

Julie, Peter and the Big Secret Secret

Julie and Peter were on holiday. They were spending a few days with Grandfather Jacob, who lived in a big old creaky country house—where nothing ever happened.

Julie and Peter were sitting at the kitchen table, drawing pictures. Julie had drawn a horse that looked like a cow, and Peter was busy with a house that looked like a box of fish-fingers.

"Enough of this drawing stuff," Grandfather Jacob said. "I just had an idea." The children both looked up.

"What's your idea?" Julie asked, in a "what's your idea?" kind of voice.

"Come outside" Grandfather Jacob said, "and I'll show you both."

Outside, the sun was shining, birds were singing—and some were even dancing as well.

"What's your idea?" Julie asked again.

"Follow me," Grandfather said, setting out across the large lawn. The children scuttled along behind until they finally came to the big oak tree.

"What's your idea?" Julie asked again.

On the grass, beside the big oak tree, was a coil of very thick rope.

"*This* is my idea," Grandfather said, picking up the rope. "I thought we'd make a swing. You see that big branch up there?" Grandfather pointed with his nose. "We're going to make the swing from that."

"It's too high," Peter said.

"The higher the branch, the better the swing," Grandfather Jacob answered.

"Maybe," Peter said, not quite convinced, "but *who's* going to climb up?"

"Can I?" Julie asked, excitedly.

"Sorry," Grandfather said.

"Not *me!*" Peter said, suddenly feeling worried.

"No, not you either," Grandfather Jacob answered.

"Who then?" Julie asked.

"Me, of course." Grandfather Jacob smiled one of his smiles.

"*Grandfathers* can't climb trees," Julie said.

"*Grandfathers* can't climb trees," Peter said.

"This one can," Grandfather Jacob said, looping the rope over his shoulder. And up he went. The children had never seen anything like it. It was amazingly mad. It was magnificently crazy. It was as if Grandfather Jacob had been climbing trees all his life. In fact, Grandfather Jacob *had* been climbing trees all his life. Almost at once, he reached the big high branch, stretched himself out, and crept along on his belly. Then he took the rope, and began to tie the biggest, thickest, strongest knot that had ever been tied.

"Watch out below," he called, and dropped the rope down. And when he was back on the ground, the children cheered and hugged him. Grandfather Jacob was the best tree-climbing grandfather in the whole wide world.

"Not so high!" Peter grumbled. "It's not nice!" Julie was pushing her brother on the new swing.

"*That's* not too high," Julie told him. "*This* is too high." And she gave Peter an even harder push.

"Stop it! Stop it! I want to get off. Let me off!" Julie stopped the swing for him. "You *always* push me too high," he said, jumping off.

"I do not," Julie answered in a kind of sing-song voice. "The ground's too low—that's all."

"Very funny," Peter didn't think. Just then Grandfather came out of the house, carrying a blanket and a basket, with his dog, Henry, following close behind.

"I thought we'd have a picnic lunch," he said.

Julie cheered, "Yahoo." Peter, who suddenly forgot he was trying to be miserable, cheered, "Aggi-aggi-aggi," which he

thought sounded more grown up.

Grandfather Jacob took them to his favourite picnic place: beside the sleepy river at the bottom of the garden. The sleepy river was called, "The Sleepy River", and was home to four swans, three ducks, two otters and a row-boat with a hole in the bottom. Henry the dog somehow managed to spread the blanket on the grass, and soon they were all tucking in to Grandfather's queer cooking.

"Picnics can even make horrid food taste good," Peter said. And he was right.

After the pick-nick, Grandfather Jacob and Peter and Henry the dog all fell fast asleep. Grandfather often slept for a while after lunch, because he was so old. Peter often slept for a while after lunch as well, because he was so young. As for Henry the dog, he often slept for a while after lunch too, because he stayed up late at night, reading big books with small words. Grandfather Jacob, Peter and Henry the dog all began to snore. Now, snoring only sounds nice to the person doing the snoring, so Julie decided to get away and do some exploring.

