, 'when further proof will surely serve to underline his guilt.'

'You would say that!' Frau Pfeifer was clearly still of the opinion that her husband was not to be trusted. 'I am the injured party here, and I want the truth.'

'As he is entirely innocent of the charge against him, he has no fear of the truth. On the contrary, he would welcome it,' the lawyer insisted.

Strudel gave a snort. 'I never heard of anyone finding the truth up a tree in the middle of the night. I don't hold with such activities. Wouldn't catch a kingsman involved in anything so undignified. We have our reputations to consider, you know.'

Gretel shrugged. 'That you are so concerned about how you are perceived and that you remain in possession of such a closed mind, Herr Kapitan, is undoubtedly why I have solved the case, and you have not.'

'So you say,' Strudel snapped. 'Let's hear it then.' He sat back in Hans's favourite armchair, leaning against the threadbare antimacassar and crossing his legs, causing his left foot to jiggle impatiently.

Gretel waited until they were all looking at her attentively, which she rather enjoyed.

'Fraulein Vogel,' she began, 'would you be so good as to tell us exactly how you came to own the necklace in question?'

The girl spoke with a sweet, gentle voice, and her cheeks dimpled attractively as she did so. Gretel tried hard not to hate her. 'I woke early and was about to prepare my breakfast when I heard a knock at the door. I took a moment to answer it, as I was not yet fully dressed, and did not wish to stand in full view of the street in only my lacy nightclothes, which are quite transparent with the light behind them.'

Both Herr Pfeifer and the lawyer squirmed a little in their seats. Strudel remained unmoved.

'Go on,' prompted Gretel.

'When I opened the door I found a large bouquet of flowers. Despite the month, and indeed the coldness of the day which caused my cheeks to flush pink, there were roses, red and luscious, and I could not resist breathing in their heady scent, even though a chill Alpine breeze was lifting the hem of my house robe, exposing my bare legs to the winter air.'

The lawyer took out a kerchief with which to dab at his brow. Herr Pfeifer coughed. Frau Pfeifer took in a long, whistling breath through her nose. Eva Vogel continued.

'It was then that I noticed the gold of the necklace glinting prettily in the sunshine among the blooms. I was so delighted to receive such a charming gift! I immediately

slipped it around my neck and it was the perfect length, the dear little pig coming to rest... just... here.'

Everyone in the room, even Strudel, followed her finger as she laid it upon her creamy skin at the uppermost point of her cleavage. A charged silence filled the room. Gretel thought it best to press on.

'So you saw no-one, Fraulein?'

'No-one.'

'And there was no note?'

'None.'

'That Herr Bader sent the flowers is not in dispute,' Gretel pointed out, 'but he firmly denies having sent the necklace. And indeed, he did not.'

'Precisely so,' agreed the lawyer.

'And nor did Herr Pfeifer,' Gretel went on.

'Indeed I did not,' he confirmed.

'Ha!' was all his wife would say on the matter.

'Then who did?' Strudel wanted to know.

Gretel smiled. 'A small fellow, known to you all, dressed forever and always in the smartest black and white, harmless enough in his way, but with one weakness - a fondness for all that glisters, whether gold or not.'

'Who?' her audience chorused.

Gretel held up a hand. 'First allow me to explain how I came to make my discovery. Whilst sitting in the square yesterday I observed that the Pfeifer residence is in part overshadowed by one of the large trees that decorate the plaza. And in this tree, high among its branches, there is a nest, which is home to a fine and dandy magpie. We all know that such birds are attracted by bright and shiny things. By scaling the tree I was able to confirm that the nest affords a clear view of the Pfeifers' bed chamber.'

'But,' Frau Pfeifer was shaking her head, 'the necklace was not found in the bird's nest. How did it come to be in the flowers, if that is in fact where Fraulein Vogel found it.'

'I did!'

'She did,' Gretel agreed. 'During my observations in the daytime I witnessed one of Frau Hapsburg's many cats stalking the birds in the square. On one occasion it pounced at the passing magpie, forcing it to change its course and land on the window ledge of the Apothecary opposite. I have concluded that on its way back from Frau Pfeifer's bed chamber, the necklace in its beak, it encountered the cat, was compelled to take evasive action, opened its beak to caw a warning to its brethren, and dropped the golden pig, which landed in the bouquet on the fraulein's doorstep.'

'Well!' said Hans. 'Pigs do fly! At least, that one did. Wouldn't have been able to lift a real pig, of course. Not a big one, don't suppose. Maybe a piglet, newborn and pink... though it might have wriggled rather...'

'Hans, you were warned,' Gretel reminded him.

The lawyer beamed. 'Fraulein Gretel, your expertise is a marvel. My client will be delighted.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

Herr Pfeifer stood up. 'Fraulein, let me shake your hand. A fine piece of detective work. Yes, very fine.'

Frau Pfeifer nodded grudgingly, evidently disappointed at being robbed of the chance to ruin the reputation of Fraulein Vogel, but presumably relieved to discover her husband was not the faithless wretch she had accused him of being.

From the daybed Eva flashed a brilliant smile. 'Oh, my good name is restored! Thank you, Fraulein. And poor blameless Eric need not spend another moment in that horrid jail.' She turned to Strudel. 'Will you release him straight away, Herr Kapitan? I shall come with you to welcome him back to freedom,' she declared, springing lightly to her feet.

Strudel scowled, his whole scrawny face seeming to fold in on itself. Gretel gave him a little bow, enjoying the moment hugely.

Later, when the last of her visitors had finally taken their leave of her, Gretel sat at the dining room table counting the pleasingly plump piles of money before her. She

had left nothing to chance and not trusted to goodwill or fair play, but had called upon each and every one of the interested parties before ever they arrived at her house. Her route had taken in all the necessary houses, as well as the workshop of the local carpenter. Figures had been agreed. Sums had been settled upon. There was one pile from Frau Pfeifer, who had been prepared to pay to prove or disprove her husband's fidelity. That same husband had agreed to pay (after Gretel approached him separately from his wife) to prove that same fidelity remained unbesmirched, which had so yielded another pile of notes. Eva Vogel had resolved to spend a fair slice of her savings in order to clear her name, and those funds now stacked up with the others. And of course Herr Bader had dug deep in his pockets in order to secure his freedom and his reputation, the results of which digging now formed the largest pile of all upon the dining table. Gretel leaned back in the creaking chair with a sigh of satisfaction. She had risen to the challenges life had place before her yet again, and she had emerged triumphant. She and Hans would not starve. Her cleverness had won out. Their immediate future was secure. She yawned elaborately as she rose, deciding that she had more than earned a little nap upon her daybed. She got no further than the hallway, however, before there came a hammering upon the front door. Upon opening it she found the carpenter standing there, holding up his handiwork for her inspection.

'Is this to your liking Fraulein?' he asked. 'Will it serve?'

Gretel read the bold lettering upon the wooden sign and experienced a small thrill of excitement - *Fraulein Gretel: Detective for Hire*.

'Yes!' she said happily. 'I believe it will serve very well indeed.'

And so begins a new career...