

## The Witch under the Hill

by

Jo Hewlett

### Chapter 1

“Oh, Mum, must we?”

The Blair twins stared at their mother in horror.

“You promised we wouldn't have to stay with Daffy duck these holidays!”

Mrs Blair ran her fingers through her hair. She always did this when she was worried. It made her look like a hedgehog!

“I know, I know, I'm sorry,” he said. “It's not my fault. Gordon and Anne have got mumps. Aunt Daphne is always kind to you, isn't she?”

“She's kind enough,” said Robert Blair, rolling his eyes. “It's just so deadly dull in her village. Nothing ever happens. The most exciting thing is her quarrel with the dreaded Oblong next-door.”

Mrs. Blair had to admit that her cousin Daphne Pollock did lead a very quiet life, but there was absolutely no one else to look after the twins until her own holiday in a week's time.

She hardened her heart.

“You'll have to go. It's only a week after all, and you are too young to leave in the house all day alone. I think it is very kind of Daphne to have you - you are both jolly ungrateful!” she said firmly.

So it was that the next Saturday morning the twins found themselves sitting sullenly in the back of the car, with their parents in the front, setting off for the village of East Pooks hill where Daphne lived.

Daphne was as quiet and dreamy as the village. She was an infant school teacher, and the twins always thought she talked to them as though they were infants. She did pale and dreamy water colouring in her spare time. Her hair was a mousey brown which drifted about her in uncontrolled wisps. She wore long skirts in lilac or grey which tended to dip and droop. However, her cottage was really charming with a thatched roof that came almost to the ground at the back. It was whitewashed and covered with roses. The only garden was a wildish piece of meadow with geese in.

The sun was shining when they arrived. The twins saw Mr. Hob Obling, Daphne's quarrelsome neighbour, leaning over the gate smoking his foul smelling pipe. As they walked up the path he deliberately dropped his tobacco wrapper on their side of the fence, spat contemptuously, and walked away.

Mr. and Mrs. Blair normally felt they had to stay and drink a cup of weak tea with Daphne when they delivered the children. This time, to their great surprise, Daphne did not offer one.

"I expect you want to get home before dark", she said, ushering them out of the cottage, when they had hardly had time to bring in the suitcases.  
"See you in a week," said Daphne, firmly shutting the gate. She kicked the tobacco wrapper out of the way and, with a brief wave, darted back into the cottage.

Mr and Mrs Blair looked at each other in some surprise.

"What's got into her?" asked Mr. Blair. "I thought we would have to admire her bally water colours".

"Yes," said Mrs Blair, "and have a piece of stale cake and be taken to see the geese - very odd!"

The twins also found Daphne's manner changed, although it was difficult to determine exactly what was different.

"It's baked beans and hamburgers for tea," she announced. "I hope that's OK - I haven't had time to go shopping."

"Thank you Aunt Daffy," said Susan, and cast a look of amazement at Robert. Daphne usually had a plate of meat paste sandwiches waiting for them with the corners beginning to curl up. She had no interest at all in food.

"Shall we do the washing-up?" asked Robert politely, when they finished.

"Oh no, I'll shove it in the machine," said Daphne.

"Good gracious have you got a dish-washer machine Aunt Daffy?" Susan asked in amazement.

Sure enough there was a shiny new washing up machine fitted neatly between the sink and what looked like a brand-new cooker.

"Don't call me Aunt Daffy - I'm not your Aunt and I'm not at all keen on Daphne but I seem to be stuck with it! I really can't do with Daffy!"

"Right - er - Daphne," said Robert.

After tea the children wandered out into the garden to admire the geese; the new family of five goslings really were very attractive, although both twins were a bit nervous of Griswold, the gander, who was a bad tempered old ruffian.

"What's got into Daffy Duck?" asked Robert, unconsciously echoing his father.

"Yes - it's not like her to buy a dishwasher - and what about those hamburgers?" replied Susan. "But it's not just that, there is something really different about her, I just don't know exactly what it is!"

Robert understood what his twin meant. They sat on a low branch of the apple tree and thought about it.

Daphne came out to peg some clothes on the line just as Mr Obling emerged from his house. To the children's complete amazement she shouted to him: "Good evening, Mr Obling. Lovely evening!"

Mr Obling snorted and went back indoors.

“Aunt, - er - I mean Daphne, are you on speaking terms with the dreaded Obling?” asked Susan in a loud whisper. “After what happened to the goose?”

The feud between Daphne and Hob Obling had started when she had complained to the R.S.P.C.A. that he was keeping wild birds in cages. Then he had taken her to court because her geese kept getting into the garden and eating his vegetables.

After this one of the geese had disappeared. Mr Obling had sworn that a fox had killed it and pointed to a pathetic heap of grey feathers to prove it. But Daphne had smelled the Obling Sunday dinner cooking and was convinced she recognised the smell of roast goose. She had promptly reported him for having no television license.

She now turned to the children with the rather curious look on her face. “I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of him!” she said.

The twins simply did not know what to make of this. As far as they knew, Daphne's only real fun in life was getting on the wrong side of Mr Obling.

That night when Robert was just drifting off to sleep, Susan slipped into his room.

“I've realised what's different!” she whispered. “What colour are Daffy's eyes?”

Robert sat up in bed and stared at his sister.

“I haven't a clue!” he replied. “What on earth are you on about?”

“Well,” said Susan, “last year I just happened to notice her eyes were a sort of dim grey - like a dress she was wearing, and, well, now they are green!”

“They can't be,” said Robert firmly, “you can't change the colour of your eyes.”

“You can get contact lenses.” said Susan. “If she can buy a dishwasher she could buy contact lenses!”

“But why?” demanded Robert. “Why should she get green contact lenses - she's not exactly a bimbo!”

“That is a really sexist remark!” said Susan.

“Well, I'm sorry,” replied her brother, “but honestly Su, I ask you, can you imagine Daffy Duck getting herself green contact lenses?”

“Well, she's done something,” said Susan, rather huffily, “because her eyes have definitely changed colour!”

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 2.

It wasn't until breakfast the next morning that Robert had a chance to look at Daphne's eyes.

To start with he was too surprised and delighted to be given a fried egg and bacon instead of stale and soggy cornflakes. However, when Susan came in, glancing in a pointed way at their cousin, he noticed that her eyes really were a strange and rather attractive shade of green. He thought he had never seen eyes quite that colour. He couldn't remember Daphne's eyes at all, but thought, rather uncomfortably, that he would have noticed these eyes.

He also noticed her hair. Surely it had always been mousey brown? Now, in the morning sunlight, it looked, well, almost gold.

After breakfast Robert apologised to Susan.

"You are right, Su, her eyes are a really weird green, and I believe she has been dyeing her hair."

It was Susan's turn to look doubtful. It really seemed most unlikely.

The twins wandered casually back into the kitchen and Susan gasped. Daphne's hair was not so much gold as a rather beautiful dark auburn. She was bending over the new dishwasher and did not notice them. They quietly backed out of the kitchen and ran into the garden.

"Well, what do you make of that?" demanded Robert. "She must be dyeing it!"

Susan gave her brother a look that was almost frightened.

"When?" she asked.

"When what?"

"When is she dyeing it? It takes ages to dye your hair. Don't you remember when Mum decided to go blonde - it took all afternoon. Daphne's hair definitely wasn't that colour at breakfast!"

For a long time the children sat on the apple tree branch. Every now and then they looked at each other as if about to speak, but no words came. At last Robert said what they were both thinking.

"I don't believe it is Daphne it all!" he said flatly.

"Then who is it?" asked Susan squeakily. Her voice seemed to have suddenly got out of control.

"I saw a film on the telly once," said Robert. "This chap had a mask of very thin rubber, and he looked exactly like this other chap until he peeled this mask off and then he was another chap altogether."

"Yes, I saw that one," agreed Susan, "but I thought at the time, what about his voice? He sounded like the other chap until he took his face off."

"I saw another film," said Robert, after a very long pause. "It was about these body snatchers. They came from another planet and stole people's bodies and even these peoples' families thought they were alright until they got up and murdered them!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Susan. She had gone very white. "Mum said you should not have watched that one. Gwen was baby sitting and I heard Mum ticking her off, saying it was far too late and too frightening. I went to bed because I didn't like it. I don't want to hear about it now, thank you very much!"

"Sorry!" mumbled Robert. "I didn't mean to frighten you. But isn't it better to be warned if Daffy is an alien being?"

"Oh, just shut up!" shouted Susan, and ran upstairs to her bedroom.

Robert, who knew his twin very well, gave her a few minutes to calm down and then went and knocked on her door.

"Let's go down to the post office for postcards to send home," he suggested.

"All right," said Susan gruffly, and, grabbing her purse, she followed Robert out of the house. For some time they walked in silence. At last Susan spoke.

"It is as if she can't keep it up," she said thoughtfully. "She looked really like Daffy while Mum and Dad were here, but did you notice she didn't invite them in? Now she looks less like her all the time."

They went into the post office and started looking at the postcards.

"What a rotten selection!" said Robert disgustedly. "There is only one view of the village and I'm sure we sent that last year."

"Serve them right for dumping us here," said Susan, "among alien body-snatchers," she added with a little gulp.

