

## PREFACE

## By W. H. G. KINGSTON

Notwithstanding the numerous admirable works constantly appearing for the use of the rising generation, I feel that I am rendering my young friends a real service in bringing *The Silver Shates* before them, while I am confident that their elders will be as pleased with the book as I have been.

It indeed fully combines, as its talented authoress intended that it should, the instructive features of a book of travels with the interest of a domestic tale. Throughout its pages the descriptions of Dutch localities, customs, and general characteristics have been given with scrupulous care. Many of the incidents, the authoress assures us, have been drawn from real life, and the story of Raff Brinker is founded strictly on fact. One of its chief charms is its perfect naturalness, and the thorough comprehension its authoress exhibits of all that constitutes the joys and sorrows of young hearts.

I put the book, on receiving it, into the hands of a relative of advanced age, who would not give it up till she had read it through. Her remark was—

"It is a delightful book—so fresh, so pure—worth all those I get from the circulating library put together."

In correcting the work for the press, I have taken very few liberties with the original text, beyond altering those allusions which would not be understood by English

readers.1

<sup>1</sup> In the present edition many passages have been restored, with footnotes to explain any details likely to puzzle the reader.

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Her first literary work was in connection with Hearth and Home, and was followed by her editorship from its origin of St. Nicholas; Scribner's Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys (New York), 1873; She also edited Baby Days (New York), 1877; Baby World (New York), 1884; A New Baby World (New York), 1897.

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# CONTENTS

CHAP						I	AGE
I.	HANS AND GRETEL .	•					I
II.	HOLLAND						5
III.	HOLLAND THE SILVER SKATES .	•	•		•		12
IV.	HANS AND GRETEL FIND A	FRI	END				17
V.	SHADOWS IN THE HOME						23
VI.	SHADOWS IN THE HOME SUNBEAMS	•					29
VII.	HANS HAS HIS WAY .						33
VIII.	INTRODUCING JACOB POOT	AND	HIS C	OUSI	4		36
							41
X.	WHAT THE BOYS SAW AND	DID	IN A	MSTE	RDAM		48
XI.	BIG MANIAS AND LITTLE	ODDIT	IES				56
XII.	ON THE WAY TO HAARLE!	M					62
XIII.	A CATASTROPHE .	•	•				65
XIV.	HANS	•		200			68
AV.	HOMES	14.5	42				72
XVI.	HAARLEM-THE BOYS HEA	R Vo	ICES				70
XVII.	THE MAN WITH FOUR HE.	ADS	v.	2	4		84
XVIII.	FRIENDS IN NEED .	•					88
X1X.	ON THE CANAL .				WIII	2.	0.4
XX.	JACOB POOT CHANGES THE	PLA	N				99
XXI.	MYNHEER KLEEF AND HIS	BILL	of I	ARE			105
XXII.	THE RED LION BECOMES	DANGI	EROUS				108
XXIII.	Before the Court .						118
XXIV.	THE BELEAGUERED CITIES						121
XXV.	BEFORE THE COURT . THE BELEAGUERED CITIES LEYDEN						126
XXVI.	THE PALACE AND THE WO	OD					T 2 T
XXVII.	THE MERCHANT PRINCE AN	D TH	E SIST	ER-PI	RINCES	SS	134
XXVIII.	THROUGH THE HAGUE				2	L	T.4.4
XXIX.	A DAY OF REST .				20	120	T50
XXX.	HOMEWARD BOUND .		2	2		L	T53
AAAI.	BOYS AND GIRLS						TEG
AAAII.	THE CRISIS		140		0		TOT
XXXIV.	THE AWAKENING .						173
XXXV.	THE AWAKENING . BONES AND TONGUES A NEW ALARM .	•	×				176
XXXVI.	A NEW ALARM .					•	179
XXXVII.	THE FATHER'S RETURN						183
XXXVIII.	A New Alarm The Father's Return The Thousand Guilders						187

## The Silver Skates

X

CHAP.						F	AGE
XXXIX.	GLIMPSES .		•	•		•	191
XL.	LOOKING FOR \	Work	•	•		٠	194
XLI.	THE FAIRY GO	DMOT	HER			•:	198
XLII.	THE MYSTERIO	us W	ATCH	•		•	203
	A DISCOVERY						210
XLIV.	THE RACE				•		217
XLV.	JOY IN THE CO	TTAG	E	•	•		230
	MYSTERIOUS DI						236
XLVII.	Broad Sunshi	NE	100	187		•	239
XLVIII.	Conclusion					4	244

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## THE SILVER SKATES

### CHAPTER I

#### HANS AND GRETEL

On a bright December morning long ago, two thinly-clad children were kneeling upon the bank of a frozen canal in Holland.