Henry the dog was the first to wake up. He went over to Peter and licked his ear. When a dog puts his tongue in your ear and licks, it sounds like windy wind and wacky waves. Peter woke up, sat up, and seemed mixed up for a few moments.

"Phew," he said to Henry the dog, who was wagging his tail. "I must have been dreaming. I thought I was drowning in the sea. There was a big storm, and splashing and, and everything."

"Woof," said Henry the dog.

Suddenly Julie appeared, running back along the river bank.

"Where've you been?" Peter asked. Julie looked at Grandfather, who was still sleeping, and sat on the grass beside Peter.

"I've been exploring," she whispered, in a whispery whispering voice.

"Oh," Peter said, uninterested. "You're *always* exploring."

"I know," Julie whispered, "but this time was different. This time I *found* something. I found something really fantastic. I found . . ." Just then, Grandfather Jacob began to wake up.

"Shh," Julie shushed, placing a finger over her mouth. "I'll tell you later."

"Oh, I must have nodded off," Grandfather said. He took out a broken pocket-watch, looked at it, shook it, listened to it, and then put it away again.

"Shall we play something?" Julie asked.

Now there were three reasons why Julie and Peter loved their grandfather so much: firstly, he was as silly as any adult could ever hope to be; secondly, he knew some of the best games ever invented; and thirdly, he knew one hundred and one ways to *cheat* at all of them.

Eight o'clock finally came, and it was time for bed.

"Can't we just play a little longer?" Peter grumbled.

"No," Grandfather said, "it's past eight o' clock."

Upstairs, Grandfather told the children, "It might get cold tonight, so you'd better both sleep with your socks on."

"It's summer," Julie said.

"Never mind that," he answered. Grandfather had such funny ideas.

Grandfather tucked them in and gave a sloppy kiss to Julie and a sloppy kiss to Peter. Henry the dog came running into the room, and gave an even sloppier kiss to Julie, and an even even sloppier kiss to Peter.

"Night-night," said Grandfather.

"Night-night," said Julie.

"Night-night," said Peter.

"Woof-woof," said Henry the dog.

After a few minutes, Julie whispered, "Peter, are you asleep?"

There was no answer. Julie climbed from her bed.

"Wake up," she whispered, shaking him.

"Leave me alone," he said, without opening his eyes.

"No. Wake up."

"What do you want?" Peter seemed in no mood for chit-chat.

Julie sat on his bed. "You remember I went exploring this afternoon?" Peter, by now, had one eye half open.

"No, and I don't want to," he said.

"You remember I found something?" Peter, by now, had two eyes half open.

"No, and I don't want to," he said.

"I found this key," Julie said, and she held up a large rusty key to show him. "It was hidden in a biscuit tin, hidden in the garden shed." She paused for a moment, and then whispered, "It's for the *attic*."

The attic door was always kept locked, and the children were not allowed inside. Grandfather Jacob said that the attic contained a secret secret. A big secret secret.

Peter, by now, had two eyes wide open. "How do you know?" he asked.

"It says on the label." Julie showed him a piece of paper, attached to the key by a piece of string, with the word "**A t t i c**" written in bold clear letters. Peter though couldn't read, so when he looked, the letters just looked like a lot of squiggle people standing in a line:

A

a squiggle man, standing on his hands;

t t

two squiggle twins looking out to sea;

i

a small thin squiggle man wearing a hat;

c

and a squiggle fat lady at the end.

"I want to go up and try it," Julie said, holding the key like a magic wand. "I think," and here she lowered her voice even more, "I think there might be *treasure* in the attic."

"*Treasure?!*" Peter, by now, not only had both eyes wide

open, but his mouth as well.

"Treasure," she repeated. "So let's go look." And she took his hand, pulling him out of bed.

Just then Peter realised something: "But, but it might be dark up there," he protested. "I don't like the dark."

"Don't be a baby," she told him, and pulled him out of bed. "We'd better put on our dressing gowns though. It might be cold."

"I don't like the cold," Peter said.

"Don't be a baby," she told him again. Julie and Peter put on their dressing gowns.

In their stocking feet, Julie and Peter sneaked down the passage and then up to the top of the attic steps. Julie put the key in the lock.

