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Opening extract from

The Merrybegot

Written by

Julie Hearn

Published by

Oxford University Press

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'Superb.'
The Times

'This truly superb novel will have your heart racing, your hands sweating and your brain whirring. You must read it.'
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Celia Rees

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The Merrybegot

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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First published 2005
First published in this edition 2011
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273235-4
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

In memory of Shoe Taylor

Something still dances
Just out of your sight
It's the voice from the well,
The trick of the light
It's something like water
You hold in your hand
While it's business as usual
In Merrie Olde Englande.

Robb Johnson

'That as there have been, so there are & will be,
witches unto the world's end'

John Gaule, preacher, 1646

The Confession of Patience Madden
The Year of Our Lord, 1692

Good day, brothers. I am ready to talk to you now. Ready to tell you the truth. Pray forgive the croak in my voice. It has been . . . it has been . . .

Water? Yes. Thank you . . .

Are you listening? I can barely see you. It is so dark in here . . .

Are you ready?

Then I will begin.

I never meant it to end the way it did. Grace might have done, but not me. Grace was fifteen, as artful as a snake, and already on the slippery slope to Hell. But I, Patience Madden, could have stopped any time—uncrossed my eyes; made my arms and legs be still; and called a halt to the filthy words jumping out of my mouth like toads. I could have spat the pins from under my tongue and admitted they came not from the Devil but from the cherrywood box our mother kept tiny things in.

I could have sat up in bed, looked around at the villagers come to whisper and gawp, and said No. Stop praying for me. Stop bringing me bay leaves and splashes of holy water. For I don't deserve your lucky charms, nor any help from the Lord. Neither does my sister. She deserves them even less. It was her fault. She started it. And now she's hurting me. Yes, she is. Pinching me black and blue beneath the coverlet, lest I weaken and tell you the truth.

Grace, I whispered, on the third evening, after our neighbours had drifted away to feed their hogs, their children, or their own nosy faces. Grace, I'm scared. I want to get up. Grace, I'm hungry.

Be silent, she hissed. Or, if you can't be silent, call out some more about imps at the window, and a crow in the corner. That was good. They liked that. We'll do more with the imps and the crow.

She promised me I would not have to behave like this for much longer. In a day or so, she said, we would stage our recovery. Wake up all smiles, ready to put on our itchy bonnets, and do our tiresome chores, like good, obedient girls.

A few days more, she said, and our lives would go back to normal. As dull as scum, but blameless.

It did not happen like that. It went too far.

We went too far.

April 1645

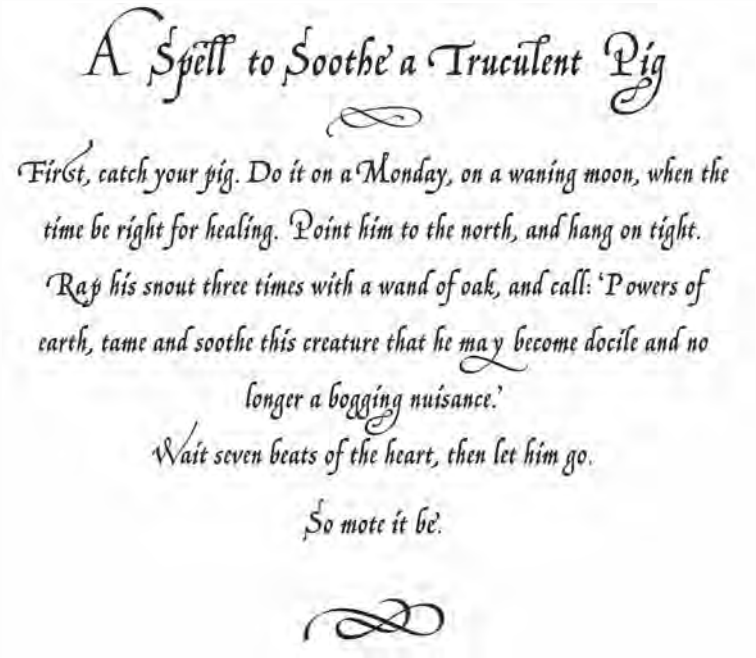
The cunning woman's granddaughter is chasing a pig when she learns there is to be no frolicking in the village on May morning. Minister's orders.

