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The Pie and the Patty-Pan

Beatrix Potter · *1905 · English original, Project Gutenberg #572*

Ribby the cat invites little dog Duchess to tea, and bakes something very nice in a pie-dish with a pink rim. Duchess is dreadfully afraid it will be mouse, so she tries to hide a veal-and-ham pie of her own in Ribby's oven. There are two ovens. The pies, the patty-pan, and a visit from Dr. Maggotty the magpie turn a polite tea into a most confusing afternoon.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of a tea party when a guest cannot trust the pie—and will not say so plainly?

"I am dreadfully afraid it WILL be mouse!"
Duchess · Duchess to herself

Duchess scratches "isn't mouse" out of her letter and changes it to "I hope it will be fine." She slips her own pie into Ribby's top oven, not knowing Ribby's mouse-and-bacon pie is already in the stiff lower one. At tea she eats the lower pie, cannot find a patty-pan, and howls that she has swallowed it. Left alone, she opens the top oven, sees her own pie and the little tin, and understands. She puts the veal-and-ham pie in the yard and says nothing. She runs home feeling uncommonly silly.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ribby
a hospitable cat who bakes in the lower oven, and is amazed at last

Duchess
a little dog who cannot bear mouse pie, and cannot quite say so

Dr. Maggotty
a magpie called in as a doctor, later drinking gravy from a patty-pan

Tabitha Twitchit
the cousin, and the shop where both dishes were bought

Grades K–2
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01
An Invitation to Tea
THE LETTERS
A pink-rimmed dish; a fear that will not quite be written down.

- Once upon a time there was a Pussy-cat called Ribby, who invited a little dog called Duchess to tea.
- "Come in good time, my dear Duchess," said Ribby's letter, "and we will have something so very nice. I am baking it in a pie-dish—a pie-dish with a pink rim. You never tasted anything so good! And YOU shall eat it all! I will eat muffins, my dear Duchess!"
- Duchess wrote that she would come very punctually, and added "I hope it isn't mouse?" Then she thought that did not look quite polite, so she scratched out "isn't mouse" and changed it to "I hope it will be fine."

02
Two Ovens and Two Pies
THE MORNING
Veal and ham in the top; mouse and bacon already in the lower.

- "I am dreadfully afraid it WILL be mouse!" said Duchess to herself. "I really couldn't, COULDN'T eat mouse pie. And I shall have to eat it, because it is a party." Her own pie was going to be veal and ham, in a pink and white dish just like Ribby's—both bought at Tabitha Twitchit's.
- Ribby pops her pie into the lower oven; the door is very stiff. "The top oven bakes too quickly," she says to herself.
- They meet half-way down the street, each with a basket, and only bow, because they are going to have a party. As soon as Duchess is out of sight, she simply runs —straight away to Ribby's house.

> *"I am dreadfully afraid it WILL be mouse!"*
> **Duchess** · Duchess to herself

03
A Scuffling in the Passage
THE SWAP
The top handles will not turn; Ribby's pie cannot be found.

- Ribby buys tea and sugar, gossips with Cousin Tabitha, and fetches muffins from Timothy Baker. Coming in at the front door she hears a sort of scuffling in the back passage—but there is nobody there. Duchess has slipped out at the back.
- "It is a very odd thing that Ribby's pie was NOT in the oven when I put mine in! And I can't find it anywhere; I have looked all over the house. I put MY pie into a nice hot oven at the top. I could not turn any of the other handles; I think that they are all shams."
- Ribby, after a careful search, is glad she used the bottom oven. The top one would certainly have been very much too hot.

04
Where Is the Patty-Pan?
THE TEA
Sugar on a nose, a pie already eaten, and a howl for the doctor.

- Very punctually there comes a most genteel little tap-tappity. The pie smells delicious; Ribby says it is mouse and bacon. Duchess almost says veal and ham, drops the sugar in confusion, and does not see which oven Ribby opens.
- She has four helps, and is fumbling with the spoon: "I was only feeling for the patty-pan." Ribby did not put one in. "I don't think that it is necessary in pies made of mouse."
- Duchess sets up a howl: "I shall die! I shall die! I have swallowed a patty-pan!" Ribby settles her in an armchair and hurries to the smithy for Dr. Maggotty. He is a pie himself, Duchess says; he will certainly understand. All the village can see that Ribby is fetching the doctor.

05
The Top Oven
THE CLOSE
A glimpse of tin, a pie in the yard, and a guest who feels uncommonly silly.

- Left alone, Duchess stares at the grate. Something sizz-z-zles. She opens the top oven: a rich steamy flavour of veal and ham, a fine brown pie, and through a hole in the crust a glimpse of a little tin patty-pan.
- "Then I must have been eating MOUSE!... No wonder I feel ill.... But perhaps I should feel worse if I had really swallowed a patty-pan!" She puts her pie outside the back-door, meaning to take it away later, and shuts her eyes. When the magpie arrives with a bread pill, she is feeling very much better, and thinks she had better go home before it gets dark.
- Half-way up the lane she slips through the fence. Upon the roof of the pig-stye sit Dr. Maggotty and three jackdaws: they are eating piecrust, and the magpie is drinking gravy out of a patty-pan. Duchess runs home feeling uncommonly silly. Ribby finds a pink and white pie-dish smashed in the yard: "Did you ever see the like! so there really WAS a patty-pan?" Next time she will invite Cousin Tabitha Twitchit.

Hospitality · Politeness · Fear · Confusion · Humility

What to watch for as you read

GRADES K–2

1. Duchess's first honesty is written and then scratched out. The whole tale grows from a politeness that will not name its fear.
2. The two dishes are alike because they were bought at the same shop. The two ovens do the rest: a stiff lower door hides Ribby's pie, and the top one holds Duchess's secret.
3. The patty-pan is feared inside Duchess, glimpsed through her own crust, drunk from on the pig-stye roof, and found as a question in the yard. Watch it move.
4. "Duchess ran home feeling uncommonly silly." The close is comic, not cruel. Ribby's next invitation is a wry reset, not a sermon.

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