The sun had not yet appeared, but the grey sky was parted near the horizon, and its edges shone crimson with the coming day. Most of the good Hollanders were enjoying a placid morning nap; even Mynheer von Stoppelnoze, that worthy old Dutchman, was still slumbering "in beautiful repose."

Now and then some peasant woman, poising a well-filled basket upon her head, came skimming over the glassy surface of the canal; or a lusty boy, skating to his day's work in the town, cast a good-natured grimace toward the shivering pair as he flew along.

Meanwhile, with many a vigorous puff and pull, the brother and sister, for such they were, seemed to be fastening something upon their feet—not skates, certainly, but clumsy pieces of wood narrowed and smoothed at their lower edge, and pierced with holes, through which were threaded strings of raw hide.

These queer-looking affairs had been made by the boy Hans. His mother was a poor peasant woman, too poor even to think of such a thing as buying skates for her little ones. Rough as these were, they had afforded the children many a happy hour upon the ice; and now, as with cold, red fingers our young Hollanders tugged at the strings—their solemn faces bending closely over their knees—no vision of impossible iron runners came to dull the satisfaction glowing within.

In a moment the boy arose, and with a pompous swing of the arms, and a careless "Come on, Gretel," glided easily across the canal.

"Ah, Hans," called his sister plaintively, "this foot is not well yet. The strings hurt me on last market-day; and

now I cannot bear them tied in the same place."

"Tie them higher up, then," answered Hans, as without looking at her he performed a wonderful cat's-cradle step on the ice.

"How can I? The string is too short."

Giving vent to a good-natured Dutch whistle, the English of which was that girls were troublesome creatures, he steered towards her.

"You are foolish to wear such shoes, Gretel, when you have a stout leather pair. Your klompen would be better

than these."

"Why, Hans! Do you forget? The father threw my beautiful new shoes in the fire. Before I knew what he had done they were all curled up in the midst of the burning peat. I can skate with these, but not with my wooden ones. Be careful now——"

Hans had taken a string from his pocket. Humming a tune as he knelt beside her, he proceeded to fasten Gretel's skate with all the force of his strong young arm.

"Oh! oh!" she cried, in real pain.

With an impatient jerk Hans unwound the string. He would have cast it upon the ground in true big-brother style, had he not just then spied a tear trickling down his sister's cheek.

"I'll fix it—never fear," he said, with sudden tenderness; but we must be quick; the mother will need us soon."

Then he glanced inquiringly about him, first at the ground, next at some bare willow branches above his head, and finally at the sky, now gorgeous with streaks of blue, crimson, and gold.

Finding nothing in any of these localities to meet his need, his eye suddenly brightened as, with the air of a fellow who knew what he was about, he took off his cap, and removing the tattered lining, adjusted it in a smooth pad over the top of Gretel's worn-out shoe.

"Now," he cried triumphantly, at the same time arranging
Wooden shoes.

the strings as briskly as his benumbed fingers would allow, "can you bear some pulling?"

Gretel drew up her lips as if to say "hurt away," but made

no further response.

In another moment they were laughing together, as hand in hand they flew along the canal, never thinking whether the ice would bear or not, for in Holland ice is generally an all-winter affair. It settles itself upon the water in a determined kind of way, and so far from growing thin and uncertain every time the sun is a little severe upon it, it gathers its forces day by day, and flashes defiance to every beam.

Presently, squeak! squeak! sounded something beneath Hans' feet. Next his strokes grew shorter, ending ofttimes with a jerk, and finally, he lay sprawling upon the ice, kicking against the air with many a fantastic flourish.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Gretel, "that was a fine tumble!" But a tender heart was beating under her coarse blue jacket, and, even as she laughed, she came, with a graceful sweep,

close to her prostrate brother.

