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Jutta Richter / Jörg Mühle (Illustrations)
The Witch's Wood and the Enchanted Socks

Translated by Helena Ragg-Kirkby

Once upon a time, a witch lived in the woods.

She lived near the three oaks, opposite the frog pond where the bright yellow marsh marigolds grow in spring.

She lived in the little crooked house that still stands there today. The house that has no window panes now. The house with the sign on the door:

No Entry

Parents are liable for their children!

That's the very house the witch lived in.

Where you always play hide and seek is where her witchy bed was. And the room on the left was the witch's kitchen. There, an old coal range used to stand with the witch's cauldron on top. The room with the rose wallpaper was her front parlour. There, she had put her witch's armchair by the window. A witch's wing chair which could probably fly.

In the evenings, when darkness fell, she would sit in this chair, knitting red socks. She loved red socks. She had at least fifty pairs of red socks.

"You can run much faster in red socks than in brown ones," she always said. "And you don't get tired feet when you're wearing red socks."

The witch knew all about running. Every day she ran out to collect things. In spring, she collected woodruff, anemones and coltsfoot. In summer, she collected wild berries, yarrow and monkshood. In autumn, she collected mushrooms, chestnuts and acorns; and in winter, she collected wood. And she dried out everything she collected in her witch's kitchen. The witch's kitchen smelled very good.

The witch had white-blond hair as long as a veil. She had green eyes that glittered like December stars. She had pale skin that smelled of lavender soap, and her lips were as red as strawberry jam.

She normally wore a blue dress which made her red socks show up particularly well.

That's what the witch looked like. Anyone who met her thought that she was the good fairy from the big book of fairy-tales.

The witch's name was Karla. Her full name was Karlotta Ingwer Loretta. But nobody can remember a long name like that, so she called herself Karla.

When Karla wasn't collecting or knitting, she was conjuring. A cake on Sundays. The moon on Mondays. A talking frog on Tuesdays. A corolla on Wednesdays. A storm on Thursdays. Blueberry pancakes on Fridays. And on Saturdays, she conjured up the most difficult thing of all. She conjured up peace.

She did that in the evenings, when the sun was just about to set. She sat by the window and sang the incantation for the night:

Day is ending.
Evening's begun.
Darkness comes
to shroud the sun.
Good or bad,
happy or sad,
the day is over
and done.

Lady Night comes
you to veil.
All your troubles
begin to pale.
Good or bad,
happy or sad,
the day is over
and done.

Karla the witch had a fabulous voice. She could hit such high notes that the glasses jumped out of the kitchen cupboards, and such low notes that the mole in his burrow thought he had visitors. She could sing so loudly that the ghosts in the dark coal-hole fled

away into the cracks in the walls, and so quietly that the butterflies fell asleep in the sunflowers.

When Karla sang the incantation, everything changed. The marsh marigolds would close up. The squabbling sparrows would fly off to their nests. The wind would stop tearing at the branches of the trees, and the water-rats would swim silently to the banks of the pond. The last rays of the sun would fall into the room, making it look as if the rose wallpaper were made of gold. Even the the wild house-fly would stop buzzing and would sit immobile on the golden wall.

The woods that Karla lived in are very big. That's why you're only allowed as far as the three oaks. If you go any further, the woods become denser and darker, and the brambles block your path. Anyone who doesn't know their way in the woods gets lost, because you keep having to look down in order not to get caught in the undergrowth.

Behind the wood are Farmer Brömmelkamp's fields. And behind them is the start of the great grey town.

In this town lived Robert. Robert was a coalman at Klawuttke's coal merchants. Every morning at seven, he shovelled the coal into grey sacks. Then he loaded the sacks onto the truck and set off. It was the dirtiest work imaginable. Robert had a black, coal-dusty face, black nostrils, and black lips. His eyes were the only bright thing about him, and when he laughed, you could see his white teeth. He couldn't remember the last time his hands had been really clean. However much he rubbed and scrubbed at them in the evenings, the greasy coal dust had eaten into the lines on his fingers and was firmly lodged beneath his nails.

That wouldn't have bothered Robert.

Except for the fact that when he met a girl he liked, he found himself constantly thinking about his dirty hands. Then he would feel ashamed, and would hide his hands in his trouser pockets.

From that point onwards, everything was difficult. If the girl wanted to go and have an ice-cream with Robert, he would say: "I'm not hungry." If the girl wanted to dance with Robert, he would say: "You dance - I don't like dancing."

And so he would stand there with his hands in his pockets the whole time until the girl, eventually tired of this boorish behaviour, would turn and run off.

That kind of thing always happened on Saturdays, as Saturdays were Robert's day off. When he turned up at work on Monday mornings, Coal-merchant Klawuttke would stand there grinning in the coal-yard, chewing on his cigar end. "So, Robert, you found yerself a bride yet?"

Robert wouldn't answer. Instead, he would shovel the coal twice as quickly into the sacks because he was angry.

Coal-merchant Klawuttke was a mean slavedriver of a man. He mostly stood in the coal-yard, making sure that Robert was working quickly enough. He didn't lift a finger himself, but just bellowed orders. "Get on with it!" he yelled. "Hurry up!" he shouted. "I'm not paying you do to nothing!"

You might wonder why Robert put up with it. Why didn't he find another job? Robert had often thought of chucking the whole thing in and starting again somewhere else. But then, when he drove his rickety coal truck over the bumpy cobblestones, he knew that the old folks in the old houses with coal heating were already waiting for him. Robert liked the old folks, and he knew his way round their cellars. When he'd carried in the coal, they would give him presents: home-made raspberry jam or a bottle of cherry liqueur or a jar of stewed fruit. And they would almost always tell him a story.

That was the best thing!

