

HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



11. Ole Man Pumpkin

It was October, and the cornfield was deserted and bare. Jehosophat and Marmaduke could remember it as a more beautiful picture. For there, in the Summer, an army had camped, the great army of the corn, with tassels and tall yellow spears, and bright green banners waving and tossing in the wind. But when Fall had come, Father and the Toyman had come, too, with their sickles like swords, to attack and cut down that brave army. And now the corn soldiers were all laid away, stiff and cold, in the barn, or else in the silo—to be pickled in juice!

Marmaduke and Jehosophat looked over the field. It was covered with little hills, and there the feet of the corn soldiers still stood, all that was left of them, for they had been “swished by those swords,” just at the ankles.

Between the hills shone the last of the pumpkins, big, round and yellow—red-yellow like an orange. Most of them had gone in the wagon, long ago, but the largest of all had been left. My, but he was a big fellow! “The biggest in the world!” they declared.

He had been saved for the great day—or night, we should say—Hallowe’en.

But let’s hurry the clock—over three days—to the morning before the celebration.

The three children were watching Mother in the kitchen. She was busy with the big pumpkin, but the Toyman had to help her with it—it was so huge. He lifted it on the table—then—what do you think?

He took a sharp knife and scalped that Pumpkin—just like an Indian—cut a great hole in his head. Then Mother scooped out his insides and chopped them up fine. Ole Man Pumpkin was very brave, just stood it and said never a word.

“Why, he doesn’t holler a bit!” exclaimed Marmaduke. “I would, if anybody scalped me and took my insides out!”

Next, Mother brought out the big pot, filling it part with water, and part with Ole Man Pumpkin’s yellow insides. And the fire roared angrily and boiled them, boiled them all up. It took quite a long time, but the children didn’t grow tired—it was such a mysterious, such an interesting process.

At last Mother decided it had been cooked long enough, and she poured the water into the sink, the nice yellow stuff into a bowl. Then she mashed the lumps till it looked like golden mush.

Now the flour was sifted on the pastry board, and the dough rolled until it was as smooth and flat as a sheet or counterpane. Then quickly and neatly the dough counterpanes were placed in the pans, hanging over the edges like covers overlapping a bed. Taking a knife, Mother cut off these edges even with the pan, then, for decoration, made little marks in the dough all around, like the flutings of the Fairy Lamp.

11. Ole Man Pumpkin

Of course, the insides of Ole Man Pumpkin wouldn't taste quite right as they were, so Mother broke some eggs over them, adding some milk and a pinch of spice for seasoning, and the delicious mess was stirred till all was thoroughly mixed.

Soon it was ready, a fine filling for pies and pans or little boys or kings, for that matter, and she scraped it into the pans until the white crust was covered up, all but the fluted edges. Then into the oven went the pies, on the top shelf, and the door was closed to keep the heat in.

Meanwhile the children had been so busy watching Mother and those pies; and their mouths had watered so as they watched, that they hadn't noticed the Toyman at all—until they heard him say,—

“Good mornin', Jack!”

Jack Who? Not Jack Holmes or Jack Frost—no, it was someone much handsomer, although he had a hole in the top of his head, a fat face, big round eyes, a large flat nose, and a wide, wide mouth with lots of square teeth in it.

“Mr. Jehosophat Green,” said the Toyman very politely, “let me make you acquainted with Jack, or, as he is sometimes called, ‘Ole Man Pumpkin.’”

Jehosophat bowed low.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, just like grownup folks.

Then Marmaduke piped up,—

“Make me acquainted, too.”

“To be sure,” said the Toyman, “Mr. Marmaduke Green meet Mr. Jack Lantern.”

“Very glad to know you,” said Marmaduke, bowing even lower than had Jehosophat, while Hepzebiah, dancing in her eagerness, shouted,—

“Make me ‘quainted, make me ‘quainted!”

The Toyman took her by the arm, and he in turn made a grand bow.

“Now, Jack, old fellow, this is an honor. Here's a lady expressin' a desire to make your acquaintance. Miss Hepzebiah Green, let me present Mr. Jack O. Lantern, otherwise known as ‘Ole Man Pumpkin.’”

Then he turned to Jack.

“You don't mind my calling you so familiarly, do you?”

Apparently Jack didn't mind, for he just squatted there, lazy-like, and grinned with all his big square teeth.

Hepzebiah giggled back at him. She was having a glorious time. So were they all.

So, through that long—no, very short —afternoon, the kitchen was filled with pleasant smells and the air of fun and a pleasant surprise to come. They almost thought they could smell the surprise as well as the pies.