"I'll tell you something else I noticed," said Robert. "I know it sounds really silly, but when Daffy went out of the front door, she ducked right down, as if she was used to having something on her head."

Susan stared at him. "What on earth do you mean, 'something on her head'?"

"Well," said Robert, blushing and shuffling his feet, "I said it sounded silly but, well, something like a tall, pointy hat!"

As the children stood staring at each other, they became aware of a slight movement from behind the post-card stand.

"Come out, I know you're there!" said Robert bravely.

Out of the shadows came Spider Obling, one of Hobb Obling's many sons. Nobody knew his real name, he was always known as Spider because of his appearance. He was incredibly thin and dark, with big knobby knees and elbows and enormous hands and feet. He had very dark slitty eyes.

Susan remembered something she had noticed before about all the Oblings. Their eyes were a dusty black and gave no reflection. It gave them a nasty dead look. Susan shivered. It certainly did seem to be her day for noticing peoples' eyes.

"Why were you hiding round there?" demanded Robert.

Spider grinned, showing very strong, yellowish teeth.

"You a bit worried about your Auntie then?" he asked slyly. "Seems a bit strange does she?"

Robert grabbed Spider by his bony shoulder. "What do you know about it?" he demanded.

"Her hair gone ginger, has it?" Spider gave a very unpleasant laugh, ducked under Robert's arm, and ran off down the village street.

The children walked slowly back to Rose Cottage. They were really quite reluctant to return, but they had nowhere else to go, and the village of East Pookshill contained nothing but the post office and shop, a pub and a garage; apart from some small and rundown houses, that was it. A surprisingly large number of the houses were occupied by Oblings who all had the same dusty, black eyes and sly, furtive expressions. Few, if any, of the Oblings seemed to work and many could be seen lounging in their doorways in the sunshine or peeping round grubby lace curtains at the children.

Susan and Robert began to feel uncomfortable and, at the same moment, both started to run. They seemed to hear nasty, sarcastic laughter from all sides. When they reached the cottage they were hardly surprised at all to see an enormous, pitch black cat sitting on the step. He was absolutely black all over, except for large intelligent, golden eyes. As they approached he rose, yawned, and wandered off into the garden in a leisurely manner.

The twins felt it was hardly worth reminding each other how Daphne had disliked cats. They were by now both convinced that Daphne was no longer who she seemed to be.

Robert put his finger to his lips. It seemed worth entering the cottage quietly without disturbing the occupant, partly because the children were really rather frightened, and partly because they were curious, and wondered what she would be up to.

The lady with the green eyes and auburn hair was sitting at the kitchen table reading a book.

She suddenly said, "Oh do get on with it, I haven't got all day!"

The twins thought for a moment that she was talking to them, but as they watched from the doorway, fascinated, the dishwasher opened its' door, and dirty plates, cups,

cutlery and dishes started to float across the room and load themselves tidily into the white plastic racks. Just as the last dish, a large casserole pot, was halfway across the kitchen, the black cat appeared on the window sill. Although it only shouted: 'Miaow', it seemed to the twins that what it meant was: "Look out behind you!"

The lady dropped her book and sprang to her feet and the casserole dish crashed to the floor. Robert stared, pale and horrified, across the room and Susan burst into tears.

-----oOo-----

### Chapter 3

For a moment the children saw a complete stranger staring at them. Then her face seemed to waver like a reflection in still water when a bird darts over it: there was Daffy Duck as they knew her: kind, grey eyes, mousey hair, and a determined mouth. Susan's fear turned to anger.

"You can just stop that!" she shouted. "We know you are not Daffy. What have you done with her?"

"Don't cry, child," said the witch, and they were looking at the stranger again. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"We're not frightened - it was just the shock," said Robert. "Where's Daffy?"

The witch looked at them with her strange green eyes. The cat jumped down from the window sill and rubbed himself against her leg. She absent-mindedly leant down and scratched him between the ears.

"It's alright, Erebus," she said soothingly, "nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about - I like that!" stormed Susan. "Where's Daffy?"

"You are fond of your cousin, are you?" asked the witch. "You are grateful to her for taking you into her home when nobody else wants you?"

The twins both opened their mouths to speak and then closed them again.

"You know she has worked hard all term, I suppose? Just when she has earned a rest and wants to get on with her painting she has two hungry children to look after. Still, as long as you are really fond of her I am sure she doesn't mind making beds, cooking food she would never eat herself, buying stuff like meat paste. You do know she is a vegetarian?"

The children felt that somehow they had been put in the wrong. They opened their mouths again, but still could find nothing to say. They did in fact remember now that Daphne was a vegetarian, but had somehow never thought about it or noticed that she didn't eat the food that she cooked for them.

"If you think running an infant class is a rest cure, you should jolly well try it," announced the witch with feeling. "I have been doing it for the last three days of term, and I am a complete wreck - I can't even keep up a simple impersonation for a couple of heartless kids!"

"We are not really heartless," said Robert in a subdued voice. "We just didn't think, I suppose. Have you really been taking her class?"

"Yes, I have, and thank heaven it is holidays now! How she does it day after day I cannot imagine."

The witch took a deep breath.



"I suppose I shall have to explain what is going on, although you two are hardly the assistants I would have chosen in a tricky situation like this. You had better understand right away that I do not like children, and if I were not very fond of Daphne I would simply have gone home days ago."

The witch fell silent, apparently wrapped in thought. The children stood awkwardly in the doorway, shifting from one foot to the other. The cat lifted his lip and sneered at them.

"You see," the witch began at last, "Daphne can be very stubborn. I tried to warn her that Obling was more dangerous than he seemed, but she would keep confronting him."

"What do you mean dangerous?" asked Robert. "He is certainly a nasty old man but we never thought of him as dangerous."

"Well, that is your trouble isn't it,? You never think at all!" snapped the witch. "I suppose you never thought his name at all significant?"

The children shook their heads.

"Hobb Obling?" she continued. "Doesn't remind you of anything? Hob goblin for instance?"

The children gasped.

"What about Pookshill?" went on the witch. "I suppose you bright pair never thought that an odd name for a village? I dare say it never occurred to you it might have anything to do with Puck? Puck's hill perhaps?"

Now that their attention was drawn to it, the twins turned to stare out of the window at the hill: a very symmetrical hill it was, not very tall, but standing alone, bare red sandstone in flat farmland. There was something rather odd and even sinister about it. They wondered why they had never thought so before.

"I met your cousin at the W.I. when she was first thinking of coming to live here. My name is Tabitha Marigold, by the way - you may call me Miss Marigold."

"I didn't think Daffy was the sort to join the Womens' Institute," said Susan. "She always said she hated being 'organised'."

"Oh no, not the WOMENS' institute, the WITCHES' Institute!" replied Miss Marigold. "If she had let us organize her a bit more she wouldn't be in this mess."

Susan's eyes were round with amazement.

"Do you mean to say that Daffy is a witch too?"

"Well, only in a small way, but she is learning fast. That may be one reason the Oblings were getting nervous of her and decided to do something about her."

Miss Marigold paused and regarded the children.

"You had better come in and sit down; don't stand there twitching. The real trouble began when Daphne discovered that Obling had a television," continued the

witch, when the children were perched on a couple of kitchen stools.

"I suppose he didn't like paying the fine," said Robert.

"Well, that was part of it; but it was worse than that." Miss Marigold continued. "Goblins don't like modern things and Hobb is a sort of leader. They were all horrified to find he had a telly at all. Some people in the village won't speak to him, and, of course, he blames Daphne. Would you like a cup of tea?"

The twins nodded. They certainly felt in need of refreshment of some sort. They watched in fascination as Miss Marigold pointed at the kettle and it swung itself slowly over to the tap. She pointed at the tap and it turned itself on, filled the kettle and then stopped. The kettle, which appeared to boil immediately, emptied itself into the tea-pot, which hopped across the table towards them on little china feet.

"Come on, get the mugs! Do I have to do everything?" demanded Miss Marigold.

She then poured out the tea in the normal way.

"Do go on!" begged Robert. "We still don't know what happened."

"I begged her to find a house on our side of the hill, but she had fallen in love with this cottage and as I told you she could be very stubborn.' Fancy setting up house in the middle of a goblin village! A very much nicer class of person lives on our side of the hill."

"Yes, I'm sure they do," said Susan a little impatiently, "but what has happened to Daffy?"

"I don't know." said Miss Marigold. "She has disappeared. I am sure it has something to do with the Oblings but I don't think Hobb actually knows where she is. I pretended to be her to confuse them. Goblins have a sort of telepathy between themselves. If only one of them knows where she is then they will all know in no time. While they think I am her, they won't go looking for her. It gives me time to try and find her."

"Oh dear," said Susan. "I'm afraid we may have let it out. Spider Obling was hiding in the shop while we were talking about you."

Miss Marigold fixed the children with a chilly green eye.

"What a perfect pest you kids are. Still, he probably doesn't know for certain - he may not know it is me."

Robert shook his head.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I think he does know; he asked us if your hair had turned - er - auburn."

Robert thought, quite correctly, that Miss Marigold would not care to be called ginger.

"Oh blast!" said the witch.

