

The Witch Tells Fortunes

by Alice Hale Burnett *from Hallowe'en at Merryvale*

Hallowe'en at Merryvale is a book about a group of boys who attend a Halloween party at the home of one of the boys. It takes place in the early 20th century in a small town called Merryvale. The boys are good friends, and most have nicknames: Reddy, Toad, Fat, etc. As this passage begins, the friends have already been entertained with other games and activities. They then hear a slow knock on the door.

"Come in," invited Father and the boys, standing in a group watching the knob of the door turn slowly. As it opened silently they saw standing on the threshold a little, old woman, all bent over, a long black cape and hood covering her from head to foot. She carried a cane with a crook in it and leaned very heavily upon it as she walked.

Muttering to herself she crossed the room and took a seat by the fire. Her coarse, gray hair fell in straggly locks about her face almost hiding it from view.

Suddenly the lights went out, leaving the room in darkness, save for the firelight.

"Place the pot before me," she ordered, in a high, broken voice, shaking her stick at Fat.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Fat, hurrying to obey.

"She's got Fat scared to death," giggled Toad to Reddy.

From under her cape she now took a small paper bag and poured the contents into the pot before her, then standing up she hobbled around it three times, waving her arms and humming a queer little tune. Soon a dull red light glowed from within the pot, getting brighter and brighter.

"It's magic," whispered Toad to Hopie Smith.

The old witch now sat down again and took from beneath her cape a small pad, a long quill pen and a queer little bottle filled with milky white fluid.

"If you drink any of that you'll get as small as a flea," said Fat in a low voice.

The old witch rapped hard on the floor with her cane.

"Herbie, come forward," she commanded.

"Go ahead," giggled Reddy, giving him a little push and Herbie stepped before the witch.

She did not notice him at first, being very busy writing upon a slip of paper with the quill pen which she dipped into a little bottle. Presently she raised her head and handed him the paper.

"Bend low thine ear," she said, and Herbie obeyed.

"Keep this until I am gone," she added, "then hold it over yonder candle light, for thy fortune is written there."

Each boy was now called in turn and received a slip of paper. Then the old witch arose.

"To those who obey my commands, good luck; to those who disobey, ill fortune," she cried, shaking her stick in the air, and in another moment she had quickly hobbled from the room.

Chuck now turned on the lights and Linn exclaimed:

"Where on earth did she ever come from?"

"Why, witches come out of the air," explained Toad. "They travel on a broomstick."

"Let's see what she wrote on the papers," proposed Hopie Smith.

"Yes," agreed Reddy, "she told me to hold it over the candle light," at which Chuck came forward with a candle that he placed on the center table, holding his slip of paper over the flame. The other boys eagerly gathered about to watch.

Soon the paper got hot and letters began to appear.

"Look, there's an 'a' and two 'e's,' and—and," cried Chuck, "it's quite plain now. I can read it."

"Go on," shouted Reddy, "let's hear it."

Chuck began:

"If your head will rule your heart,
From a cent you'll never part;
So tell your heart to rule your head,
And all will mourn you when you're dead."

"That means if you're stingy no one will care when you're gone," explained Linn, at which Chuck laughed with the others.

Herbie now held his over the light, and as the letters appeared, he read:

"Don't always be in too great haste,
It often means a dreadful waste;
Await your turn and take with ease,
The piece you want with fingers greased."

"That's you and the molasses candy," laughed Reddy, adding, "Here's mine:

"Your hair may be of brilliant hue,
But this should never bother you;
For when the winter winds blow most,
Your head will be as warm as toast."

"That's great," cried Reddy as all the boys laughed.

Fat now held his slip over the flame, and, as the words appeared read slowly:

"If you should eat a pound of lemons every other day,
You'd grow as lean as any pole, for so I've heard folks say;
But if, upon the other hand, you keep on eating pie,
You'll grow so big and round and tall, you'll almost reach the sky."

"You'd better be careful, Fat, and buy a barrel of lemons," suggested Toad.

"I'll order a wagon-load," grinned Fat.

Hopie now held his paper near the candle, and in a moment read:

"If you're the lad, to find the coin
That's hidden in the flour,
You, the highest will enjoy,
Of health, and wealth and power."

Toad's turn now came and upon his paper was written:

"You're very fond of teasing all the girls,
And pulling off the ribbons from their curls;
But mark my words, these tricks you'll surely rue,
For when you're grown, a few they'll play on you."

"That's a good one for you to remember, Toad," laughed the others.

Linn now read:

"Your mouth may be large, as I've oft heard you say,
But your words show a brain that is working;
You'll go to the top of the ladder because,
You do what you do without shirking."

"The old witch must have liked you, Linn," commented Reddy. "That's the best yet."

Questions

1. What does *stingy* mean here: " 'That means if you're stingy no one will care when you're gone' "?
2. Explain the meaning of Toad's fortune.
3. Explain the meaning of Linn's fortune.
4. Find two sets of rhyming words in the passage.