It came at last, that is the surprise did, for, just after supper, the Toyman disappeared, probably to do some of his chores.

A little while later there came a tap at the window.

Marmaduke turned.

11. Ole Man Pumpkin

Jehosophat turned.

Hepzebiah turned.

“Ooh, ooh!” said she;

“Golly!” said Marmaduke; and

“Gee whiz!”, Jehosophat.

Great yellow eyes looked in through the window, and a nose, and a great grinning mouth with big teeth in it.

The visitor nodded, needing no introduction, for they had made his acquaintance already.

He came into the house, helped a little by the Toyman, and still nodding his great yellow head.

They gave him a seat of honor, not by the table, but on it, right in the centre. Marmaduke climbed up and looked down into the big hole in the top of his head. In it was a thick candle, dancing inside his old yellow skull, and he seemed a good comrade, that Ole Man Pumpkin.

But what was the Toyman doing now?

He had a tub in his arms. He set it down, filled it with water, then popped three red apples in it.

And the children got down on their knees around the tub and tried to take the apples in their teeth. But round and round they bobbed, so fast that it was difficult to catch them.

“Ugh!” exclaimed Jehosophat;

“Kerchoo!” sneezed Marmaduke;

“Guhuh!” coughed Hepzebiah, all their eyes and their mouths, noses and tummies, too, full of water. And always those little red apples bobbed out of reach. Once Jehosophat thought he had caught one, but his teeth slipped on its smooth round cheek and all he got was a piece of skin. It was fun just the same.

A lot of other games they played, with flour, and candles, and rings, and things, then the Toyman gathered them up on his knees and the arm of his chair, and told them a story. A good one? Of course! He never told a poor one.

By this time the children were sneezing and Mother said they’d have to go to bed or they’d catch their “deathocold.”

When they were at last undressed Jehosophat lay his head on the pillow. But it wouldn’t stay down. He could see Ole Man Pumpkin sitting there on the dining-room table—so still! The Toyman had forgotten to put out the candle in his head. It was a thick candle, and it burned a long, long time. Ole Man Pumpkin seemed to be very cheerful with it inside his hollow skull. It made him feel “all lit up,” he heard the Toyman say.

The big, round eyes never blinked. They just watched the little boy all the time, and the big mouth was “just laughin’ an’ laughin’ an’ laughin’ at him.”

Then all of a sudden Ole Man Pumpkin started to move. He didn’t have any legs, but he slid from the table to the floor, and somehow climbed up on the window sill, and rolled out of the window. Jehosophat had to get out of bed to see what his new friend was going to

11. Ole Man Pumpkin

do. He followed him across the dining room, over the window sill, and by the barn. And all the little boy had on were his pajamas, but he didn't feel cold, for Ole Man Pumpkin looked so bright and jolly and warm that Jehosophat felt bright and jolly and warm, too.

Ole Man Pumpkin kept bumping his way along to the cornfield where Mr. Scarecrow stood on guard, though his work for the year was done.

Now Mr. Scarecrow seemed to have a lot of friends around him, and he was making a speech. There was Ole Man Pumpkin, of course; and Jehosophat, who had just arrived; and Mr. Stuckup the Turkey, as usual looking very grand and proud; and the Hippity-hop Bunnies, wiggling their noses in their funny way; and Johnny Cottontail, their little wild cousin, making his nose go, too. And there was Reddy Fox, with one forepaw raised and his eyes as bright as beads; and a whole squad of corn-soldiers with yellow tassels and green banners and tall spears. My, but they looked bright and gay once more! And there were lots of funny little folk besides,—three bright rosy-cheeked Apples, talking and laughing and chattering away just like real people, and two Pie-pans, only they didn't look flat and dull as when they were in the kitchen, but had shiny intelligent faces, and they were chattering away, too.

Mr. Scarecrow was making a speech to them in such a ridiculous fashion. His arms stood out stiff and straight from the shoulder, but he made queer floppy gestures with his wrists.

"I'm a Red," he was saying, "and I call upon you to rise upon the cap'talists, who feed on your flesh and bones."

Jehosophat shuddered, for he thought he knew what was in Mr. Scarecrow's mind. That very day in school they had had "Currantyvents," and Miss Prue Parsons had told them a lot about Reds, and Annarkisseds, and Revolushions they wanted to start all over the world. Horrible, shivery things they were that she had told them!

"Revolt—rebel. Rebel—revolt!" Old Mr. Scarecrow shouted, flapping his wrists and swinging in the wind.

"Hear, hear!" cried the Little Red Apples;

"Hear, hear!" cried the Shiny Pie Pans; and

"Horrible, horrible!", Mr. Stuckup the Turkey.