## Chapter 4

"It was last Tuesday evening that Daphne disappeared," continued Miss Marigold, when she had regained her composure. "She was talking to me on the telephone when she suddenly said the geese were making a lot of noise - they are very good watchdogs you know. Well, Daphne said she wouldn't be a minute and then I heard her say 'Goblins!' and the line went dead. I flew straight over, of course, and looked everywhere for her. Then I came into the garden disguised - to see if I could surprise Hobb into giving himself away. But he just said: "I shall shoot those birds of yours one of these days if they don't shut up!"

There was quite a long silence while the children considered this story.

At last Susan said, "If other goblins were involved in her disappearance, what about their telepathy? Why didn't Hobb know?"

Miss Marigold frowned. "I don't know. Perhaps they didn't think he would be interested, or perhaps they are not speaking to him at the moment because of the telly. It doesn't really matter because Spider will tell him now. We must act quickly. If Hobb decides to join in whatever is going on, he will be certain to make everything much worse. He will never forgive her about the telly. He has had to get rid of it and he really loved it, especially the horror films."

Later on that evening their fears were confirmed. While they were all feeding the geese Hobb Obling leant over the fence and leered at the witch.

"Good evening Miss Marigold," he squeaked in what was meant to mimic a female voice. "Lovely evening!"

"That's torn it!" said Miss Marigold. "Come on indoors - we have work to do now."

She went to a cupboard in the sitting room and carefully lifted out a crystal ball wrapped in black velvet. Motioning to the children to sit down, she settled herself in an old fashioned upright chair and uncovered the ball. Erebus jumped up onto the table and they all gazed into the depths of the crystal.

The children could see clouds swirling about and the ball gave off a faint humming noise and occasional sparks. After a few minutes Miss Marigold sat back.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing!" she said.

"What does it mean?" asked Susan.

"It means they have either put a jamming spell on Daphne which is spoiling the signal, or ... she must be underground."

Susan gave a little cry of terror and Robert went very white.

"Don't panic!" said the witch. "I don't mean she is dead and buried, just that they are keeping her underground. Goblins are really underground people you know. It is only in the last couple of hundred years that some of them have taken to living in houses."

Pushing the crystal ball to one side, Miss Marigold fetched a large bowl of water from the kitchen. Setting it on the floor, she took a piece of chalk and carefully drew a pattern, rather like a star, round the bowl.

"Don't move ... don't even breathe!" she said fiercely. She took an old, stoneware bottle from a high cupboard and carefully eased out the cork. A wisp of green smoke curled upwards from the mouth, accompanied by a gurgling noise. The witch looked pleased.

"I thought Daphne would have some of this. It will work better because it belongs to her!"

She tipped a little bubbling green liquid from the bottle into the bowl of water. It gurgled and spat. Both children moved back and Miss Marigold glared at them.

"Keep still!" she hissed.

Gradually the water turned green and the bubbling stopped. They all stared into the water. At first they seemed only to see reflections of the room. Then gradually a figure began to form at the bottom. It was a woman dressed all in white with a wreath of white flowers in her hair. She seemed to be asleep on a stone table strewn with flowers.

"Come closer," said the witch, and the face of the sleeping figure seemed to rise in the water until they could all see the features quite clearly.

It was Daphne.

"Where are you?" asked Miss Marigold.

At this the picture started to change. The figure became dim and disappeared. The green in the water started to coalesce at the bottom of the bowl. It began to form a landscape and rising up in the middle was a red mound. Without a doubt it was Pook's Hill.

"How can we get in?" Miss Marigold inquired.

The landscape scattered. A dark line seemed to grow up from the middle. It thickened and shot out branches: Leaves sprang forth to cover them in green.

"The sacred oak!" muttered the witch. "Of course, I should have guessed."

Almost immediately the tree started to disintegrate. Green smoke rose from the bowl and disappeared. In a few moments the water was completely clear. Carefully Miss Marigold tidied everything up and wiped away the chalk star with the black, velvet cloth.

At last she said, "You can move now."

The children stretched their arms and legs.

"I've got pins and needles." said Robert. "What do we do now?"

"We eat." said the witch. "And then we wait. Tonight we go into Pook's Hill."

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 5

The children passed the rest of the evening in an agony of anticipation – half excited, half terrified. They hardly tasted their supper, but Miss Marigold insisted they ate a good meal. At last it was time to get ready. They all put on their warmest clothes because Miss Marigold said it was always cold underground, even in midsummer. When they were all ready in thick trousers and sweaters, black so they would not show up too much in the dark, and trainers for running and climbing, Miss Marigold got a long black cloak out of the cupboard and a pointy black hat which she put on her head. Robert gave Susan a nudge.

"Told you so!" he whispered.

Miss Marigold gave them each a torch and a small dagger in case of goodness knows what.

"Stick them in your belts." she said. "You never know."

Susan gave a little shiver, but they did as they were told. They followed the witch in silence to the back door. There propped against the wall was an ancient broomstick.

"This belonged to my granny," said Miss Marigold proudly. "It's as good as the day it was made."

She stroked the handle and the broomstick gave a little quiver.

"They don't make them like this any more. Modern brooms only last a few years. Some are imported from Russia and keep trying to fly home. You think you are heading for Milton Keynes and you end up over Omsk."

She carried the broomstick out into the back yard.

"I'm afraid there are four of us tonight," she said, "but we are not going very far. Will you take us to the sacred oak, please?"

The broomstick started to stretch and stretch until it was about two metres long.

"Susan, you ride behind me," said Miss Marigold, climbing astride at the handle end. "Robert, you go at the back and hang onto Susan."

"Who is the fourth?" demanded Robert, just as Erebus leapt onto the witch's shoulder and settled himself round her neck like a fur collar.

"Hang on tight!" commanded the witch. "If anyone falls off they can walk home; we're not stopping!"

The broomstick gave a judder and at that moment a full moon burst from behind a cloud. They shot forward, over the fence and up into the night sky. It was a lot faster than the children had expected and to start with all their time was taken up with simply staying on. The wind buffeted them from all sides and the witch's cloak flapped in Susan's face. But after a while the broomstick settled down to a steady flight and they started to enjoy it.

The moon lit the scene below with a cold, magical, white light. They could see the lighted windows in the village and the river like a silver snake. The children had a dreadful fright when a great silent shadow suddenly flew up beside them.

"Oh, what's that?" gasped Susan, nearly slipping off the broomstick.  
"It is only Griswold the gander," said Miss Marigold. "He is Daphne's Familiar."

Sure enough, they could now see the grey bird, looking much bigger with his wings spread, flying along beside them.

"What is a Familiar?" asked Robert nervously.

"Don't they teach you anything in school?" exclaimed the witch in an exasperated tone. "All witches have an animal of some sort to help with their magic. Most people have a cat, of course, but Daphne is a strange one, she doesn't like cats."

Erebus gave a deep growl in his throat and his long tail twitched. And then, almost before they knew it, Pook's Hill rose before them and the broomstick swooped down towards a massive ancient oak tree growing at the foot of the hill.

As soon as everyone had dismounted, Miss Marigold lifted the broomstick. She pushed the handle in amongst the branches and it immediately sprouted leaves all over so that it looked exactly like a branch.

"Oh, clever thing!" said Robert.

The broomstick quivered and shook its leaves, almost as though it was laughing.

"Now," said Miss Marigold, "we know there is an entrance somewhere here. Look for a crack in the rock or anything at all odd."

They all searched. The humans running their hands over the rock while Erebus sniffed everything and scratched with his claws. Griswold poked his beak into every small cranny. But they could find no sign of an entrance.

"Can't you use a spell?" asked Susan.

"I can try," replied Miss Marigold, "but there are strong spells protecting this place - I can feel them."

For a few minutes she muttered strange words and sent out flashes of fire from her finger tips. But nothing moved on the quiet hillside.

Suddenly Susan looked round.

"Where's Robert?" she cried.

"It's alright!" said a voice from directly above them. "I'm up here and I've found the entrance!"

Looking up into the branches of the oak they saw Robert's face, pale in the moonlight, looking down at them. Susan and Erebus immediately began to climb the tree and Griswold flew up with a loud flapping of wings.

The broomstick-branch leant down towards the witch. She held the end and it gently lifted her up beside the others.

They saw at once that the tree was nearly hollow, and in a large hole in the middle they could see steps, like the rungs of a ladder, going down into the heart of the oak.

"Well done Robert!" said the witch graciously. "You children are not as useless as some. You may call me Tabitha."

The children grinned at each other and thanked her politely.

"Erebus, can you nip down and just see if it is safe?" asked the witch. "You are black as night and will not be seen."

Like a shadow the cat was gone and a moment later they saw his golden eyes shining from the bottom of the ladder. He gave a soft 'miaow', and Tabitha started to climb down.

"It's quite safe - so far," she said.

The children scrambled down the ladder and Griswold flew down to them. He did not find this easy as his wing-span was almost too wide to fit in the hole, but he managed it and arrived at the bottom cursing and spitting. Robert wondered if he could really be much help, but he was obviously determined to come.

They found themselves in a tunnel, apparently hollowed out of the earth. It seemed to have been made for very small people and they had to crouch down and, in some places, go on all fours.

"Use your torches, but sparingly," advised Tabitha. "Follow Erebus, he can see in the dark."

For some time they moved along in silence. The only sound was the slap, slap of Griswold's webbed feet on the ground as he brought up the rear of the procession. At last they came to a solid wooden door about one and a half metres high. There was an inscription in a strange script engraved on it. Tabitha turned to the others with relief.

