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Snake Ring at Risk and Other Stories

Written by John Holroyd

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SNAKE RING AT RISK & OTHER STORIES

JOHN HOLROYD



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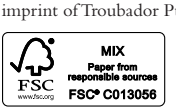
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PIE AND THE WITCH

When I was about ten years old, a new boy joined my primary school class. His name was James Appleby. We thought that Appleby sounded rather like Apple Pie, so we just called him Pie. His parents had lived in several different towns, and Pie had attended several different schools. The result of this was that he had not learned some of the things that we had learned in our class. We did not understand this, so we just thought that he was stupid. At that time, my two best friends were a boy called Kenny and a girl called Jodie, and the three of us decided to play a trick on Pie. I must tell you that it was rather a horrid trick, and we were sorry about it afterwards. But before I tell you what it was, I must tell you about the witch.

Next to the school playground was a narrow road. On the other side of the road was a row of small houses, and in one of these houses lived an old lady. We were quite sure that she was a witch. She lived alone except for her black cat, and she was always dressed in black. When she came out to sweep her front path, she used a witch's broomstick. When

she wanted her cat to come in, she called, "Miss! Miss!" Jodie said she had read all about witches, and she knew why the cat was called Miss. A witch's cat, said Jodie, was called a 'familiar' because it was really a young girl who had been turned into a cat by a magic spell.

One day, just as we were arriving at school, we noticed that the old lady was polishing the brass knocker on her front door, and we could hear that she was singing. Kenny crept up as close as he could, while Jodie and I waited by the school gate. A few moments later he joined us in great excitement. "It's a spell!" he said. "She's singing in a foreign language."

"That's right," said Jodie. "Spells are usually in Latin, like: 'Hocus, pocus…'."

"I don't know whether it's in Latin," replied Kenny, "but quite often she sings something that sounds like 'Ah, hid a nose!' I wonder what that means."

Just then the bell rang for us to go into school. By the time morning school ended, Jodie had thought of the answer. "Suppose she does not want anyone to know that she is a witch. So she does not wear her witch's hat when she comes out. Everyone knows that witches have long pointed noses, so she uses a magic spell to hide her nose – 'Ah hid a nose'." Kenny and I thought Jodie was quite clever to have worked that out.

Now I can tell you about the trick we played on Pie. We told him that new members of the class had to do a brave deed, and that his brave deed was to knock at the witch's door and run away.

"I don't think that knocking at an old lady's door is a brave deed," said Pie. So we told him all the reasons why we thought she was a witch.

"You will be in great danger," I told him. "You could be turned into a frog!"

"Or she might need another cat," added Jodie, "and she would probably call you Mister!"

So in the end Pie agreed to do it.

The next day, after school, we were ready, and waited until everyone else had gone home. I must tell you that in those days children, even very small ones, walked to and from school by themselves, so there were no parents waiting, and certainly no cars. This was the plan: Pie was to walk quietly across the road to the witch's door while we hid behind the low wall between the playground and the road. Pie would knock loudly on the knocker three times, then run at full speed and join us behind the wall before the old lady had time to open the door. She would then open it, see that there was no-one there, and go back indoors. We would wait until we were sure that she had gone in and closed the door, then we would go home.

But something went wrong.

We heard no knocks, and we waited. I thought

I heard a voice, then silence. Pie did not return. We peeped over the wall. The old lady's door was closed, and Pie was nowhere to be seen. Jodie thought he was probably a frog or a beetle by now. Kenny said he didn't believe it. He thought Pie must have run home instead of knocking at the door. In the end we agreed that Kenny's idea was probably right, so we too went home.

Mothers can usually tell when something is wrong. When I got back, my mum asked whether something unpleasant had happened at school. Of course I was worried about Pie, but I just said, "I'm just a bit tired."

"Better have an early night," replied Mum.

I went to bed early but I didn't sleep very well. I had a horrid dream that a giant frog was in bed with me. I woke up suddenly and pushed it out, but it was only my pillow.

Next morning things were worse. Pie was not at school. Kenny plucked up the courage to ask our teacher, Miss Green, if he was ill.

"None of your business, Kenneth," she answered.

Pie arrived late for afternoon school, with one side of his face rather swollen. We were keen to question him, but all he would say was that he had been to the dentist's, his face was painful, and that he didn't feel like talking today. In fact, it was a few days before we learned the full story. I think he was

teasing us, getting a little of his own back for the trick, by only telling us the story in bits and pieces, although he remembered perfectly everything that had happened. But I'm not going to tease you in this way. I'm going to tell you exactly what happened to Pie from the moment that he went to the old lady's door.