For coalman Robert collected stories in the way that other people collect stamps. And no other job would have brought him as many stories as he was able to collect as a coalman for coal-merchant Klawuttke.

Robert collected all the stories in his head, because he was too tired to write them down in the evenings. Before he went to sleep, he always thought about the story he'd heard that day. Then he would shut his eyes and dream himself into the story. There, things mostly worked out well. Robert was a prince or nobleman; sometimes he was the miller's youngest son who had two bad brothers but who was smiled upon by fortune because a good heart is always rewarded. If he had dirty hands in these story-dreams, a good fairy would come along and wash his hands in ass's milk.

And if in these dreams he met a girl whom he liked, then they married, had lots of children, and lived happily ever after.

It was a Friday in September.

Coal-merchant Klawuttke was in a particularly bad mood. He was sitting in his hut, writing out bills.

Robert was shovelling coal into the sacks and piling briquettes onto the truck. The sun was shining, and the sky was that kind of dark blue that it only is in September.

Every now and then, Klawuttke would wrench open the hut door and bellow: "Get a move on, slowcoach, or I'll put a rocket under your backside!"

But on that day, this didn't worry Robert as he was about to get into the truck and drive off down Apothekerstraße.

Apothekerstraße, you see, is where old Hermine Schlott lived. She had always lived there, in an old grey block of flats with bay windows and pointed turrets on the roof. Above the front door was a round window with panes of red, yellow, blue and green glass. And when the sun shone, as it was doing today, then a rainbow of light fell into the dark hallway, and flecks of coloured light danced on the cellar steps like lost gemstones.

Hermine Schlott was at least as old as the house, if not older. She had spent her whole life collecting things, and she had never thrown anything away. In her cellar, she kept everything she didn't have space for in her apartment.

The first time Robert had brought her coal, he'd tripped over an old umbrella with a parrot's head on top.

"Watch out!" Frau Schlott had cried. "That's a magic umbrella. People used to be able to fly on it. Do you want to hear the stories?"

And Robert had nodded enthusiastically and said "yes" and "please".

Frau Schlott had sat herself down in a dusty wing chair and had started talking.

The following night, Robert had the nicest story-dream of his entire life:

He was holding tightly to the open umbrella and was flying high above the town, past the church steeple.

"Where do you want to fly to?" croaked the parrot's head.

Robert had asked to go to the high mountains that he knew from pictures. They'd flown there, and Robert had built a snowman on the highest peak, right in the middle of summer.

Only Frau Schlott could tell stories like that. "Oh, young man," she'd said then. "I soon won't know what to do with all this stuff, but I can't throw anything away. You've seen it for yourself: everything here has a story. I wouldn't be able to remember anything if something

were missing.” As she spoke, she pointed to plates and stones and pine cones and boxes, and Robert’s ears had turned red with delight.

Now the coal truck was rumbling once more over the cobblestones. The coal-sacks were dancing around on the truck bed, and Robert beat out their rhythm with his fingers on the steering wheel. Around Pfaffenteich Pond he went, and there was Apothekerstraße. There was the old apartment block number 25 with the turrets and bays and the brightly coloured round window above the front door.

Old Frau Schlott opened the door for Robert. “I’m so glad you’re here, young man,” she said. “I was starting to think the cold nights might beat you to it.”

She led Robert through the rainbow light and down into the cellar, where she unlocked the doors, making sure that he didn’t hit anything with his heavy sacks.

When the last sack had finally been emptied into the coal cellar, Robert wiped the sweat off his forehead. As he did so, his elbow banged against a wobbly shelf.

A flowery yellow cardboard box fell off. The lid sprang open, and balls of red, yellow and green wool went rolling across the cellar floor.

“Oh lawks, the sock collection!” cried Frau Schlott. “I’d completely forgotten where that was.”

Robert’s heart started to pound. “Is it a story?”

“A story and a half!” said Frau Schlott. “It’s one of my best.”

She picked up a pair of red socks and carefully unrolled them.

“Red woollen socks,” she murmured. “Hand-knitted red woollen socks.”

“Magic socks?” asked Robert.

“If you like! If that’s how you see it!” replied Frau Schlott. “There’s what you know and what you believe ...”

Then she sat down in her old wing chair with a creak and a wheeze. A little cloud of dust rose up to the ceiling.

Robert sat down on the wooden chest next to the wing chair. From there, he could see part of the cellar steps and the flecks of bright light dancing there. He rested his chin on his hands and waited expectantly.

“You know the woods?” asked Frau Schlott.

Robert nodded. “I know where they begin, but I’ve never been in there.”

“First there are Farmer Brömmelkamp’s fields. It’s not far from there. Wheat, rye, fodder maize. Fodder maize is always at the edge of the woods. Then fifty steps to the east is a beaten track ...”

Frau Schlott stroked the pair of red socks on her lap.

“Maybe the path has gone now. It’s a long time since I was there. It’s a long way for an old lady like me ... And anyway, I’d forgotten where the socks were.”

“So they *are* magic socks!” said Robert.

“Not necessarily,” said old Frau Schlott, and smiled. “But they help me to remember.” And so she began her story:

Once upon a time, a witch lived in the woods.

She lived near the three oaks, opposite the frog pond. The place where the bright yellow marsh marigolds grow in spring.

She lived in a little crooked house. On the door was a yellow sign:

No Entry

Parents are liable for their children

That’s the very house the witch lived in.

The room on the left was the witch’s kitchen. There, an old coal range used to stand with the witch’s cauldron on top. The room with the rose wallpaper was her front parlour. There, she had put her witch’s armchair by the window. A witch’s wing chair which could probably fly. In the evenings, when darkness fell, she would sit in this chair, knitting red socks. She loved red socks. She had at least fifty pairs of red socks.

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