"This is not a goblin tunnel," she said. "The language on the door is Dwarfish."

"Can you read it?" asked Susan.

But the witch shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I just recognise some of the letters. I think it is very old Dwarfish. You see all those squiggles and curls on the letters; I don't think modern dwarfs write like that. But we shall be alright anyway. They are friendly folk." and with that she knocked loudly on the door.

-----oOo-----



## Chapter 6

After a few moments they heard the stomping of heavy boots on the far side of the door, and then the sound of bolts being drawn and keys turned.

"Who goes there?" asked a gruff voice.

The door swung open to reveal a strange little man. He just came up to Susan's shoulder but he was very broad and powerful looking, with thick sturdy legs and enormous shoulders. A grizzled beard came down past his waist and he was dressed all in leather. In one hand he held a lantern and in the other a heavy axe.

"Friends!" said Tabitha. "Friends from the West side of the hill."

"No goblins?" demanded the little man, holding up his lantern to have a look at the visitors.

"Certainly not!" said Tabitha firmly, and at this he opened the door widely and gestured at them to come in.

"I didn't think they would have the cheek to knock on the door," said the dwarf, "but you never know. They are getting terribly cocky these days."

The children found themselves in an enormous cavern. The ceiling almost out of sight above them. The whole place seemed to sparkle and glitter so that they were quite dazzled. The principal light came from a huge open fire at one end and the flames reflected a million jewels that studded the walls wherever they looked. The floor was red sand, hard packed by a multitude of little feet over many years, and down one entire wall a steady cascade of water fell crashing into some ravine far below. Sturdy wooden tables were arranged in a line down the middle of the floor and around these sat a great many dwarves who looked much like the one who had opened the door. The tables were covered with gold and silver plate, goblets and carved jugs, and candlesticks bearing lighted candles. It was obvious that a considerable feast was in progress. The plates were piled with roast meats of every description and a most appetizing smell filled the hall. At the top table sat a figure, who the visitors realised at once must be the King. His beard was the longest of all and pure white. His clothes were simple leather like his companions but on his head he wore a crown of gold, at a jaunty angle over one eye. The King made some effort to stand up, but owing to a good deal of mulled wine that he had taken with his supper, this proved difficult. He sank back into his chair.

"Who have we here, Thunder Brow?" he demanded.

"Visitors, Sire!" responded the dwarf who had let them in.

"Let them approach; sit them down; give them a drink!" said the King, waving his arm expansively and knocking a golden goblet, encrusted with rubies, flying across the floor. His crown slipped down to an even more rakish angle, where it seemed to be balanced on his rather large nose.

"Please sit down, friends!" said Thunder Brow. "Plenty of food for all."

Several dwarves shuffled along the heavy wooden bench to make room for the visitors. In no time they found plates piled high with food placed in front of them. Robert looked at his plate in some dismay. There was easily enough food for a fortnight.

"Don't worry," whispered Tabitha, "you are not really expected to finish it."

Silver dishes arrived for the Familiars. Roast chicken stuffed with quails eggs for Erebus, and fine white bread soaked in wine for Griswold. Every now and then a dwarf would rise to his feet and propose a toast:

"To the Queen, may she soon be back with us."

"To the young prince."

"To Pan."

"To Puck."

"To the visitors."

The children were not used to wine, but it seemed rude not to raise their goblets. After each toast, jugs of wine were brought round and the goblets refilled. Quite soon the room started to swim and the jewelled walls to ripple like curtains in the breeze. Tabitha put her hands over the twins' goblets.

"No more, they are only children," she said. The dwarves were amazed.

"They are so tall," they said. "We thought they were adults."

Susan and Robert watched the swaying walls with interest. It was very warm and they felt their eyes closing. Robert nudged Susan with his elbow.

"Don't go to sleep!" he muttered. "We don't want to miss anything. What an evening!"

But it was too late; Susan's eyelids were drooping uncontrollably. Robert decided to rest his head on his arms just for a few moments. Very soon the twins were asleep, their heads on the table. They didn't feel themselves being lifted in strong arms and tucked up warmly in animal furs on piles of sweet heather. They slept as snug as dormice in their nests.

The following morning Fair Pearl, Queen of the dwarves, sat up in her bed of satin pillows and ermine skins and stared fondly at her son. He was the reason for the feasting of the previous night, for her absence from the festivities, and also for the King's rather inebriated condition. The crown prince was an extremely small but sturdy baby, with a very red face, and at this moment he was bawling loudly enough to wake the Dreamers. His many sisters, cousins, aunts, ladies-in-waiting and anyone else who happened to be passing, were gazing at him in great admiration. The queen held out her arms for him and proceeded to feed him. The bellowing stopped abruptly and peace reigned in the royal apartments.

The children awoke some several floors below, in their warm earthen bedroom.

"This must be what a badger's set is like," remarked Robert.

Tabitha and Erebus were not with them, but Griswold, his head under his wing, was asleep in the entrance tunnel. Apparently he had taken it upon himself to guard them. While they were still yawning a dwarf appeared in the entrance.

"I am Arm Strong," he said. "I will take you where you can wash."

The children and Griswold followed him down a short passage to where water ran through a deep pool in a small cave. The water was sparkling and clear, but so intensely cold that they contented themselves with splashing some water on their faces. Even so, they lost all feeling in their hands for a few moments. They decided that dwarves were made of sterner stuff. Griswold seemed quite unaffected by the cold and walked out into the pool with evident satisfaction. After a good deal of flapping and splashing, he waddled out and settled on the bank to preen his feathers. When they had all finished, Arm Strong took them back to the large cavern where they had eaten on the previous evening. Everything had been tidied up and food had been laid out for breakfast. It was much the same food as before, only served cold. The dwarves seemed to be extremely fond of meat and, considering their size, they consumed an enormous amount of it. Several were sitting in small groups eating their breakfast when the twins arrived with Arm Strong and Griswold. The children were not quite so fond of meat, especially at breakfast, but they managed to find some bread and butter and a large jug of milk. Arm Strong gave Griswold some bread soaked in milk. The gander also ate a dish of ripe plums with evident pleasure, swallowing them, stones and all.

While they were eating, another dwarf, Bone Crusher, arrived with Tabitha and Erebus, and when they had all breakfasted Arm Strong and Bone Crusher took them to admire the crown prince. Now clean and fed, and wrapped in a rabbit skin in his cradle. The King was delighted to show off his fine son. The royal house of Blood Axe had waited a long time for an heir. Indeed King Stand Fast had almost given up hope after the birth of nine daughters. When the visitors had all paid their respects, Tabitha asked if anyone had any news of Daphne. When she described the magic vision they had seen of the stone table heaped with flowers and Daphne apparently asleep, the King looked grave.

"So, they are up to their old tricks!" he said. "The goblins think it really funny to send someone to sleep for a hundred years. When the poor wretch wakes up they think they have only slept for an hour or two. They go home to find everything changed and all their friends and relations long dead."

"How wicked!" cried Susan. "They must have a really twisted sense of humour!"

"Don't worry," said Tabitha firmly. "We will rescue her."

"I cannot give you a map, for I am not familiar with the goblin regions," said the King, "but Arm Strong and Bone Crusher will take you to the border. If you make your way always downwards, you should come at last to the tomb room you have described. But go no further in case you wake the Dreamers!"

He said the last sentence in hushed tones ending in a whisper, and looking around nervously.

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" said the Queen. "Surely, my dear Stand Fast you do not believe in the Dreamers? These are stories made up to frighten children!"

"I expect you are right, my dear," said the King bashfully, "but I would rather not risk it myself. You can't be sure there is nothing there."

"Of course, the legend of the Dreamers!" said Tabitha thoughtfully. "I had forgotten all about it." She turned to the children. "They say that powerful spirits sleep under the hill where the sacred river runs to the centre of the earth. If they ever wake, it means the hill is in great danger. Perhaps even the end of the world!"

The King gave a shiver.

"The goblins are quite bad enough!" he said. "Come, I will set you on your way."

They said their goodbyes to the queen and admired the prince once more. Other dwarves arrived with large packets of roast beef sandwiches and bottles of wine.

"Dwarf wine is marvellous stuff!" said Tabitha. "It warms and sustains but has no nasty after effects, like human wine - no hangover!"

The children realised that this was true. Neither the King, or they themselves, showed any effects from their drinking of the previous night. Robert, who would one day grow up to be a business man like his father, sighed.

"If we could only market that," he said. "We could make a fortune."

Arm Strong laughed.

"You would first have to find the recipe," he said. "It has been a dwarf secret for thousands of years."

The wide lighted passageway led downwards from the royal apartments. The King walked with them until the lighting stopped. Promising that they would return when they could, the rest of the party, with Arm Strong and Bone Crusher, continued down the now dark passage.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 7

As the friendly, lighted lanterns faded into the distance behind them, the tunnel got darker and darker. Arm Strong and Bone Crusher carried pieces of rope, which had been dipped in tar and lighted, but the glow from these was very dim, only just lighting the dwarves' faces in the darkness. Robert suggested they should light their torches, but Tabitha said: "Just one torch then - we may need them later."

Quite suddenly the dwarves both stopped.