"Click," went the lock.

"It works!" Julie said, sounding surprised. She turned the handle, pushed open the door, and they both peered into the dark room.

"I'm scared," Peter whispered.

"Don't be a baby," Julie told him. And taking his hand, in they went.

Julie fumbled around, found the light switch, and then closed the door in case Grandfather Jacob should hear them. Now they could see properly.

"It's empty," Peter said. "There's nothing here but dust. Let's go back to bed."

"No, look, there's a trunk over there." The attic was a strange room and somehow had ten times more corners than walls, with the trunk standing in one of them. "Let's look inside." They walked over, and Julie pushed open the heavy lid.

"Look!" Julie reached inside the trunk and brought out two pairs of red Wellington boots.

"That's not treasure," Peter said.

"No," Julie sighed.

"Let's try them on," Peter said. "I want to pretend I'm a

fireman." And so the children put on the Wellington boots. It was then, by the way, that something very strange happened: QUICK AS A FLASH, Julie and Peter both disappeared.

"Where are we?" Peter asked.

"What happened?" Julie wondered. The children were *somewhere else*.

"I think these Wellington boots must be magic," Julie said.

"*Magic?!*" Peter was shocked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, magic."

"I don't like magic. Not one bit. Not one itsy-bitsy bit."

"Oh shut up," Julie told him.

"But how will we get home?" Peter was almost ready to cry.

"If we got here by putting them on," Julie said, "I suppose we get back by taking them off. Let's explore first though." And Julie took her brother's hand.

The children were standing at the side of a country road. They could see a small village ahead. They were just about to set off down the road, when they noticed a little barefoot man walking towards them. He was only about the size of Peter, and had long hair and a long beard going all the way to his knees. His clothes were all ragged. The little man was looking at his bare feet as he walked, and didn't see the children until he almost bumped into them.

"Hello," Julie said. The little man looked up. His face was sad.

"Hello," he said. His voice was sad as well.

"Who are you?" Peter asked.

"Who *am I*? That's a good one." The little man laughed one of those laughs that people laugh when they think something is *not* funny.

"Yes," Peter said. "Who are you?"

"Who am I? Ha! Who am I? That's the best one I've heard all day."

The children were starting to think the little man was as

crazy as an upside-down carrot.

"I'm Julie, and this is my brother, Peter," Julie said.

"I beg your pudding?" The little man seemed to think his ears were telling big fat lies.

"I said, I'm Julie, and this is my brother, Peter."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Know what?"

"Who you are, of course."

"I just know. Everyone knows who they are." The children were starting to think the little man was as crazy as a spotted zebra.

"*No-one* knows who they are," the little man corrected.

"What do you mean? Why not?" Julie asked, in a "what do you mean, why not?" kind of voice.

"Because. Because of the Warted Witch."

"Who's she?" Peter asked, not liking the idea of a Warted Witch. In fact, he didn't like the idea of *any* kind of Witch.

"The Warted Witch is the Warted Witch. Who else would she be? She has Warted Magic. That's how she made everyone forget who they are. We only know who *she* is." The children just stood staring. It all seemed too impossible to believe.

"Anyway, I'm just on my way home. You can come and have some tea if you want."

And so, Julie, Peter and Mr. Nobody set off down the road.

From a distance the village looked very pleasant, but as they drew nearer, the children saw that all the buildings were torn and tattered, beat up and battered.

"Mr. Nobody," Julie began. "Why are all the houses so messy? They look like they're falling down."

"Of course they're falling down," Mr. Nobody said. "Who do you think will fix them? I told you, nobody knows who they are. When you don't know *who* you are, you don't know *what* you are either. Who's the builder? Who's the painter? Who's the decorator? Nobody knows, so nobody can do anything."

"So you all just sits around doing nothing," Julie said,

starting to realise what a terribly Warded spell the Warded Witch had cast.

"Lucky!" Peter said. "I wish I could just sit around and do nothing. No more horrible school."

"Anyway," Mr. Nobody concluded, "here we are. This is where I live."

