

# SHOCK

## Magazine

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*There's been a lot of loose talk going around about witches lately. I don't believe it. After all, have you ever seen a witch? More important, would you recognize a witch if you saw her?*

# THE WITCH

*by* RALPH E. HAYES

LITTLE JIMMY SMITH NUDGED THE sardine can back onto the pavement with the side of his foot and gave it a kick that sent it careening along the sidewalk ahead of him. Sardine cans, he concluded, were not good for kicking; they were too flat. You had to kind of skid them along, and sometimes, if you weren't careful, you stubbed your toe into the cement.

Jimmy looked across the street momentarily and saw several girls from his class at school playing in front of Suzy Adams'

house. They were chanting in unison to a game they were playing.

*A-leanie to clapsie, to twirlie  
around to backsie,*

*Right hand, left hand, highest  
a-leanie, lowest a-leanie,*

*Touch your knee and your toe,  
And your heel and under you  
go.*

Even at his age, Jimmy felt an odd uneasiness when he heard these weird little tunes that little girls sang, and it added to his inherent distrust of the opposite sex.

Who could tell which of them would grow up to be a witch, like Old Mrs. Moore? The ones that could chant best became witches, he supposed. He turned back to the challenge of the can, and continued along his way. As he reached the next corner a man walked briskly by, clutching his coat and hat against an explosive fall wind.

"I kicked this can six blocks," announced Jimmy to the passer-by, who smiled and walked on. "And I could kick it to China if I wanted to," he yelled after the man. He rubbed a bit of dust out of his eye. "Or even a hundred miles."

Jimmy turned at the corner because his friend Leonard lived down the block. Leonard's mother was Mrs. Moore, whom everybody called a witch just for fun, but not when Leonard was around, because they liked Leonard. In giving the can one last kick he stubbed his toe on the cement. "Ouch," he cried, and his eyes grew moist for a brief moment. "Darn it," he added sullenly, and limped away from it.

By the time he had gotten to Leonard's house, he had forgotten the can and the limp. Leonard had not been at school today, and he wondered if his friend were sick. Leonard and he had sat together all through the first grade last year. They had had a lot of good times together, he and old Leon-

ard.

Jimmy turned in at the faded picket gate and went up the rickety steps to the porch. He was always a little scared when he came to Leonard's house, because of Leonard's mother. She acted crazy sometimes, and once she squeezed Jimmy's arm so hard it hurt for two days.

Leonard had come to school several times with blue marks on him, and Jimmy knew The Witch had done something to him, but the teacher didn't see them, and Leonard wouldn't talk about it to the kids. Whenever Jimmy saw marks on Leonard he remembered his own sore arm and became even more afraid of Leonard's mother.

"*Leonard,*" sung out Jimmy.

The front door was open, and Jimmy looked through the screen to the dim interior. He couldn't see anyone.

Jimmy remembered, as he peered into the hallway, that Leonard had told him one time that Mrs. Moore was not his real mother. And, shortly after she had come to live with him and his dad, his dad had gone away, and he never came back. Since then, Leonard and Mrs. Moore had lived by themselves, and Leonard almost never got to play out with the rest of the kids.

"*Leon-ard.*" His falsetto voice rung clearly in the dry autumn air.

In the next moment Leonard's

mother towered in the doorway behind the screen. Her dark hair, streaked with grey, hung along her face. She was tall and gaunt, and her eyes were open wide, staring at him. She looked very angry.

"Leonard is not here. He is visiting his grandmother. Go away and quit yelling on the porch." Her voice was not loud, like his mother's voice was when she was angry with him, but it was funny sounding, and scarey.