"This is the border; we must leave you here," they said.

The children looked around; there was no sign of any change in the tunnel.

"How do you know it's the border?" asked Susan.

"Can't you smell anything?" asked Arm Strong.

The children sniffed the air. There was a faint acrid smell reminiscent of Hobb Obling.

"Goblins!" said Arm Strong. "They never wash you know. Never touch water at all if they can possibly help it. They think it's unlucky."

"It's unlucky for anyone who gets too close to them" said Bone Crusher with a laugh.

"Goodbye, Friends, and good luck. We hope to see you soon."

They hurried away, uncomfortable in the darkness and eager to get back to their warm and cheerful caves and the explorers moved bravely on, Erebus the only one comfortable in the dark. Even he was not really happy to be so close to goblins. As they approached a bend in the tunnel they all, quite suddenly, felt that there was something very nasty round the corner. They stood still and listened. Nothing but the sound of their breathing could be heard and after a few minutes they cautiously approached the bend. As they came round they saw it. At first only the eyes were visible, enormous pale shining eyes, near the roof of the tunnel. Then they could make out huge hairy legs, like a great bridge nearly over their heads. It was a gigantic spider. The children and Tabitha cowered back in terror. Erebus shot his tail straight in the air like a bottle brush, all the fur on his body standing out in fright. Tabitha immediately thought that there would be an enormous web somewhere near, waiting to trap them. The spider made a sort of hissing sound and its' great head moved from side to side. They were simply too terrified to scream or even to think, when Griswold suddenly came waddling forward, his feet slapping on the earth floor. He walked right through the spider, not just under the bridge, but right through one of its legs. The spider seemed to sway, and then it was gone.

"Good grief!" gasped Tabitha. "It was an illusion, just a phantasm set to guard the tunnel."

Both children sat down heavily on the ground, still shaking. After taking a few minutes to recover, Robert asked:

"How did Griswold know it was an illusion?"

"He couldn't see it at all," said Tabitha. "He doesn't know what we are worrying about. I think the spider was designed to frighten humans. Griswold's eyes and brain are so different he just didn't perceive it at all."

"Good old Griswold!" said Robert with feeling. "I wonder why Erebus was frightened?"

Tabitha stroked the cat. He mewed and rubbed himself against her leg.

"He says he was frightened because we were," she explained. "He felt our terror and it terrified him!"

They sat on the ground, huddled together and ate some beef sandwiches. When they had passed round some of the marvellous dwarf wine, they all felt better and decided to move on.

They arrived at a place where the tunnel widened out and they could hear water running. As they rounded a big pile of rocks they came across a strange sight. A beam of light shone down a narrow shaft from miles above and where it struck the ground a mass of strange white flowers grew.

"Don't go near them, hurry past!" said Tabitha. "They are goblin poppies, the scent of them can send you to sleep."

The children tried not to breathe, but even so they caught a waft of heavy soporific scent. They stumbled a little as they hurried past. The tunnel gently sloped downhill so they felt they were going the right way, but after a few hundred metres disaster struck.

Robert, who was in front, stumbled over a sleeping goblin. He had been left on guard and had dozed off in the darkness. The goblin leaped to his feet and opened his mouth to scream. As quick as a flash Susan hit him over the head with a wine bottle, knocking him out. They waited in silence, had they got him in time? Almost immediately they heard, to their horror, the pattering of little pointed feet coming from all directions. The guard had apparently had time to send out a telepathic cry for help.

Before they could do anything, they were seized by many small but strong arms. They put up a good fight. The twins kicked and punched in all directions; Griswold, his neck extended and wings spread, charged into a crowd of goblins, hissing horribly, and did a good deal of damage; Erebus was a whirling mass of claws and teeth. The trouble was that the goblins seemed impervious to injury. As some fell, others, behind them, simply climbed over the wounded and continued to fight. Gradually the gallant band were being pushed down a side tunnel and towards a large black hole in the floor. At last, exhausted, they reached the hole. It was the top of an old mine shaft. In vain they tried to hold on to the edge but it was too slippery and then they were tumbling down - down - down into the depths of the earth. They landed in a small dark room at the bottom of the shaft. They could just see a faint glow of light very far away above them. Susan and Robert felt themselves carefully. Their arms and legs seemed to work. They were bruised and banged and scratched but not badly hurt. Erebus had landed well but Griswold was hurt. There had not been room in the shaft for him to fly properly and he had banged his wing painfully against the side. Robert and Susan tried to feel the wing but he cried out in pain and they didn't know what to do for him. Erebus walked right round the little room and then sat down, put his head back and howled. The twins had never heard

such a heart-rending sound in their lives. They realised that Tabitha Marigold was no longer with them.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 8

King Orky XII sat on his throne, carved from a solid block of anthracite, and stared with displeasure at his visitor. The King wore a pewter crown studded with pieces of jet, and his sceptre was made of finely wrought pewter with a large lump of jet on the end.

"What I do not understand, Hobb, is why you decided to interfere in my affairs?" asked the King in a deceptively mild voice.

Hobb was twice the size of the King. This seemed to be the result of living outside in the open air and perhaps a more varied diet. However, his larger size did not seem to make Hobb feel superior at the moment.

"I am sorry, Sire," he muttered. "I did not realise you had got the witch, Daphne."

"You did not know, because I did not wish anyone to know." The King's voice was rising dangerously and he was tapping his sceptre on the arm of the throne, always a bad sign.

"I only broadcast my thoughts when I wish to - unlike some," continued the King. "I believe you were making inquiries all over the place? You must have alerted half the county."

"The only people who know are the witch, Tabitha Marigold, and two silly human children. I am sure there is no reason to worry about them, Sire."

The King jumped off the throne and started pacing up and down.

"I am not worried about them, you blithering idiot," he stormed. "It's my wives I'm worried about!"

"Your wives, Sire?" Hobb looked at his monarch in amazement. "Surely you were not thinking of marrying the witch, Daphne?"

"Well, what if I was?" demanded the King truculently. "I suppose I can get married if I want to?"

Hobb might have said that, at the age of two hundred and eleven, with thirty two wives already, the King was married enough, but he had the sense to keep this thought to himself.

"Anyway," continued the irate monarch, "thanks to you my wives heard about it and they were all furious with me. They have taken her off to the tomb room and sent her to sleep - so that's that."

"I'm terribly sorry, Sire," said Hobb, hanging his head and shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

"You'll be a jolly sight sorrier by the time I'm finished with you!" The King slumped back on to the throne. "My wives say there are plenty of nice goblin women if I wish to marry again," he went on more quietly. "The trouble with nice goblin women is that they all look exactly the same. I can hardly tell my wives apart. I just felt like a bit of a change, that's all."



He turned to stare at Hobb in disgust.

"You wretched top dweller!" he concluded.

'Top dweller' was the rude name given to those goblins who had taken to living on the surface. They were cordially disliked and distrusted by the 'true' goblins who lived underground, in spite of the fact that they brought a great deal of food and other supplies into the hill. Roast rat had usually been the highlight of the week in the old days. Nobody could accuse Hobb of being very bright, but the beginnings of an idea was stirring in his head, whereby he might be able to put things right with the King.

"Sire," he said, "what about the other witch? She looks nothing like a goblin. She has hair of a most unusual red colour and green eyes."

The King stared at Hobb as though he could hardly believe his ears.

"There is nobody like that in the hill," he said firmly, shaking his head and pulling faces at the goblin. But it was no good, Hobb blundered on.

"Oh yes there is, Sire, I have seen her myself."

"Shut up ... you ... you ..." King Orky seemed to have run out of epithets. He raised his sceptre and hit Hobb very hard on the side of the head. The goblin sank to the ground with a grunt. The King jumped off his throne and hurried over to the door and threw it open.

"I suppose you picked up all that?" he demanded of the guard, a young goblin named Kobold, who nodded sheepishly.

"Then my wives will certainly have got it. Oh, confound everything!"

He hurried down the passage, muttering furiously to himself and threw open the door of the cell where he had hidden Tabitha; he was too late - the cell was empty! He darted back into the passage and was just in time to catch a glimpse of a draggletailed skirt disappearing round the corner.

"Somebody is going to pay for this!" shouted the King.

He walked slowly back to the throne room and kicked Hobb, who was just creeping away on all fours.

"Wait a minute, dung beetle. I have a job for you. I don't believe even YOU can get this wrong!" said the King spitefully, and he proceeded to tell Hobb his plan.

A long way below the throne room the twins sat huddled in the tiny black space at the bottom of the mine shaft. Erebus had stopped howling and was squeezed between the children, allowing them to stroke and cuddle him in a way he would normally have scorned. Even Griswold lay as close as he could, but with his injured wing spread out. He was hissing and honking sadly to himself. Susan found the last of the beef sandwiches lying on the floor in a fairly undamaged state. They ate these up, taking the beef out of one for Erebus and offering the bread to Griswold. He swallowed some, but found it very dry. The dwarf wine, which everyone could have done with, was all gone, lost in the fall.

After a while, Erebus wriggled free of the children and started pacing round the floor, sniffing everywhere. He suddenly stopped and started scratching furiously at the earth. The children came over and felt the ground carefully. There seemed to be the edge of a stone slab embedded in the soil. Robert got out his little dagger, which was still tucked safely in his belt, and started to dig round the edge. Susan found her dagger and joined him. After some effort they managed to lever up one side of the stone. It was about the size of a patio paving slab, heavy but not too heavy for two desperate children. When it was finally pulled away, they saw that it had covered yet another shaft, but this one had carved stone steps leading downwards.