Julie and Peter looked at Mr. Nobody's tumble-down house. Half the roof had fallen off. Inside was even worse: the kitchen table had only three legs—and one of those had a limp. The chairs were held together with string—and the string was held together with knots.

"Lucky I still have some tea left from the old days. All the shops have closed down," Mr. Nobody explained.

"How do you buy food then?" Julie asked.

"Buy food? Nobody can buy food. Nobody knows who's supposed to grow food, or who's supposed to sell food. We only know that we *want* food."

"So what do you eat?" Peter asked.

"Well, when there was no *real* food left, most people ate minced mice."

"*Minced mice?!*" Julie and Peter cried together. "*Yak.*"

"And when there were no mice left, most people ate toasted tadpoles."

"*Toasted tadpoles?!*" Julie and Peter cried together. "*Yak.*"

"And when there were no more tadpoles left, most people ate warmed worms."

"*Warmed worms?!*" Julie and Peter cried together. "*Yak.*"

"Yes. Anyway, I'd like to invite you both to stay for supper," Mr. Nobody said.

"*Stay for supper?!*" Julie and Peter cried together. "What do you eat *now?*"

"Well, now there are no more worms left, most people eat baked beans."

"*Baked beans?!*" Julie and Peter cried together. Then they realised what he had said.

"Oh, *baked beans*," Peter said.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Nobody began, "I know it's horrid. Everyone hates baked beans."

"We *love* baked beans," Peter said.

"Yak. You *love* baked beans?!" Mr. Nobody thought his ears were telling big fat lies again. "Yak. Give me a warmed worm any time."

Just then the kettle started to whistle, and Mr. Nobody made the tea.

"No milk, I'm afraid," he said, putting the cups on the table. "Come along now, while it's hot."

Julie and Peter walked over to the kitchen table. And then, suddenly, Mr. Nobody became as still as a statue in an empty museum, half way between standing up and sitting down. He seemed terribly terribly scared. He was looking at Julie and Peter's red Wellington boots.

"What's wrong?" Julie asked.

"What's wrong? You're both wearing red Wellington boots. *That's* what's wrong." Mr. Nobody really looked scared. "And I'll bet you're both wearing—" Mr. Nobody peeped down their red Wellington boots—"Oh no. *Socks* as well."

Of course, Mr. Nobody's feet were completely naked, but the children still didn't understand why he was making such a fuss.

"Why are you making such a fuss?" Julie asked.

"Don't you like red Wellington boots?" Peter added. "Is it because they make our socks all sweaty?"

"Well, well of course I like red Wellington boots. They're my favourite. It's just that the Warded Witch has a rule: naked feet only. No shoes allowed. No boots allowed. No socks allowed."

Peter gasped a gasp that was like the final breath of a whirly-wind. "You mean, even when it's freezing cold, even when it snows even, no-one's allowed to wear anything on their feet?" Mr. Nobody nodded.

"But why?" Julie asked.

"I have no idea," Mr. Nobody answered. "All I know is, when she first arrived in the country, she ordered the total destruction of shoes, boots and socks. Especially socks."

Mr. Nobody was looking very worried, so Julie and Peter took off their Wellington boots and socks, and hid them under the couch.

Mr. Nobody seemed happier. "That's better," he said. And they all drank their tea.

"The Warted Witch seems like the most nastiest person I've ever heard of," Peter said, after a few minutes of serious slurping.

"I agree with you, Peter. I just wish there was some way to get rid of her."

"It's impossible," Mr. Nobody said, shaking his long haired head. "The Warted Witch has Warted Magic. It's very strong that Warted Magic."

"But there must be something stronger." Julie said. And then she stopped talking, and started thinking. She was thinking about all the things Mr. Nobody had told them. She was thinking what could be stronger than the Warted Witch's Warted Magic. Then, suddenly, she clapped her hands together and cried, "Of course. Why didn't I realise straight away? I know what it is!"

"What what is?" Peter asked.

"I know what must be stronger than the Warted Witch's Warted Magic! And I know why she made everyone destroy their shoes and their boots and their sock as well."

"How can you know?" Peter said, not believing her for even half a second.