"Are you hurt, Hans? oh, you are laughing! catch me now"—and she darted away, shivering no longer, but with cheeks all aglow, and eyes sparkling with fun.

Hans sprang to his feet and started in brisk pursuit, but it was no easy thing to catch Gretel. Before she had travelled

very far, her skates too began to squeak.

Believing that discretion was the better part of valour, she turned suddenly and skated into her pursuer's arms.

"Ha! ha! I've caught you!" cried Hans.

"Ha! ha! I caught you," she retorted, struggling to free herself.

Just then a clear, quick voice was heard calling, "Hans! Gretel!"

"It's the mother," said Hans, looking grave in an instant. By this time the canal was gilded with sunlight. The pure morning air was very delightful, and skaters were gradually increasing in numbers. It was hard to obey the summons. But Gretel and Hans were good children; without a thought of yielding to the temptation to linger, they pulled off their skates, leaving half the knots still tied. Hans, with his great square shoulders, and bushy yellow hair, towered high above his blue-eyed little sister as they trudged homeward. He

was fifteen years old and Gretel was only twelve. He was a solid, hearty-looking boy, with honest eyes, and a brow that seemed to bear a sign, "goodness within," just as the little Dutch zomerhuis 1 wears a motto over its portal. Gretel was lithe and quick; her eyes had a dancing light in them, and while you looked at her cheek the colour paled and deepened just as it does upon a bed of pink and white blossoms when the wind is blowing.

As soon as the children turned from the canal they could see their parents' cottage. Their mother's tall form, arrayed in jacket and petticoat and close-fitting cap, stood like a picture, in the crooked frame of the doorway. Had the cottage been a mile away, it would still have seemed near. In that flat country every object stands out plainly in the distance; the chickens show as distinctly as the windmills. Indeed, were it not for the dykes and the high banks of the canals, one could stand almost anywhere in middle Holland without seeing a mound or a ridge between the eye and the "jumping-off place."

None had better cause to know the nature of these same dykes than Dame Brinker and the panting youngsters now running at her call. But before stating why, let me ask you to take a rocking-chair trip with me to that far country, where you may see, perhaps for the first time, some curious

things that Hans and Gretel saw every day.

<sup>1</sup> Summer-house.

## CHAPTER II

#### HOLLAND

HOLLAND is one of the queerest countries under the sun. It should be called Odd-land or Contrary-land, for in nearly everything it is different from the other parts of the world. In the first place, a large portion of the country is lower than the level of the sea. Great dykes or bulwarks have been erected at a heavy cost of money and labour, to keep the ocean where it belongs. On certain parts of the coast it sometimes leans with all its weight against the land, and it is as much as the poor country can do to stand the pressure. Sometimes the dykes give way, or spring a leak, and the most disastrous results ensue. They are high and wide, and the tops of some of them are covered with buildings and trees. They have even fine public roads upon them, from which horses may look down upon wayside cottages. Often the keels of floating ships are higher than the roofs of the dwellings. The stork clattering to her young on the housepeak may feel that her nest is lifted far out of danger, but the croaking frog in neighbouring bulrushes is nearer the stars than she. Water-bugs dart backward and forward above the heads of the chimney swallows; and willow trees seem drooping with shame, because they cannot reach as high as the reeds near by.

Ditches, canals, ponds, rivers, and lakes are everywhere to be seen. High, but not dry, they shine in the sunlight, catching nearly all the bustle and the business, quite scorning the tame fields stretching damply beside them. One is tempted to ask, "Which is Holland—the shores or the water?" The very verdure that should be confined to the land has made a mistake and settled upon the fish-ponds. In fact, the entire country is a kind of saturated sponge, or, as the English poet, Butler, called it,

<sup>&</sup>quot;A land that rides at anchor, and is moor'd, In which they do not live, but go aboard."

Persons are born, live, and die, and even have their gardens, on canal-boats. Farm-houses, with roofs like great slouched hats pulled over their eyes, stand on wooden legs with a tucked-up sort of air, as if to say "we intend to keep dry if we can." Even the horses wear a wide stool on each hoof to lift them out of the mire. In short, the landscape everywhere suggests a paradise for ducks. It is a glorious country in summer for bare-footed girls and boys. Such wadings! such mimic ship sailing! Such rowing, fishing, and swimming! Only think of a chain of puddles where one can launch chip boats all day long, and never make a return trip! But enough. A full recital would set all my readers rushing in a body toward the Zuider Zee.

