

Story 1809 (1989 Tape 2)

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The Woodman and His Children

There was once a woodman who lived on a mountain. This woodman went into the forest every day to cut wood. He had two children, a boy named Henzel and a girl named Gretel.¹ The mother of these children had died, and after a while their father married another woman. This second wife of the woodcutter became the stepmother of the two children. Because she was a stepmother, she was, of course, a very bad person.

After a while the woodcutter was unable to find many customers to buy the firewood that he cut. As a result, the family grew poorer and poorer. Finally one day the stepmother suggested to her husband that they abandon the children somewhere deep in the forest. Their father objected to this idea at first, but the stepmother kept

¹This is clearly the Hansel and Gretel story that many readers might associate with the folktale collection of the Brothers Grimm. The tale is of course much older than the Grimms, and its variants are not limited to their Germanic sources. It is No. 327A in the Aarne and Thompson The Types of the Folktale.

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insisting that they must do this. After talking more about it, they made a plan to abandon the children.

Of course the children overheard them making this plan. Henzel, the older child, collected many small pebbles and filled his pockets and shirtfront with them. "Now you can sleep well," Henzel said to Gretel. "We shall be able to find our way home all right."

When morning came they all went into the forest. Before they had left home, each child had been given a piece of bread. When they reached a certain place in the forest, the parents said to the children, "You stay here and play while we cut wood. We shall return for you at the end of the day."

As they had walked from their home into the forest, Henzel had dropped pebbles at short distances apart along their trail so that they would have a way of finding their way back again. Before they had reached their destination in the forest, however, he had dropped all of the pebbles that he had brought along. He then began to drop crumbs of bread to mark their trail.

In the evening when their parents did not return to them to take them home, they tried to find their way back

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by following the trail of bread crumbs. But, alas, the crumbs had disappeared from the ground, for birds had eaten them. Henzel and Gretel were now lost, and they wandered aimlessly through the forest. After a while they came to the house of a witch, but they did not know that it belonged to a witch. It was a very nice house that was made of candy and other sweet foods. The roof was made of chocolate. The walls were made of cake, and the windowpanes were made of clear sugar candy. The children were hungry by then and they were naturally attracted to this unusual building. They ate a piece of the roof. They ate one of the windowpanes. They ate a doorknob.

When they ate the doorknob, the witch opened the door. She looked to the children like simply a poor old woman when she said, "Come in, my children, and have some food." After the children had entered her house, she grabbed Henzel and put him in a cage, and then it became obvious that she was not just a poor old woman. She put him in the cage and gave him much food to eat in order to fatten him, for she intended to eat him. The witch ordered Gretel to cook delicious meals and take them to her brother. When Gretel took the first meal to Henzel, she

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said, "Brother, do not eat this food, or the witch will eat you. She is trying to fatten you for that purpose

Henzel did not eat the food brought to him, but he did withdraw from the meat a long, thin, round bone witch went every day to the cage to find out whether Henzel had grown fat enough to be eaten. Because she could not see very well, she said to him every day, "Stick out your finger so that I can see if it has grown fat yet." Instead of his finger, Henzel always stuck out the bone for her to feel. Day after day she fed Henzel well, but day after day he seemed to remain very thin.

After a while the witch became so annoyed by this that she decided to eat Henzel even if he was very thin. She called Gretel and said, "Light the oven and make it very hot so that I can roast Henzel and make a good of him."

Gretel pretended that she was trying to light the oven. She then said, "I do not know how to light this oven. Will you please show me how to do it?" The witch then crawled inside the oven and lighted it. Before the witch could crawl back out, however, Gretel slammed shut the oven door and trapped the witch inside. In this way

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witch was burned up inside her own oven.

Gretel then took the key and unlocked the cage to release Henzel. Henzel and Gretel then searched through witch's house to discover anything there that might be valuable. They found a trunk that was filled with treasure.

Henzel and Gretel finally found their way home carrying the trunk with them. Their father was very pleased to see his children again. They said, "Look, Father, we have found treasure. We are no longer poor but rich!" They were all happy and enjoyed the rest of their lives