'Bogger . . . that,' she pants. 'And bogger . . . this . . . pig. There's no . . . catching . . . him . . .'

Clutching her sides, she gives up the chase, and collapses, laughing, against the gnarled trunk of a tree. Above her head, pink blossoms shake like fairy fists. Spring has arrived. A beautiful time. A time when it feels absolutely right to think of dancing barefoot in the dew, and absolutely wrong to dwell on the new minister, with his miserable ways and face like a trodden parsnip.

'That's what they be saying,' the blacksmith's son tells her. 'No pole. No goin' off into the woods. No nothing. It ain't godly, Nell, to frolic so. That's what the minister reckons.'

Nell picks a blade of new grass and begins to chew it. Her stomach rumbles beneath her pinafore, but she is used to that. Out of the corner of her eye she can see the pig rooting around. It is a bad pig. A bothersome pig. Her granny will sort it out. This is how:



A light breeze frisks the orchard. There are things Nell ought to be doing, but she stays where she is, squinting up at the blacksmith's son and thinking about May morning.

'And who be you wishing to frolic with anyway, Sam Towser?' she chuckles. 'As if I couldn't guess . . .'

The lad reddens. He is a month short of sixteen and all swept through with the kind of longings that can tie up a boy's tongue and have him tripping over everything, from clods of earth to his own great feet, twenty times a day. He has a mop of corn-coloured hair, and a cleft in his chin so deep it might have been pressed there by his guardian angel. He is too ungainly; too unfledged, as yet, to be truly handsome. But he will be. The promise of it is

all about him, like the guarantee of a glorious day once some mist has cleared.

'No one,' he mumbles. 'I got horses to see to. No time for fumblin' around with some daft maid on May mornin', nor any other time.'

'Pah! That's a fib!' Nell flings both arms wide and twists her face to look like a parsnip. 'Beware, sinner! Beware what you say! Repent! Repent! For Satan loves a fibber, and will carry you off to burn in Hell. In Hell, I tell you, where fibbers go. And frolickers. And women who wear scarlet ribbons, or sweep their hearths on Sundays . . .'

'Hush . . . Hush up, you daft wench . . .'

'Repent! Repent! For I am your minister. God's representative in this heathen place . . . Repent! For though my nose drips and I do not know a hoe from my . . .'

'NELL, hush!'

'. . . elbow, I know a sinner when I see one. And a fibber. And a frolicker. All rolled into one vile, wretched . . .'

'Right!'

'. . . body . . . and a . . . Yieeek! . . .'

He has pounced and is tickling her—tickling her to what feels like a giggly death, while the sun pours down like honey, and the truculent pig looks on in mild surprise.

'You two! Have a care! Mind that tree, and stop your messing.'

A woman has entered the orchard. She stands some distance away, almost in the nettles. Her face, beneath a bonnet the colour of porridge, is grave.

'What?' Nell scrambles to her feet. 'What is it, Mistress Denby? What's happened?'

The blacksmith's son gets up. There are twigs and fallen

petals in his hair. He looks like Puck. He looks drop-dead frolicsome.

'Gotter go,' he mutters. 'I got horses to see to.'

The woman and the girl pay him no mind. They have already jumped the stile and are hurrying away, along the crooked path leading down to the village. Women's stuff, he supposes. Someone getting born. Or dying. Or doing both in the space of a few breaths.

He doesn't want to be seen trotting at the heels of womenfolk, towards whatever, or whoever, needs their attention in some fusty room. The sun is high, now, and he has his own ritual to perform.

The apple tree he chooses is truly ancient; its timber as knotted as a crone's shins; its blossom strangely pale. No one knows how long it has stood here, or why it was planted alone. Much older than the rest, it continues to bear fruit so sweet that to press cider from it, and drink the stuff, is said to send the mind dribbling out of the nostrils and the legs in several directions at once.

It is to this tree the Apple Howlers come, on Twelfth Night, to scare away evil spirits. It is here that they form their circle—a raggle taggle of villagers, young and old, banging pails and pots and howling, *'Hats full! Caps full! Bushels, bushels, sacks full!'* loud enough to wake the dead.