Dutch cities seem at first sight to be a bewildering jungle of houses, bridges, churches, and ships, sprouting into masts, steeples, and trees. In some cities vessels are hitched, like horses, to their owners' door-posts, and receive their freight from the upper windows. Mothers scream to Lodewyk and Kassy not to swing on the garden gate for fear they may be drowned! Water-roads are more frequent there than common roads and railways; water-fences, in the form of lazy green ditches, enclose pleasure-ground, polder, and

garden.

Sometimes fine green hedges are seen; but wooden fences such as abound in America are rarely met with in Holland. As for stone fences, a Dutchman would lift his hands with astonishment at the very idea. There is no stone there, excepting those great masses of rock that have been brought from other lands to strengthen and protect the coast. the small stones or pebbles, if there ever were any, seem to be imprisoned in pavements or quite melted away. Boys with strong, quick arms may grow from pinafores to full beards without ever finding one to start the water-rings or set the rabbits flying. The water-roads are nothing less than canals intersecting the country in every direction. These are of all sizes, from the great North Holland Ship Canal, which is the wonder of the world, to those which a boy can leap. Water-omnibuses, called trekschuiten, constantly ply up and down these roads for the conveyance of passengers; and water-drays, called pakschuyten, are used for carrying

<sup>1</sup> Canal boats. Some of the first named are over thirty feet long. They look like green houses lodged on barges, and are drawn by horses

fuel and merchandise. Instead of green country-lanes, green canals stretch from field to barn and from barn to garden; and the farms or *polders*, as they are termed, are merely great lakes pumped dry. Some of the busiest streets are water, while many of the country-roads are paved with brick. The city boats, with their rounded sterns, gilded prows, and gaily painted sides, are unlike any others under the sun; and a Dutch waggon, with its funny little crooked pole, is a perfect mystery of mysteries.

"One thing is clear," cries Master Brightside, "the inhabitants need never be thirsty." But no, Odd-land is true to itself still. Notwithstanding the sea pushing to get in, and the lakes struggling to get out, and the overflowing canals, rivers, and ditches, in many districts there is no water fit to swallow; our poor Hollanders must go dry, or drink wine and beer, or send far into the inland to Utrecht, and other favoured localities, for that precious fluid older than Adam yet young as the morning dew. Sometimes, indeed, the inhabitants can swallow a shower, when they are provided with any means of catching it; but generally they are like the albatross-haunted sailors in Coleridge's famous poem of "The Ancient Mariner"—they see

## "Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink!"

Great flapping windmills all over the country make it look as if flocks of huge sea-birds were just settling upon it. Everywhere one sees the funniest trees, bobbed into fantastical shapes, with their trunks painted a dazzling white, yellow, or red. Horses are often yoked three abreast. Men, women, and children go clattering about in wooden shoes with loose heels; peasant girls who cannot get beaux for love, hire them for money to escort them to the Kermis; <sup>1</sup> and husbands and wives lovingly harness themselves side by side on the bank of the canal and drag their pakschuyts to market.

Another peculiar feature of Holland is the *dune* or sand-walking along the bank of the canal. The trekschuiten are divided into two compartments, first and second class, and when not too crowded the passengers make themselves quite at home in them; the men smoke, the women knit or sew, while children play upon the small outer deck. Many of the canal boats have white, yellow, or chocolate-coloured sails. This last colour is caused by a preparation of tan which is put on to preserve them.

1 Fair.

hill. These are numerous along certain portions of the coast. Before they were sown with coarse reed-grass and other plants to hold them down, they used to send great storms of sand over the inland. So, to add to the oddities, farmers sometimes dig down under the surface to find their soil, and on windy days *dry* showers (of sand) often fall upon fields that have grown wet under a week of sunshine.

In short, almost the only familiar thing we can meet with in Holland is a harvest-song which is quite popular there, though no linguist could translate it. Even then we must shut our eyes and listen only to the tune which I leave

you to guess.

