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Opening extract from

The Witch's Vacuum Cleaner: And Other Stories

Written by

Terry Pratchett

Published by

Doubleday Children's Books

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2016

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All stories contained in this collection were originally published in the 'Children's Circle' section of the *Bucks Free Press* in the following publication years. All stories were previously untitled, and so these titles have been attributed for the purposes of this collection.

'The Witch's Vacuum Cleaner' (1970); 'The Great Train Robbery' (1966); 'The Truly Terrible Toothache' (1973); 'The Frozen Feud' (1967); 'Darby and the Submarine' (1966); 'The Sheep Rodeo Scandal' (1969); 'An Ant called 4179003' (1970); 'The Fire Opal' (1968); 'Lord Cake and the Battle for Banwen's Beacon' (1968); 'The Time-travelling Television' (1972); 'The Blackbury Park Statues' (1970); 'Wizard War' (1968); 'The Extraordinary Adventures of Doggins' (1966); 'Rincemangle, the Gnome of Even Moor' (1973)

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Set in 12/25pt Minister Light
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives, plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–857–53483–5

All correspondence to:
Doubleday
Penguin Random House Children's
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL

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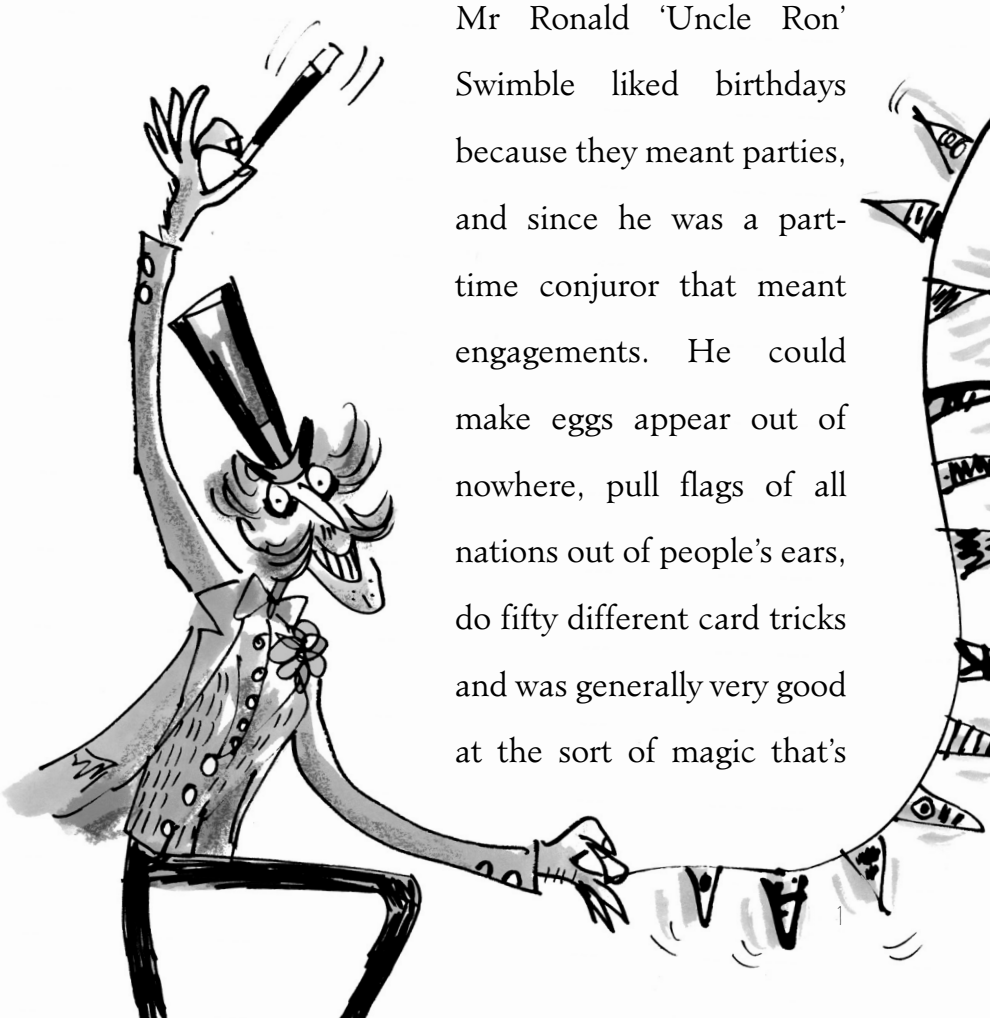
THE WITCH'S VACUUM CLEANER



Mr Ronald 'Uncle Ron' Swimble liked birthdays because they meant parties, and since he was a part-time conjuror that meant engagements. He could make eggs appear out of nowhere, pull flags of all nations out of people's ears, do fifty different card tricks and was generally very good at the sort of magic that's

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learned by hard practice in front of a mirror.* He was President of the Blackbury Magic Rectangle too.

Uncle Ron had a parrot called Mimms who could pick cards out of a hat and liked to shout, and a daughter called Lucy who generally stood on the stage saying very little, but who took his cloak and handed him Mimms in a cage and so on.

All three were very happy until the night of Jimmy Waddle's tenth birthday party at the town hall.

Uncle Ron walked onto the stage, and all the children bellowed,

'Hello, Uncle Ron!'