Ole Man Pumpkin didn't say anything, but just grinned and grinned with his big eyes and old yellow teeth.

"There is a cap'talist now, standing before you!" shouted Mr. Scarecrow, and his wrists flapped right at Jehosophat, "away with him!"

"Away with him!" shouted one and all—the Little Red Apples, the Shiny Pie Pans, Mr. Stuckup the Turkey, and the Tall Corn Soldiers; and all the time Ole Man Pumpkin kept grinning and grinning, as if he were enjoying himself most cruelly.

Then Mr. Scarecrow said in a solemn voice:

"Soldiers, do your duty with the prisoner!"

And all at once two Tall Corn Soldiers stood on each side of him, grabbed him by one arm, and growled:

"About face—forward march!"

And the first thing he knew, he was being hustled very swiftly over towards the Pond.

11. Ole Man Pumpkin

The Little Red Apples and the Shiny Pie Pans rolled on ahead, chattering gaily to each other; Mr. Stuckup marched on very pompously; Ole Man Pumpkin bumped along just in front; the two Corn Soldiers marched by his side; and a lot of others pricked him from behind with their sharp, cruel spears.

What were they going to do with him? That was the question.

He was soon to know, for they had reached the edge of the Pond.

“Duck him!” shouted the Little Red Apples in glee.

And the Tall Corn Soldiers seized Jehosophat by the hair on the top of his head, and shoved him under the water, way under, oh, way, way under.

“Give me a bite!” said the first Little Red Apple, snapping at their prisoner’s face when he came to the surface again.

“Me, too!” shouted the second.

“A big one for me!” yelled the third, and they all rolled in the water and bobbed around, bumping up against his face and trying their best to take a nip out of his cheeks.

He never had known before that apples had teeth, but, sure enough, he felt them now—there was actually a little piece gone from each side of his face.

“Great fun, Hallowe’en!” they called to one another as they bobbed about, still snapping at his cheeks.

“Enough!” It was the two Corn Soldiers who spoke, and Jehosophat was dragged from the Pond. He was dripping wet and he felt pretty cold in his pajamas.

“Now it’s my turn,” said Ole Man Pumpkin. “Take him to the workshop, there’s a lot of sharp tools there.”

Tools! Whatever could they be going to do with him now! But he had no time to think, for there they were, all bumping, or rolling, or stalking along, to the workshop, and taking him with them. They had no keys, but they managed to enter just the same.

“On the table—come, up with him!”

And immediately the two Corn Soldiers seized him by the arms and hoisted him on the table, where he sat in his little pajamas, like a tailor, with his knees crossed under him. But what was the idea? What was that Ole Man Pumpkin telling the Corn Soldiers?

“Just cut a little hole in the top of his head—just enough to scoop out his insides. Quick work, or he’ll spoil.”

“Save the drumstick for me,” gobbled Mr. Stuck-up, “they didn’t bother me much on Hallowe’en, but I’m going to get even for Thanksgiving.”

And all the time the Little Red Apples rolled around the floor in high glee; and the Shiny Pie Pans danced against each other, making a noise like the cymbals of the Salvation Army parade; and Ole Man Pumpkin kept sharpening and sharpening his knife.

Then—then—but it was a new voice that was speaking to him.

“Get up!” it said.

It wasn’t Ole Man Pumpkin that was telling him to get up on that table, so he could scalp him. It was Mother telling him to sit up in bed!

“I knew they had too much pie,” she was saying, and, “come, dear, open your mouth; take

11. Ole Man Pumpkin

this and you'll feel better in the morning.”

She was on one side of the bed, and Father was on the other, ready to take a hand, as he always did under the circumstances.

They weren't pleasant, either, the circumstances, for they were,—first Father's grip on his arm, then a tablespoon—not a teaspoon, or a dessert spoon, but a tablespoon, such as a giant might use—full of a thick yellow liquid from that bottle they hated so, and pointed right at his tongue.

However, he took it pretty bravely, swallowed it, gulped, then choked back the tears. But the orange-juice, which followed the yellow stuff, almost made up for it. He always did like orange as a color better than yellow, any day.

And there was Ole Man Pumpkin again, on the dining room table, grinning, not wickedly but cheerfully. He winked at Jehosophat, just like the Ole Man in the Moon, whom he strangely resembled—as much as to say:

“We'll have a good time yet in spite of that bottle.”

After all, he wasn't an enemy of the children, who would cut holes in their heads and scoop out their insides—he was their friend, was Ole Man Pumpkin, and Jehosophat felt much relieved at that.