The descent looked fairly easy for Erebus and the children, but Griswold was a different matter. There was no way he could get down the steps with his wing spread out. He seemed to understand the problem and allowed the children to fold his wing back into its' normal position. They were very gentle, but it obviously gave him a lot of pain. However, they did eventually get it folded back, and Robert assured Susan that this meant it could not be broken. He only hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

In the end, Erebus went first as usual and miaowed from the bottom that it was safe. Robert went next and Griswold followed, leaning on Robert's shoulders and allowing the boy to take most of his weight. Susan came last and finally they all stood on a wide, muddy bank beside a swiftly flowing river.

The children had completely lost all idea of time. They suddenly felt very tired. It seemed days since they had slept. By mutual consent they walked along the bank until they were well away from the steps. Susan wished she had thought of pulling the paving slab back into place, but she certainly wasn't going back now. If any goblins came looking for them they would see at once where they had gone. As they walked, the bank got wider and sandier. It looked quite dry and comfortable. They made themselves as inconspicuous as possible behind a big rock, curled up with the familiars and almost at once fell fast asleep.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 9

In the tomb room a great deal of activity was going on. Half the king's wives were preparing the stone table for a second sleeper. It was really only designed for one, but both the witches were slim. Daphne was carefully moved to one side and great mounds of Goblin poppies were piled up beside her for Tabitha to lie on. The rest of the wives were preparing Tabitha for her long sleep. Unfortunately there was only one white embroidered gown and Daphne was already wearing it. Tabitha would not be quite so beautifully dressed in a rather grubby off-white nightdress with a torn hem, produced by the tallest wife, whose name was Tizzie Bogle. They made up for this by putting extra piles of flowers all round her and threading some into her auburn hair which they plaited carefully and tied with white ribbons. Both the witches were deeply asleep. When at last the wives had everything arranged to their satisfaction, they started to dance round the table, a quaint flat footed dance, beating out the rhythm of the spell. As they danced they sang; a monotonous song in time with the slapping of their bare feet on the floor:

"Sleep, sleep for a hundred years  
No laughs, no fears,  
No work, no tears,  
The years roll by  
You peaceful lie  
No youth, no age  
No fun, no rage  
Invisible enchanted cage.  
No hearth, no home  
Silent hours on drifts of flowers  
No chill, no warm,  
No dark, no light  
No day, no night....."

On and on the song continued. Every now and then one of the wives would fall down asleep, only to be pinched by the others till she woke again to continue the spell. An hour later they were still dancing and singing the interminable song.

Back in the bright caverns of the dwarves, a terrible despair gripped the people. The Queen Fair Pearl had suddenly come running out of her quarters, her hair uncombed and her eyes wild.

"My baby, my baby!" she screamed. "They have taken my baby!"

To begin with, King Stand Fast was not too concerned. He knew ladies were sometimes taken very peculiar at the time of child birth.

"But what is that you are holding, my love?" he said soothingly, pointing to the wriggling bundle in the queen's arms.

She laid the baby down and with a shriek of despair, pulled back the royal rabbit-skin wrap. The child was very dark and very tiny. It had skinny little arms and legs which furiously beat the air. On its' head was a thatch of spiky black hair and its' eyes were not blue like all proper babies, but a sooty black that gave no reflection. Its' ears were pointed and when its' opened its mouth to scream they saw, to their horror, that it had a complete set of little teeth as sharp as needles. Worst of all, the infant had a tiny, scaly, forked tail!

A great cry went up from all the dwarves: "A changeling! The goblins have stolen Prince Good Heart and left us a horrid changeling!"

The King stood up. He was very white.

"This means war!" he said.

Deep in the ground Robert and Susan slept, snuggled up with the familiars. Suddenly, where the river emerged from a cave, there appeared a small man expertly steering an old-fashioned coracle. He was a little pot-bellied, bow-legged man almost completely bald, but his face was the face of an innocent child, almost a baby. He skilfully manoeuvred his small craft - really more like a large basket covered with skin than a modern boat - with a short broad paddle. The little man saw the lines of foot prints in the sand and a frown appeared on his round face. He brought his craft to the shore and, jumping out, he pulled it up onto the beach. He followed the tracks round behind the rock and stood staring at the little group of sleepers. He crept quietly up to Griswold and tweaked a grey feather out of his tail. The gander gave a honk in his sleep and the little man covered his mouth to suppress a giggle. He then climbed up onto the rock and, lying flat on his stomach, he leant over and tickled first Robert's nose then Susan's with the feather. Their noses started to twitch. Robert brushed the feather away with the back of his hand and Susan sneezed. It took a long time for them to wake up as they were deeply asleep and very weary. However, at last, they opened their eyes and sat up. The little man was no longer able to contain his mirth and, laughing loudly, he rolled off the rock and onto the sand. Erebus woke up and spat at him.

"Who are you?" asked Robert. He felt quite calm - there didn't seem to be any reason to be afraid.

"I am Puck, of course!" answered the little man, rather crossly. "I should have thought anyone would know that, you ignorant brat!" The children stared at him in surprise.

"Where did you come from?" asked Susan.

"Aha! Who knows where I comes from or where I goes?" answered Puck, tapping the side of his nose and looking mysterious. "Come on, hurry up: It's getting late and time won't wait."

"Where are we going?" asked Susan.

"There isn't time to explain. You'll see, follow me!"

The strange little fellow headed back towards his coracle. It looked very small and not at all stable. The children exchanged doubtful looks. Erebus gently pushed Griswold with his head. The gander gave a sad honk, but did not try to get up.

"Why does the goose lie so still? Is he ill?" demanded Puck, coming back to them.

Suddenly without any warning, he started jumping up and down and seemed in an agony of impatience.

"He is hurt," explained Robert. "He crashed into the wall when we fell down a shaft."

"Leave him to stay, we must away." Puck headed back towards the coracle.

The children were horrified.

"We are most certainly not going to leave him," said Susan firmly. "If HE can't come then we are all staying here!"

"The future of the whole hill is at risk," shouted Puck furiously. "We are all in terrible danger - it is absurd, he's only a bird."

The little man shook his fists in the air and became terribly red in the face. Robert and Susan started laughing at him. This seemed to send him into an absolute frenzy. He stamped and screamed, his baby face contorted with fury. The twins were quite afraid that he was going to have a fit or a heart attack. All the time Puck was watching them out of the corner of a large blue eye. He seemed to realise that his performance was having no effect on the children. He suddenly stopped, grinned and said:

"All right, he can come. You'll have to carry him if he cannot swim."

After some discussion, Robert took off his sweater and they gently lifted the injured Griswold onto it. He was extremely heavy and seemed to be in considerable pain. When he was settled on the sweater, Robert, Susan and Puck each gripped a piece of it and lifted him up and carefully over to the coracle. Robert got in first and the others manoeuvred the large bundle onto his knee. Susan and Puck got in next. The tiny craft rocked perilously and nearly tipped them all out again. But Puck wielded his paddle skilfully and steadied them up. Erebus sat on the bank and mewed pathetically. He felt exactly the same about water as the goblins. It was probably the only thing they had in common.

"Get in, get in, or you'll have to swim!" shouted Puck and Susan held out her arms to the frightened cat. He closed his eyes and leaped onto her knee, causing the coracle to lurch violently again. Puck pushed off with his paddle guiding them out into deep water.

"If you can sit still, we won't have a spill," he muttered, and off they went.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 10

King Orky sat on his throne and glared at his chief wife. She was the oldest and fattest of his wives and her name was Millie Boot. She was bundled up in a full-length dress that had once hid a pattern but was now faded to a uniform grey. Her sooty black eyes were almost buried in rolls of fat.

"What's all this about a changeling?" she demanded.

"I can't see it's any of your business," growled the King, "but if you must know, I got Hobb to steal that precious baby the dwarves were making such a fuss of."

"Well, why did you do that?" asked Millie Boot. "Not that it's any of my business, me being just a silly woman and everything."

"Well, it's traditional, isn't it?" demanded the King, waving his sceptre about in a lordly manner. "It is what goblins do, swap peoples' babies for changelings. I like to keep those old traditions going."

Millie Boot stared sourly at her husband.

"You do remember that the last dwarf wars lasted for a thousand years, I suppose?" she inquired. "I expect you remember that nobody won? The wars just stopped in the end because everyone on both sides was too exhausted to fight any longer. And anyway everyone had forgotten what they were fighting about. Not that it's any of my business, of course, me just being a stupid woman and all that."

The King scowled at her, but just at the moment could not think of a pithy reply.

"Of course," continued his wife slyly. "It couldn't have anything to do with you being in a foul temper, because you wasn't allowed to start a new goblin tradition, like goblins marrying witches for instance?"

Millie Boot rose and left the throne room with dignity. Some minutes later the King thought of several really snappy replies!

In King Stand Fast's throne room, worrying thoughts had also been occurring to the gloomy collection of dwarves gathered there.

"The trouble is that if we do anything rash they might hurt the prince," complained Thunder Brow bitterly. The dwarves all nodded.