"Yanker didee dudel down
Didee dudel lawnter;
Yankee viver, voover, vown,
Botermelk und Tawnter!"

On the other hand, many of the oddities of Holland serve only to prove the thrift and perseverance of the people. There is not a richer, or more carefully-tilled garden-spot in the whole world than this leaky, springy little country. There is not a braver, more heroic race than its quiet, passive-looking inhabitants. Few nations have equalled it in important discoveries and inventions; none has excelled it in commerce, navigation, learning, and science,—or set as noble examples in the promotion of education, and public charities; and none in proportion to its extent has expended more

money and labour upon public works.

Holland has its shining annals of noble and illustrious men and women; its grand, historic records of patience, resistance, and victory; its religious freedom, its enlightened enterprise, its art, its music, and its literature. It has truly been called "the battle-field of Europe,"—as truly may we consider it the Asylum of the world, for the oppressed of every nation have there found shelter and encouragement. If the rest of us, who, after all, are homeopathic preparations of Holland stock, can laugh at the Dutch, and call them human beavers, and hint that their country may float off any day at high tide, we can also feel proud, and say they have proved themselves heroes, and that their country will not float off while there is a Dutchman left to grapple it.

There are said to be at least ninety-nine hundred large windmills in Holland, with sails ranging from eighty to one hundred and twenty feet long. They are employed in sawing timber, beating hemp, grinding, and many other kinds of work; but their principal use is for pumping water from the lowlands into the canals, and for guarding against the inland freshets that so often deluge the country. Their yearly cost is said to be nearly ten millions of dollars. The large ones are of great power. Their huge, circular tower, rising sometimes from the midst of factory buildings, is surmounted with a smaller one tapering into a cap-like roof. This upper tower is encircled at its base with a balcony, high above which juts the axis, turned by its four prodigious, ladder-backed sails.

Many of the windmills are primitive affairs, seeming sadly in need of modern "improvements;" but some of the new ones are admirable. They are so constructed that, by some ingenious contrivance, they present their fans, or wings, to the wind in precisely the right direction to work with the requisite power. In other words, the miller may take a nap and feel quite sure that his mill will study the wind, and make the most of it, until he wakens. Should there be but a slight current of air, every sail will spread itself to catch the faintest breath; but if a heavy "blow" should come, they will shrink at its touch, like great mimosa leaves, and only give it half a chance to move them.

One of the old prisons of Amsterdam, called the Rasphouse, because the thieves and vagrants who were confined there were employed in rasping log-wood, had a cell for the punishment of lazy prisoners. In one corner of this cell was a pump, and in another, an opening through which a steady stream of water was admitted. The prisoner could take his choice, either to stand still and be drowned, or to work for dear life at the pump and keep the flood down until his jailer chose to relieve him. Now it seems to me that, throughout Holland, Nature has introduced this little diversion on a grand scale. The Dutch have always been forced to pump for their very existence, and probably must continue to do so to the end of time.

Every year millions of dollars are spent in repairing dykes, and regulating water-levels. If these important duties were neglected the country would be uninhabitable. Already dreadful consequences, as I have said, have followed the bursting of these dykes. Hundreds of villages and towns

have from time to time been buried beneath the rush of waters, and nearly a million of persons have been destroyed. One of the most fearful inundations ever known occurred in the autumn of the year 1570. Twenty-eight terrible floods had before that time overwhelmed portions of Holland, but this was the most terrible of all. The unhappy country had long been suffering under Spanish tyranny; now, it seemed, the crowning point was given to its troubles. When we read Motley's History of the Rise of the Dutch Republic we learn to revere the brave people who have endured, suffered, and dared so much.