Jimmy broke away from what seemed a spellbinding look from her, and hopped down the steps. When he stopped in the yard and looked back, she was gone. Now his courage returned, and he remembered a rhyme the older boys had made up about Mrs. Moore, and he blurted it out defiantly:

*The Witch is mean and lazy,  
Old Mrs. Moore is crazy.*

He ran impishly to the gate and swung on it, looking over his shoulder toward the house. He was just about to go when he saw the movement behind the low-pulled shade in the large front window. And it seemed that he heard Mrs. Moore talking to someone. The spirit of adventure flushing his cheeks, he tiptoed to the gate again, holding his breath. Yes, she was moving around in there, and talking.

Jimmy made a wide circuit around the inside perimeter of the yard and came up beside the house

on the north side. Then he raised himself up on his tiptoes and looked into the interior, and his eyes went wide. Leonard *was* there.

Leonard was bound to a straight kitchen chair in the middle of the large living room, a hand-towel tied across his mouth. He was not trying to talk or cry out, but merely sat there, little and scared, his face white. He was wearing his small horn-rimmed glasses. Jimmy listened as Mrs. Moore spoke to him. She was leaning close over Leonard, shaking a long finger at him.

"Didn't I tell you?" she said. "Didn't I tell you what would happen to you if you disobeyed a fundamental law of God? There is no escape, no alternative. You must be punished."

She was breathing hard. "Do you think I didn't see you behind the garage with that Perkins girl?" Her unkempt hair fell forward enveloping part of her face as she leaned over him. "You think I don't know what dirty, filthy things you were doing out there?"

Leonard now attempted to protest, but only muffled noises came from behind the towel. He looked very small sitting there; he was Jimmy's age, only smaller.

"You could not have tainted yourself this way if you had been

of my body," she said, walking to the doorway and picking up a square red can. She brought it back with her to the chair.

"Now that you have, you must be cleansed," she said. "Cleansed in body and spirit."

She unscrewed a cap from the can and poured the contents over Leonard's clothing. Jimmy now saw the lettering on the side that read *Kerosene*, and knew what it was because his dad used it for a small stove in the garage. She was going to start a fire. Jimmy saw Leonard recoil from the feel and smell of the liquid as she continued to pour it over him.

"Your father left this place to you," she said, "so it's only fitting you should take it with you." She was smiling as she threw some of the kerosene about the room, on the floor, sofa, draperies. "It is God's will," she said, "that you suffer severe penance." In a moment the can was empty.

"Need some more. There's another can in the basement," she said to herself. She turned and disappeared through the doorway.

Jimmy thought what a big blaze the house would make and found himself looking forward to seeing it. But then there was poor old Leonard there, tied to the chair. He started to yell to him, but thought better of it. Mrs. Moore might hear him. Somebody, he decided, should try to help Leonard, though. Maybe he

should get home and tell his mother and dad. That sounded like a good idea.

Jimmy Smith raised himself once more to get a last look at Leonard, then skipped out of the yard and down the street toward home. He could see his house from Leonard's back yard, but his father had forbade him from cutting through the several empty lots because of a barbed wire fence there. Even so, it would take only a few minutes to get home, and maybe his dad would come over here and talk Mrs. Moore out of setting fire to Leonard. At the first corner he ran into Bobby Kempiski and they almost knocked each other down.

"Hi," said Jimmy.

"Hi. Ain't you home from school yet?" Bobby was bouncing a large red rubber ball on the cement.

"Nope. I stopped at Leonard's house," said Jimmy, watching the bouncing ball. "Is that your ball?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did your dad buy it for you?" said Jimmy, eyes on the ball.

"I bought it myself," said Bobby. "It cost fifty cents."

"Bet it didn't cost as much as my magnifying glass," said Jimmy, digging into his pocket for it. "But I'd trade you if you want to."

"I wouldn't trade for that old thing," said Bobby. "You didn't even buy it; you got it from your

uncle. Anybody knows that. Ha, ha, ha."

"Ha, ha. I don't care. Anyway, I know something you don't know."

"Huh-uh."

"Yes I do, and it's about Leonard Moore."

"I know that. His mother is a witch," said Bobby triumphantly.

"Ha, ha. That's not it," said Jimmy in a mocking voice. "Leonard's mother is going to burn him with kerosene."