She must have seen him coming, because he had no time to knock. The door opened and there stood the old lady.

"Hello," she said, in quite a friendly voice.

Pie was so surprised that he forgot to run away. He couldn't say anything for a moment, then managed to say, "Sorry!"

Now it was the old lady's turn to be surprised. "What are you sorry for?"

"I was going to knock at your door," replied Pie meekly.

"What did you want?" she asked.

Pie thought of saying it was a mistake. But he realised that he might be in trouble, and remembered what his parents had taught him: "Don't tell lies to get out of trouble, because in that way you get into more trouble." So he told the truth. "Some of the children in my class dared me to knock at your door and run away."

"Oh, did they indeed?" said the old lady, quite sharply. "And why did they choose my door for you to knock on?"

"Because they think you are a witch," replied Pie. "I'm sorry if that sounds rude."

"I'm very interested," said the old lady, "so you must come indoors and tell me all about it. Shut the door and follow me!"

Pie thought it would be even more rude to run away now, so he did as he was told and followed her into her small, cosy sitting room, where she seated herself in an easy chair.

"Sit down," she said, "and tell me your name."

"My name is James Appleby, but the other children call me Pie."

"I shall call you James. My name is Mrs Gwyneth Jones. So now, James, do *you* think I'm a witch?"

Pie thought for a minute. "You don't seem like one. But the children had some very good reasons."

"Tell me," said Mrs Jones.

"Well," began Pie, "you live alone, you always wear black, and you have a black cat called Miss."

"I wear black," began Mrs Jones, "because I'm a widow. That means I was married but my husband died. That made me so sad that I didn't want to wear brightly coloured clothes. That was a long time ago, but I just got used to wearing black, and I'm too old to change now. When I came here to live by myself, I went to the cats' shelter and brought home a little black kitten to keep me company. It's a tom cat – a boy – and his real name is Mischief, because of the tricks he used to get up to. He climbed up my

curtains and could not get down. Another time he tangled up my knitting. He's grown up now, of course, and I call him 'Miss' for short."

"I'm sorry your husband died," said Pie.

"It was a long time ago," continued Mrs Jones. "But you are a kind boy to say so."

"Well then, James," she asked after a pause, "what else do the children say?"

"You've got a broomstick."

"So I have," she replied with a smile, "but I call it a besom, and it's the very best kind of broom for sweeping up leaves and garden rubbish. But it won't fly! I only wish it would. It would be wonderful to fly off to town to do my shopping. So is that all?"

"Just one more thing," said Pie. "The children heard you singing in a foreign language, and they thought you were casting a spell."

"Now this really is interesting," said Mrs Jones. "Tell me more. I want to hear the whole story."

"One of the boys who heard you singing says that he kept hearing the words, 'Ah hid a nose', and one of the girls, who says she knows all about witches, explained it. She said that witches have long pointed noses, and when they go out of doors, they have this spell which will hide a nose."

He stopped as he noticed that Mrs Jones was laughing till the tears ran down her face.

"Sorry, James," she said, wiping her eyes. "I'm not laughing at you. It's what the girl said that's so

funny, and when you hear my story, you will laugh with me!"

"You might have guessed from my name," she continued, "that I am Welsh. I was born in Wales, and I can speak Welsh as well as I can speak English – perhaps better. What I was singing is a lovely Welsh song called 'All Through the Night', and the Welsh for that is *A'r hyd y nos*. So you see that '*nos*' in Welsh means 'night', and has nothing at all to do with noses! Listen – I'll sing a verse for you."

Pie listened while she sang in a clear, sweet voice a verse in Welsh.

"You're a very good singer," he said. "But you are not a witch!"

"Thank you," said Mrs Jones. "I'm very pleased. Now you must go and find your friends. Remember all the things I've said, and tell everyone, so that all the children know that I am not a witch."

So Pie said goodbye to Mrs Jones. He looked for us behind the school wall, but we had gone home long ago.

That was the story Pie told us. We were very pleased that there was not a witch near the school. It also made us change our minds about Pie. He had talked to Mrs Jones, asked her all the right questions, and remembered the answers. He could not be stupid, so we decided not to call him Pie any more. As his proper name was James, we called him Jim.

Soon after that, I arrived home from school one

day and my mother said, "You look very cheerful these days. Is something good happening at school?"

I decided to tell Mum the whole story. When I had finished, she was quiet for a while, then she said, "I agree that Jim wasn't stupid, but some people were."

I think she meant Kenny and Jodie… and me!