"Because, Peter, I've figured it all out. That's how."

"Ha," he laughed. "Tell us then."

"I'll do more than tell you. I'll show you! And if my plan works, we'll get rid of the Warted Witch once and for all."

Mr. Nobody suddenly looked very excited.

"First," Julie continued, "Peter and I must pay that Warted Witch a visit."

"A visit?!" Peter cried out. "No way. No no way."

"*Don't be a baby,*" she told him.

"But it could be rather dangerous," Mr. Nobody advised.

"We still have to try," Julie said. And taking no more notice of Peter's complaints, nor Mr. Nobody's warnings, she began making preparations.

Soon they were ready to leave, and Mr. Nobody explained carefully how to find the Warted Witch's castle. And then he reminded Julie, one last time, that the Warted Witch was a real real baddy.

The Warted Witch's castle was far away, so Mr. Nobody gave both of them a sleeping bag tied up with cord, a flask of hot baked bean soup, and to Julie, a box of matches. As well as all that, Julie carried a brown paper parcel—tied with a pink ribbon.

"Toodle-pip," Mr. Nobody called. The children waved. And off they went, with Peter looking glummer than glum.

Julie and Peter walked through the village. There were lots of people sitting around in the streets. They didn't know who they were, and so they didn't know what they were, and so they had nothing to do. They were just sitting around in the streets. And of course, their feet were completely naked—from the ankles down.

Julie and Peter followed the road out of the village, and then scrambled down a hill to the local river. The river had no name, no idea it was even a river, no place to go—and even less intention of getting there. It was as still and silent as a lake.

"My feet are cold," Peter grumbled. "Why did we have to come without our boots and socks, anyway?"

"You know why: because of the Warted Witch. Now come along, and *don't be a baby.*"

On they went, walking and walking—and even weeking. They walked and weeked. They weeked and walked.

"Julie," Peter began.

"Yes?"

"We've been gone an awful long time now. What if Grandfather finds us gone? He'll worry and get mad. Adults always worry and get mad."

"Grandfather never gets mad." Julie said. And it was true.

They walked and weeked. They weeked and walked.

"Julie, what's in that brown paper parcel?" Peter asked.

"Never you mind. You'll see later," she told him with a secret smile.

They walked and weeked. They weeked and walked. On and on they went.

The sky was growing darker first by the second, and second by the minute. Night was drawing in. It was not a good drawing either. It had too much black. Julie and Peter made camp.

Julie made a fire, and they sat on their sleeping bags, sipping the hot baked bean soup. It was a long time before either of them spoke.

"It's fun camping, isn't it?" Julie said, trying to sound happy.

"No," Peter told her.

At last they slept.

Next day, early in the morning, the children packed away all their things. Finally, Julie picked up the brown paper parcel—tied with a pink ribbon, and the barefoot march continued.

Just before lunch time, Julie spotted something.

"Look!" she pointed. In the distance they could see the Warded Witch's castle. It looked terrible and scary, and not the kind of place you would want to call home. It was so giant, the top was hidden in the clouds.

Julie and Peter finally stood at the huge door to the Warded Witch's castle. Julie knocked, but no-one answered.

"No-one in," Peter said quickly. "Let's go home." But Julie was already turning the handle and pushing open the door. She took Peter's hand, and they stepped inside. They found themselves in a small square room that smelled of boiled cabbage and beet-root. On each wall there was a single door. They walked, still hand in hand, silently to the first door, and Julie knocked (knock-knock). There was no answer. They tried the second door (knock-knock). There was no answer. The third and final door (knock-knock).

"*Who's there?!*" a horrible screeching voice screeched out. Julie opened the door, and they saw a lady shrouded in darkness.

"It's two children: I'm Julie, and this is my brother, Peter."

"*Children?! Children?! Children?! What do children want here? How dare you disturb me! And how dare you know who you are.*" Her voice was very scary, and Peter began to whimper.

"We've brought you a gift," Julie said, sounding a little afraid herself. "Look." And she held up the brown paper parcel-tied with a pink ribbon.