"That's just something you made up," said Bobby, bouncing the ball.

"I did not. I'm going to tell my dad and he'll stop her and then you'll see." Jimmy turned haughtily and walked away. He would show him all right. He ran for half a block because it was getting late and he would get the devil if he was late for supper.

A short distance from home Jimmy stopped being mad at Bobby and thought again of Leonard. That sure would be a big fire. He picked up a stick and let it run over a picket fence as he walked. He had better hurry, he decided, if he were to help Leonard. Just before he got to his own front gate Nancy Bronson ran from her house across the street to greet him.

"Hi, Jimmy," she smiled, barring his path.

"I got to get home," he said. He hated girls.

"Can you play over in my yard tomorrow?" she said. "It's Saturday."

"I don't think so," he said, moving slowly around her.

"You can, too, Jimmy Smith, you just don't want to," she frowned, stepping into his path again. "Please come over tomorrow, Jimmy." She was smiling again.

"I got to go home," he said firmly. "I got something to tell my mother and dad." He envisioned Mrs. Moore lighting a match at that very moment.

"What you got to tell them?"

"Nothing," he said, trying to get around her again. In a bold rush he ran by her and into his yard. "Ha, ha," he said.

"I don't want you over now," she said, turning and running back across the street.

"Ha, ha," Jimmy screamed after her. He turned and walked over to a dog house in the yard, and called out a scraggly mongrel.

"You just wait a few minutes," he said. "I'll bring you your supper." He knelt down and petted the dog for several minutes, seemingly completely absorbed in the exchange of affection, and then remembered it was supper time. And there was Leonard, too. He forgot for a moment just what it was he wanted to remember about Leonard, and then he saw in his

mind's eye the kerosene can.

When Jimmy burst into the house, his father was reading the evening paper, and his mother was setting the table for supper.

"Where in the world have you been?" she asked when she saw him.

"Nancy Bronson wouldn't let me in the yard," he said.

"Oh, really!" said his mother.

"You'd better start getting right home from school, young man," said his father, looking up momentarily from the paper. "It's almost dark. And don't use Nancy as an excuse."

"Honest, it's the truth, Dad," said Jimmy, wiping his hand across his cheek and leaving a smudge there. "Except, I stopped at Leonard's house, too, and I've got something important to tell you." He tried to see around the paper his father was holding, but was unsuccessful.

"I told you to stay away from there," said his mother.

"It's a good thing I went, mother," he said, skipping over to the table. "Mrs. Moore is going to set fire to Leonard."

"Jimmy!" said his mother. "What have I told you about that?"

"Gee, mother, I didn't call her a witch," Jimmy complained. "I just mean she's going to burn Leonard with kerosene. And their house, too."

"Jimmy," said his father, his

tone ominous. "You heard your mother. You forget about Mrs. Moore, once and for all, or you'll go up to your room right now, minus your supper."

"But, Dad, don't you feel sorry for Leonard?" Jimmy protested.

"Did you hear me?" his father said. Jimmy knew from his tone that he had better forget the whole thing. Still, it seemed a shame to let The Witch burn old Leonard. Jimmy sullenly went to the bathroom and slowly washed up for supper. Leaving a badly soiled towel in his wake, he returned to the table about ten minutes later, just as his mother was placing the last hot dish on it.

"All right, let's eat," she said.

Jimmy looked out the dining room window just as he started to sit down, the window facing the rear of the house and the vacant lots, and what he saw made him forget about the meal. Excitement filled his eyes, and he ran to the window. Orange and yellow light reflected in kaleidoscopic fashion across his face from across the vacant lots. Leonard's house was blazing brightly in the fading light.

"Well, there goes old Leonard," he said loudly. His face showed surprise when his parents suddenly were beside him at the window. They looked at the blaze in the sky, and they looked at Jimmy.

"My God!" said his father. His face looked awfully funny. ■ ■