It is on these branches, and around this trunk, that the Howlers hang their amulets and leave cider-soaked toast for the piskies. The orchard swarms with piskies. Everyone knows that. Little folk in rags, their skin as rough as bark, their heads sprouting lichens and moss. A few are downright malicious, the rest merely troublesome and high-spirited. All are uglier than dead hedgehogs and as greedy

as swine. Over the hills, in a neighbouring county, lies fairy territory—a prettier species, by far, the fairies, but just as pesky, so rumour has it . . . just as demanding of treats, and remembrance.

Be good to the piskies, the old folk say hereabouts, and they will be good to you. Treat them with respect on Twelfth Night and they will stay by the trees, watching over the fruit until picking time comes.

The cider-soaked toast has been eaten long ago by robins and other things. But the amulets are still here, swaying gently at the end of their strings, like small, hanged felons.

'May I?' says the blacksmith's son, before pressing the point of a horseshoe nail into the old tree's trunk.

Yep, something replies, the sound of it such a faint rasp that the blacksmith's son assumes the pig has farted.

Slowly, carefully, he begins to cut. Not his full name—Samuel—for he isn't sure of all the letters. A single 'S' is the mark he makes, the down stroke wobbly as a caterpillar against the wood. He can't spell the other name, either. The one that is on his mind day and night. The one he only has to hear, in passing, for a fluttering to start in his belly, as if larks are nesting there.

He knows his alphabet though. Just. And he knows, from the way the girl's name is said, which letter he needs to entwine with his own. It is one of the tricky ones that sounds different, depending on the word. As the metal point of the nail forms the letter's curve he finds himself wishing it made a soft sound like the beginning of 'gentle'. He would have liked that. It would have seemed significant.

The girl's name, though, begins with a hard 'G', like 'gallows' or 'god'.

When he has finished, he steps back to inspect what he has done. And then he sees one. At least, he thinks he does. There and gone it is, between knots of blossom, its face as coarse and grey as the tree, its small, bright eyes fixed intently on the 'S' and the 'G'.

'Oh . . .'

He looks quickly, all around, and then back again. Nothing. There is nothing there. A trick of the light, perhaps? But no . . . His sight is good, and he isn't given to fancies.

He stays a minute more, half dreading, half hoping to see the thing again. What did it mean? Was it lucky, to see a piskie when you were a month short of sixteen and so desperate to get your hands on a certain someone that you would probably die of frustration if it didn't happen soon?

Did it mean that he would?

Did it?

It takes just seconds for the blacksmith's son to convince himself that he has been sent an auspicious sign. That, come May morning, he will be frolicking away to his heart's content with the girl whose name begins with a hard-sounding 'G'.

She will be all over him like a vine, yes she will, for all she is the minister's daughter and seems as distant and cool as a star. He will have her. No doubt about it. For they are joined, already, in his mind and on the tree. And their union has been blessed. He has the piskie's promise.

The blacksmith's son feels light on his feet as he swings himself over the stile, and he is whistling as he strides away.

'Silly young bogger . . .' goes the sighing and the rasping

among the topmost branches of the trees. *'Silly . . . little . . . whelp.'* And the letters 'S' and 'G' begin slowly turning brown, the way a cut apple will do, or naked flesh beneath hot sun.

All the way down the path, Mistress Denby had gone rambling on about a pot lid:

'That pot lid's about to fall. Things be boiling up quick—a bit too quick, if you asks me. There'll be trouble with this one, you mark my words.'

Nell had simply nodded, and hurried on. She'd got the message. The Bramlow baby is coming, and coming faster than a snowball down a hill. But you never, ever, spoke of these matters outdoors, lest piskies should overhear and come to steal the newborn away. No piskie would be interested in something as boring as a pot lid—although Nell often wonders what they make of a village in which pots boil over with alarming frequency, and their lids, when that happens, seem so fragile and important.

Now, beneath the eaves of a squat little cottage, the Bramlows' pot lid is giving everyone the worries. The Watchers—all mothers themselves—shake their heads and grunt, sympathetically, as the person lying prostrate on a straw pallet arches her spine and hollers. Her belly, rippled across by contractions, is so huge she can barely lift herself.

Somewhere in the room a fly buzzes. It has been trying to escape, but the bedroom door is closed tight, and a rough piece of wood, wedged into the window-space, is keeping light, air, and piskies out and heat, flies, and anxiety in.