* And even harder practice in front of people, for not many mirrors shout things like 'Rubbish!' And if your mirror does, you probably don't need to worry about whether or not you can learn to do magic tricks. Knowing how to run away very fast would be a more useful skill.

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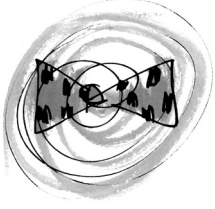
and then his hat fell off and three rabbits tumbled out.

He bent down to pick them up and a flock of pigeons burst out of his jacket, a daffodil shot out of his ear and his bow tie began to revolve at high speed. It was all very entertaining, and young Jimmy Waddle was wide-eyed with amazement, but the most surprised person in the hall was Uncle Ron. They weren't his tricks, and anyway, he was allergic to rabbits.



He tried to carry on, but his act went all to pot. He did plenty of tricks, like turning a top hat into a vase of flowers and making a table disappear. But he didn't mean

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to. Every time he moved his hands something appeared or vanished. He was almost in tears by the time he reached for his pack of cards, and when that turned into a glass of wine he ran off the stage.

'That's a new lot—' began Lucy.

'They're not mine! I don't know what's happening! I haven't even got any pigeons!'

'Cake!' screamed Mimms.

The audience was still clapping, and Ronald had to go and take two bows before he could say any more. Everyone was shaking his hand and asking him how he did it.

Finally he reached his dressing room and locked the door.

'I don't know how it happened,' he said. 'But it was as if all I had to do was point my finger at something, like that cupboard there, and say "Turn into a hat stand" and—'

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It turned into a hat stand.

'Jam!' screamed Mimms.

Ronald pointed his finger at his hat.

'Vanish,' he said hoarsely. It did.

*

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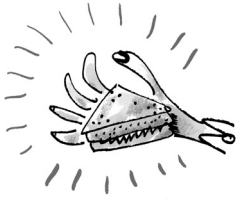
They went home by taxi. Every now and again Ron would point his finger at things on the pavement, just to see if the magic was still there – and three lampposts were turned into a stork, a small yellow elephant on wheels, and a baby's buggy.

The trouble came when he paid the taxi driver. Because although Uncle Ron could turn things into other things, he didn't have much control over what might change, *or* what something would turn into. So when he took his wallet out of his pocket it suddenly became a cheese sandwich. Lucy had to pay the fare out of her lunch money and the taxi driver drove off hurriedly.



'The front-door key is in my waistcoat pocket,' said Ron through clenched teeth. 'I don't think I can touch things any more. You'd better unlock the door in case I turn it into something unmentionable.'

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'Gloves!' said Lucy. 'That's it! Put a pair on, and then you'll be able to touch things again.'

'I haven't got any,' Ron said miserably. 'And if I had they'd turn into something as soon as I touched them.'

Lucy fetched a pair of her red woolly ones, with daft rabbits embroidered in odd colours on the back. Sure enough, as soon as Ron touched them they changed – into socks. That gave her an idea. She went and got a pair of her father's socks, and sure enough again, these changed into red woolly gloves as soon as he put them on his hands.

Ron slumped down onto a chair and picked up the phone. He asked some of his fellow conjurors from Blackbury Magic Rectangle to come round at once, and soon the little house was filled with people.

'Watch this,' Ron told them, taking his gloves off

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and pointing at a little potted cactus. It turned into a bowl of marbles! Everyone gasped satisfactorily except for one woman, who had just looked out of the window and seen a small wheeled elephant trundling by towing a stork on a baby's buggy.

'It's not trickery,' said Ron. 'It's the real thing – proper magic.'

'Marmalade!' Mimms screeched.

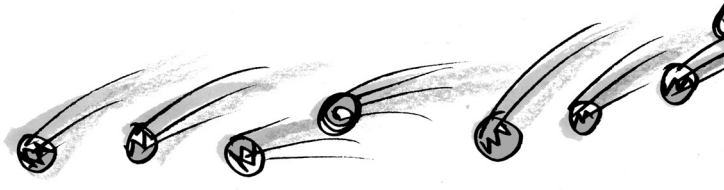
'There's no such thing,' scoffed Amir Raj, who did card tricks.

'It's all illusion,' added Presto Changeo, who sawed his assistant in half twice nightly.

'Sandwich!' screamed Mimms, rapping his beak against his cage.

Ronald turned the table into a lawn mower.

'What can I do?' he said. 'I could make my fortune, I suppose, but I don't want to have to wear gloves all the time. And anyway, I might turn



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something good into something dreadful.'

'Could it have been anything you've eaten? Did anything unusual happen today?' asked Presto.

'Let's see now . . . not much. The only thing unusual that I can remember is knocking over an old lady's vacuum cleaner when I went to work this morning. It was in the car park – no idea why. She went on something dreadful about it, but she *had* leaned it against my car.'

'Was it a small lady with a brown coat and a sort of flowerpot hat full of hat pins?' asked Lucy, who had been listening to all this. 'It was? Oh dear, oh dear – I never thought of that. That's Mrs Riley, and she's a witch.'*

'Biscuits! Crisps! Ice cream!' came from Mimms.

'You mean she's put a spell on me?' said Ron, ignoring his parrot.

* Something that every child in the town knew for a fact, though strangely not known by a single grown-up.