Mr. Motley in his thrilling account of the great inundation tells us how a long-continued and violent gale had been sweeping the Atlantic waters into the North Sea, piling them against the coasts of the Dutch provinces; how the dykes, tasked beyond their strength, burst in all directions; how even the Hand-bos, a bulwark formed of oaken piles, braced with iron, moored with heavy anchors and secured by gravel and granite, was snapped to pieces like packthread; how fishing-boats and bulky vessels, floating up into the country, became entangled among the trees, or beat in the roofs and walls of dwellings, and how at last all Friesland was converted into an angry sea. "Multitudes of men, women, children, of horses, oxen, sheep, and every domestic animal, were struggling in the waves in every direction. Every boat and every article which could serve as a boat, were eagerly seized upon. Every house was inundated, even the gravevards gave up their dead. The living infant in his cradle, and the long-buried corpse in his coffin, floated side by side. The ancient flood seemed about to be renewed. Everywhere. upon the tops of trees, upon the steeples of churches, human beings were clustered, praying to God for mercy, and to their fellowmen for assistance. As the storm at last was subsiding. boats began to ply in every direction, saving those who were struggling in the water, picking fugitives from roofs and tree tops, and collecting the bodies of those already drowned." No less than one hundred thousand human beings had perished in a few hours. Thousands upon thousands of dumb creatures lay dead upon the waters; and the damage done to property of every description was beyond calculation.

Robles, the Spanish governor, was foremost in noble efforts to save life and lessen the horrors of the catastrophe.

He had formerly been hated by the Dutch because of his Spanish or Portuguese blood, but by his goodness and activity in their hour of disaster, he won all hearts to gratitude. He soon introduced an improved method of constructing the dykes, and passed a law that they should in future be kept up by the owners of the soil. There were fewer heavy floods from this time, though within less than three hundred years six fearful inundations swept over the land.

In the spring there is always great danger of inland freshets, especially in times of thaw, because the rivers, choked with blocks of ice, overflow before they can discharge their rapidly-rising waters into the ocean. Added to this, the sea chafing and pressing against the dykes, it is no wonder that Holland is often in a state of alarm. The greatest care is taken to prevent accidents. Engineers and workmen are stationed all along in threatened places, and a close watch is kept up night and day. When a general signal of danger is given, the inhabitants all rush to the rescue, eager to combine against their common foe. As everywhere else straw is supposed to be of all things the most helpless in the water, of course in Holland it must be rendered the main stay against a rushing tide. Huge straw mats are pressed against the embankments, fortified with clay and heavy stone, and once adjusted, the ocean dashes against them in vain.

Raff Brinker, the father of Gretel and Hans, had for years been employed upon the dykes. It was at the time of a threatened inundation, when in the midst of a terrible storm, in darkness and sleet, the men were labouring at a weak spot near the Veermyk sluice, that he fell from the scaffolding, and was taken home insensible. From that hour he never worked again; though he lived on, mind and memory were gone.

Gretel could not remember him otherwise than as the strange, silent man, whose eyes followed her vacantly whichever way she turned; but Hans had recollections of a hearty, cheerful-voiced father, who was never tired of bearing him upon his shoulder, and whose careless song still seemed echoing near when he lay awake at night and listened.

## CHAPTER III

#### THE SILVER SKATES

DAME BRINKER earned a scanty support for her family by raising vegetables, spinning, and knitting. Once she had worked on board the barges plying up and down the canal, and had occasionally been harnessed with other women to the towing-rope of a pakschuyt plying between Broek and Amsterdam. But when Hans had grown strong and large, he had insisted upon doing all such drudgery in her place. Besides, her husband had become so very helpless of late, that he required her constant care. Although not having as much intelligence as a little child, he was yet strong of arm and very hearty, and Dame Brinker had sometimes great trouble in controlling him.

"Ah! children, he was so good and steady," she would sometimes say, "and as wise as a lawyer. Even the burgo-master would stop to ask him a question; and now, alack! he don't know his wife and little ones. You remember the father, Hans, when he was himself—a great brave man—

Don't you?"

"Yes, indeed, mother; he knew everything, and could do anything under the sun—and how he would sing! why, you used to laugh, and say it was enough to set the windmills

dancing."

"So I did. Bless me! how the boy remembers! Gretel, child, take that knitting-needle from your father, quick; he'll get it in his eyes maybe; and put the shoe on him. His poor feet are like ice half the time, but I can't keep 'em covered all I can do,'—and then half wailing, half humming, Dame Brinker would sit down, and fill the low cottage with the whirr of her spinning-wheel.

Nearly all the out-door work, as well as the household labour, was performed by Hans and Gretel. At certain seasons of the year the children went out day after day to gather peat, which they would stow away in square, brick-