"But we must do something, and quickly," said the King. "The Queen is in a dreadful state."

They all nodded again, looking at each other with worried eyes.

"We must send an ambassador," continued the King. "Tell the wretched goblins that it is all out war, unless they return the prince. We will drive them all down and into the river - drown the lot of them, clean out the hill for good." There was a fairly long pause, but the dwarves were a courageous race, and soon there were several offers to be ambassador. In the end, the King chose Thigh Thumper, one of his oldest and trustiest friends, to go and confront the goblin King in his lair.

The changeling baby seemed to scream continuously, a high-pitched ear-splitting scream. Thigh Thumper went to the room where a patient nurse was trying, without any success at all, to quiet the infant. She wrapped it in a warm fur, having removed the royal rabbit skin and folded it away to await its' true owner. Thigh Thumper collected the screaming, wriggling baby. He put it gently in a large carrier bag on top of his beef sandwiches, and bravely set out for the goblin regions, pausing only to stuff a bottle of dwarf wine into his deep pocket and to pick up a glowing torch to light the way.

The little coracle bounced along with the river. They seemed to be going downhill now and the river ran faster, throwing up white spray on either side. The children clung nervously to the familiars on their knees. Griswold was either unconscious or asleep and lay like a dead weight on Robert, who gradually lost all feeling in his legs. Erebus crept right inside Susan's sweater where he lay shivering and digging his claws painfully into her body. Altogether it was not a comfortable journey. They were all relieved when, after what felt like hours, Puck suddenly stood up and swung his paddle across the bow, turning them neatly onto a little beach rather like the one they had slept on. They all stumbled out of the coracle. Robert's legs gave out and he sat down hard on the sand, with Griswold on top of him. Erebus leaped about in a rather kittenish way and then settled down for a really good wash. Puck tied his little boat up to a handy stump and called for them all to follow him. Griswold lay on the sand, still wrapped in Robert's sweater. They were quite relieved when he opened one beady black eye and gave a feeble honk. Puck was entering a cave close by, and the children followed him. Inside was a small table with a red and white checked cloth and a chair. Someone had painted a window, complete with blue flowered curtains, on the cave wall, and on the other side a bookcase filled with books. The twins thought this rather funny but knew by now that Puck did not like to be laughed at. In the middle was a circular hearth. This, at least, was real and Puck immediately set about making a fire, collecting a bundle of dry sticks and shavings from a pile by the entrance and lighting them with an old-fashioned tinder box. A flue in the middle of the ceiling took the smoke away out of sight.

"Is this your home?" asked Susan politely.

"Not in particular," said Puck rather vaguely. "I stop here sometimes, mornings and bedtimes. I'm too worried to make rhymes."

"We don't mind if it doesn't rhyme," said Robert. "What are you so worried about?"

Puck went to the back of the cave and pulled out a piece of paper from under a large pebble. He held it out to the children.

"I am ashamed indeed, I never learnt to read," he said, apparently unable to stop rhyming even when he wanted to.

The children stared at the paper. It had been in the river and was completely illegible.

"We can't read this, either," said Susan sadly. "The water has made all the words run together. It says Notification of something or other and there is a date here and something about Shellford Down."

To their consternation Puck sat down on his chair and burst into tears.

"Oh dear, oh dear," he wept, rocking to and fro' and holding his head in his hands. "It is a dreadful spell of some sort. It smells of evil and danger and death and I don't know what to do about it. Something awful is going to happen! I dreamed of terrors while I slept. I woke, I held my head and wept."

The twins stared at the little man. He seemed dreadfully distressed.

"Why do you think it is evil?" asked Robert in a puzzled voice. "It just looks like an ordinary piece of paper - it might be anything."

Puck jumped up and down in a frenzy of excitement and distress.

"Can't you smell it? Evil and bad, awful paper, wicked and sad, grief and sorrow. I fear for tomorrow."

Suddenly he stopped weeping and stared at them. His blue eyes even wider and rounder than usual.

"Do you suppose the time has come to ...? Oh no surely not!"

"Time to do what?" asked Susan.

"Time to ..." Puck looked round as though fearful of being overheard. He dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Time to . . . . . wake the Dreamers?"

"What dreamers?" asked Robert, also in a whisper.

"Come and see," whispered Puck. "Leave the animals, come with me."

He went to the back of the cave and started to push a large boulder to one side. The twins came to help, and between them they rolled it away from the entrance to yet another tunnel. They turned round to see Erebus and Griswold watching them intently but they made no attempt to follow them. Rather nervously the children went after Puck. In just a few metres the passage opened out into a fairly large room. It had no furniture at all, but was well lit by two large candles, stuck in the sand. On the floor lay two identical golden suits of armour, very long and thin.

"I'm a sort of unofficial guard. It isn't hard," whispered Puck.

"Is there anyone in there?" whispered Susan.

The suits of armour lay so still and yet there was a slight movement of the breast plates indicating someone might be breathing inside. Puck very gently lifted the visor on one of the figures and the children saw that the armour was indeed occupied. The face of the Dreamer was pale and tranquil. The eyes shut and a ghost of a smile played on the lips.

"Who are they?" asked Robert.

"The last of the elves," explained Puck. "They will not waken till, some truly dreadful ill, comes to my magic hill. Then the elves will rouse themselves."



Puck took the piece of paper and gently opening the golden fingers of one of the gauntlets, he slipped it between them and waited.

## Chapter 11

For a long time the little group waited, hardly daring to breathe. At last the golden fingers seemed to tighten on the paper and the Dreamer opened his eyes. His eyes were very dark green like woodland leaves. Very slowly he sat up, yawned and looked around him. He spoke in a strange language.

"I have forgot the Elvish tongue," said Puck dropping to his knees. "I spoke it when the Hill was young."

"You speak the language of men," said the Elf. "That is bad, men cause grief."

The other figure was beginning to stir. He raised a golden hand and pushed up his visor. His face was very like his brother's, long and pale with dark green almond-shaped eyes. He also slowly sat up and looked around him.

"Ambrose," he said. "Why have we woken? Is the hill in danger?"

"I do not yet understand, Florian," replied the other. "Perhaps these visitors can explain?"

Puck pointed wordlessly to the paper Ambrose was still holding. He looked at it.

"Yes, I see," he said. "This is certainly a serious evil, you did right to wake us."

Puck breathed a sigh of relief and grinned at the children, he obviously felt a lot better and was glad to hand over the awesome responsibility - whatever it was.

"What does the paper say?" asked Florian.

The children and Puck all shook their heads.

"We don't know," said Puck. "It has been in the river. It landed on the beach, within my reach. I smelt the evil even from my bed. I felt the terrors in my head. I don't know what the paper said."

"Who would know what it means?" asked Ambrose.

"I think Tabitha Marigold might know," suggested Susan. "She knows a lot of things."

Slowly, their limbs stiff from their long sleep, the Dreamers stood up.

"Take us to this lady," said Florian.

"Unfortunately we don't know where she is," said Robert sadly. "The goblins have got her somewhere."

"Then take us to the goblins," said Ambrose.

Without a word they led the elves back to Puck's cave where the familiars were patiently waiting. When he saw the elves, Erebus lay right down and put his head on his paws as if he was bowing. Griswold tried to stand up.

"The wise bird is ill," said Florian. "Perhaps I can help him."

He knelt with a clank of armour and took the gauntlet off his right hand. He stretched out long, strong fingers and touched the gander on his injured wing. Something like liquid green flame seemed to flow from his fingers, covering the wing, and finally the whole bird in a green glow. As it gradually faded, Griswold stood up and shook himself. He spread his great wings and honked loudly. Then he lowered his head to the ground before the elves. He was obviously bowing too, in his way.

"I am glad," said Florian, who seemed to understand him. "Peace be with you, Grey One."

Puck, who seemed to be completely over his nervousness, was jumping about with excitement.

"The quickest way to the goblin lair is over there," he announced, running along the river bank. Robert's heart sank. It was not so much the thought of facing the goblins, but the many miles of steps and passages they had come down, not to mention their precipitate slide down the mine shaft. They must have travelled a great distance through the earth.

"We had better start then," he said. "It is a long way."

"Not so far, you silly feller, ignorant top-dweller!" said Puck rudely, and, completely forgetting his manners, he stuck his tongue out at him and burst out laughing. Before anyone could reply he ran off along the beach and into another cave. Inside a strange sight met their eyes. A large cage stood in the middle of the cave with a great wheel beside it and heavy chains running up into a black shaft above their heads.

"It's the old miners' lift - if you want to shift," said Puck, hugging himself with delight. "It will take you all the way to the top if you don't want to stop. It comes out near the Dwarf Queen's room, where she sits and weaves her loom."

In fact Queen Fair Pearl never did any weaving, but it was the best rhyme Puck could think of!

"Count the floors!" continued Puck. "The goblin King lives on the seventh level. If you want to stop or start again, hang with all your might and main. The noises echo down the chain. You go aloft and save the Hill. I'll turn the wheel and wait here still. The Dreamers are awake and free. All will be well - you won't need me."

He gave a little bow towards the elves and looked mightily relieved.

"You have done well, Puck," said Ambrose. "We accept your offer - many thanks."