"*A gift? A gifty gifty gift?*" the Warded Witch screeched. She still sounded very angry, and seemed about to cast a terrible spell on the children that would turn them into twisted sticks of rhubarb, or some other awful thing. But then she appeared to change her mind, and in a quieter voice said:

"Come here my little darlings," and beckoned them with a long scratchy finger. "Come closer, come closer. Bring my *gifty gifty gift.*" What the Warded Witch *didn't know*, was that the parcel contained the *only thing* stronger than her terrible Warded Magic.

Even Julie was afraid now, and as they walked forward, the Warded Witch kept repeating: "Come closer, come closer," in her horrible whispering voice. When they were very close, the children could see her face quite clearly, and what they saw was about as horrible as horrible can ever be. Not only was the Warded Witch warded, but her warts *twitched*. The warts twitched

SWEATY SOCKS!

When Julie and Peter arrived back in the village, everyone was busy. Houses were being repaired, shops opened, farms fixed, streets swept, windows washed, flowers flowered, clothes cleaned, pubs painted, and schools scrubbed ready for a new term. And everyone was going around saying things like:

"Hello Mr. Jones."

"Hello Mr. Smith."

"How are you Prudence?"

"Nice to see you Englebert."

"Hello Ima, Justin, Time. How's your mother, Mrs. Late?" No-one knew what had happened, but they were all glad it had. Even Mr. Bottom and his son, Smelly, were glad to know their names.

And then Julie and Peter saw Mr. Nobody down the street, just outside his house. He was doing a kind of naughty dance.

"Hello children," he said when he saw them. "Well, Julie, you really did know what was stronger than the Warded Witch's Warded Magic." And then Julie told him all about the parcel, and the sweaty socks.

"So we don't have to call you Mr. Nobody anymore," Julie concluded. "What's your real name?"

"My name is Mr. Nobody," Mr. Nobody said.

"No, I mean your *real* name," Julie said.

"My real name *is* Mr. Nobody," Mr. Nobody said.

"What do you mean?" The children were starting to think the little man was as crazy as a boomerang that never came back.

Mr. Nobody explained: "Well you know when something gets broken or something gets spilled, and parents say, 'Who did that?' And the children say, 'Not me. Not me.' And then the parents say, 'Don't tell me, it was Mr. Nobody again!' Well it was. It was Mr. Nobody again. It was *me*."

"You're the one?" Peter was impressed.

"Yes," Mr. Nobody said. "*Somebody* has to do it."

And then, Julie told Mr. Nobody to make sure everyone started wearing boots and socks as soon as possible. That way

the Warted Witch would never return. And she gave Mr. Nobody their own sweaty socks to keep the Warted Witch away in the mean time.

They said good-bye to Mr. Nobody, and watched him shaking hands with all his friends—and even a few enemies.

“Well, this looks like a happier place now,” Julie said. And at that moment, even though he tried not to, Peter was thinking his sister was really wonderful.

“Let’s go home, then,” she said, and they reached to take off the magic red Wellington boots. But then, Julie suddenly thought, “What if nothing happens? What if we take off the magic red Wellington boots and nothing happens? What if we’re stuck here forever?” And Peter was probably thinking the very same thing, for you see his knobbly knees were knocking together like mad. With their hearts racing, the magic red Wellington boots were suddenly off. And then, QUICK AS A FLASH, the children disappeared.

Julie and Peter found themselves back in Grandfather Jacob’s attic—and it was only just morning. They put the magic red Wellington boots back inside the trunk, locked the attic door, and hurried down to their bedroom. Just in time, they heard Grandfather Jacob’s footsteps in the hall.

“Quick,” Julie whispered, “Grandfather’s coming. Pretend to be asleep!”

The door opened.

“Wakey-wakey. Rise and shine,” said Grandfather Jacob.

“Oh, is it morning already?” the children asked innocently and jumped out of bed. Grandfather Jacob had a twinkle in his eye, and a peculiar smile on his face. Looking at their bare feet he asked:

“By the way, where are your sweaty socks? I want to do the washing today.”

“Oh, don’t know,” said the children. Of course they knew really, and now so do you—

but don't tell anyone, will you?