They crowded into the cage and Florian slammed the door shut. Puck started turning the wheel which seemed to be well oiled and in good order. The twins wondered who else used it. In fact, Hobb often made use of the lift for various nefarious reasons of his own. Most recently for stealing the dwarf prince and leaving the goblin changeling in his place.

"Good luck, from Puck," shouted the little man, as, with much clanging and grinding of gears, they started to ascend. They were in perfect darkness after a few moments and the children got their torches out. They shone with a weak glow, the batteries being nearly worn out. The elves were fascinated. They had never seen anything like

them and. thought they must be a new sort of magic. Counting the levels was not so easy as it sounded. There was just a little lightening of the darkness and a slight change in the clanking of the mechanism. At about the fifth level, Erebus suddenly leapt up and gave a great cry and Griswold started honking loudly. The elves both stamped furiously on the floor, so that the cage lurched in a most uncomfortable manner and then stopped.

"What is it?" cried Susan, clutching at Robert. "What has happened?"

"I am sorry if we frightened you," said Florian. "The creatures say their Dear Ones are nearby."

He pushed the gate open. They had overshot the floor by about a metre, but quite easily scrambled down onto the floor. Erebus and Griswold did not wait for them but tore off down the passage, until brought up short by a large oaken door with many locks and bars. When the elves arrived a few moments later, both held their hands out in front of them and something like liquid purple fire seemed to flow from their fingers into the door.

"Green for healing, purple for power," said Ambrose. The door seemed to shiver and then it turned into sawdust. It hung for a moment keeping its shape and then simply sank into a heap with a gentle sigh. The hinges, locks and bars dropped into the sawdust with a soft plop. They all walked over it into the tomb room.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 12

By the time Thigh Thumper had arrived at King Orky's throne room, that monarch was feeling a lot less war-like. He had had time to cool down and consider. He received the dwarves' ambassador quite politely. Thigh Thumper, although maintaining a fierce expression was considerably relieved as he had half expected to be thrown into a deep dungeon and never heard of again. He placed the carrier bag, containing the goblin baby, and what remained of his beef sandwiches, carefully on the ground by his chair. Oddly enough the infant had stopped screaming immediately on entering the goblin regions, and now appeared to be asleep. Thigh Thumper left the top of the bag open in a pointed sort of way, but King Orky stubbornly refused to look in that direction.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Ambassador?" asked the King politely.

Thigh Thumper pushed the carrier bag a little closer to the goblin.

"Well, Your Majesty," he said, staring at the bag. "King Stand Fast of the Dwarves is very concerned for the health of his young son, the crown prince."

"You don't say!" responded the goblin King, "I thought the dwarf King was only blessed with daughters."

Thigh Thumper wondered what to do next. It seemed that Orky was determined not to lose face.

"Perhaps you would care to join me in a glass of wine," continued the King. "Kobold, would you be so kind as to get refreshments for our visitor?"

Thigh Thumper was not terribly fond of goblin wine, but decided it would be diplomatic to drink some and eat some of the fairy cakes which Kobold then brought them. The two gentlemen drank a glass while both wondered what to do next. It seemed to be a complete impasse. The dwarf could hardly call the King a liar to his face; so they compromised by drinking some more wine. Goblin wine, although nothing like as good as dwarf wine, is always well laced with poppy juice and therefore inclined to send the drinker to sleep. Before long both his majesty and the ambassador were fast asleep in their chairs.

Millie Boot, together with some of the other wives, had been watching all this from behind a curtain. When both the drinkers were thoroughly asleep, the women came out into the room. With them was a miserable skinny little goblin girl called Agony Bogget. She was whimpering to herself and her dirty face was streaked with tears.

"For Pan's sake stop sniveling!" said Millie Boot, giving her a good pinch. "Go and get your baby, you silly girl."

Agony Bogget ran forward and grabbed the goblin baby from Thigh Thumper's carrier bag. Crooning goblin endearments to it, she scuttled off at a great speed, as though she feared she might lose it again at any minute.

One of the wives, in fact tall Tizzy Bogel, who had supplied the nightdress for Tabitha, now came forward with another bundle in her arms. Gently, she laid the baby prince in Thigh Thumper's carrier bag. As quietly as leaves in the wind, the wives departed.

After a while the King and Thigh Thumper woke up. The after effects of goblin wine are not as beneficial as the dwarf vintage. Both gentlemen felt decidedly the worse for wear; but Thigh Thumper was not so affected that he did not immediately notice the change of babies. He saw the round pink face of prince Good Heart with blessed relief. The prince was sound asleep. Goblin mothers always spike their children's milk with poppy juice, so they have no trouble sleeping. The ambassador considered it best all round, to make no comment. He picked up the carrier bag and bowed politely to the King.

"I will bid your Majesty farewell," he said. "Thank you for your most gracious hospitality."

"Not at all, not at all," mumbled the King sleepily. "Do drop in anytime you're passing."

He closed his eyes and started to snore. Thigh Thumper crept quietly out of the throne room and headed for home.

Great was the rejoicing in the dwarf kingdom of Blood Axe when the ambassador returned with the prince. The Queen wept and clutched her baby, refusing to put him down even for a minute. The King, very red in the face, shook his friend's hand 'till it looked as if he would shake it off. He then ordered a really splendid feast in Thigh Thumper's honour and this went on well into the following morning.

The twins and the elves followed the familiars into the tomb-room. The door through which they had come was not the main door, which was opposite to them. They came in behind the table where the witches slept their enchanted sleep. Erebus leapt onto Tabitha and began to lick her face with his rough tongue while kneading her furiously with his claws. This would normally have caused her to wake up with a cry of pain, but the witch never moved a muscle. If she had not been breathing they might have thought her dead. Griswold jumped up beside Daphne honking and hissing and flapping his wings. At last in desperation he pecked her arm really hard. It was no good. The children looked at the elves, standing quietly in their golden armour.

"How shall we wake them?" they asked.

The elves took off their golden helmets and laid them on the floor. Their hair was nearly the same colour and fell very straight framing their long pale faces. They looked at each other and smiled.

"The traditional way, of course," said Florian, and Ambrose laughed.

"Of course," he said.

Florian went over to Daphne and Ambrose went to Tabitha. They leant over and kissed them. Immediately both witches opened their eyes and sat up.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" said Tabitha. "What on earth am I wearing?"

She looked down in horror at Tizzie Bogle's nightdress, which reached scarcely to her knees and smelt strongly of Tizzie Bogle!

Fortunately the goblins, being very lazy by nature, had not bothered to remove the witches' other clothes, simply putting their sleeping robes on top. Tabitha hastily struggled out of the offending garment and threw it in a corner.

Daphne stared round in amazement.

"What's happening? Where am I?" she gasped. Then she saw the twins.

"Susan and Robert!" she exclaimed. "Where on earth did you come from?"

There was so much to explain. They took a few minutes to start to sort everything out. Before they were nearly finished however, Ambrose spoke.

"I think proper explanations will have to wait," he said solemnly. "There is something seriously wrong and we thought you might be able to help."

He produced the mysterious paper and showed it to the witches.

"I have seen something like this before," said Tabitha in puzzled tones. "I just can't think what it is."

"Yes, it reminds me of something," said Daphne. "I think I saw one of these quite recently. Where on earth was it?"

"I know what it is!" said Tabitha suddenly. "It is the Notification of a Public Enquiry. There was a copy on the wall in the town hall. It is to do with the new motorway through Shellford Down. You know, the one everybody is protesting about. But why is it giving off such bad vibrations? What has it to do with us?"

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 13

Daphne looked round and saw that both children were fast asleep.

"We must get out of here quickly," she said. "It wouldn't do if we all fell asleep."

The witches put on their cloaks and pointy hats, which were piled neatly by the door. Daphne decided to keep the rather lovely embroidered gown.

"After al, they gave it to me," she said. "I can soon wash out the smell – I hope."

They picked the children up and the elves led the way back to the lift.

"Now, that was the fifth level and we want the seventh," said Ambrose. "Everyone bang on the floor."

The banging must have reverberated down the chains, but nothing happened. They tried again, jumping up and down as hard as they could. The lift stubbornly refused to budge.

"It's Puck," said Ambrose. "He is really hopeless; he can't stick to anything for more than a few minutes. I expect he saw something or thought of some rhyme and simply wandered off."

"Perhaps he has just gone to sleep," said Florian. "Let us wake the children and all try again."

The children were already waking up, although still feeling heavy and doozy from the scent of the goblin poppies. Nonetheless, they pulled themselves together and joined the others in stamping and banging on the floor of the lift with all their might. At last, to their great relief, they heard the grinding of machinery. The cage shuddered and then started moving upwards. At the seventh level they stopped it again. This time with no trouble, and they stepped out into a goblin tunnel. The smell was quite unmistakable. Almost at once they were confronted with a terrible face that filled the tunnel; some sort of ravening beast with great teeth and slavering jaws.

"Out of the way, phantasmagoria!" said Florian. "We have no time for such childish games now."

The illusion wavered and disappeared.

Shortly after this they met a small goblin hurrying along towards them on some private matter. When he saw them he turned and tried to run away, but Ambrose stretched out a long golden arm and held him firmly by the shoulder.

"Do not be afraid. We come on urgent business," he said. "Take us to your King."

The small goblin was so terrified that for a while all he could do was lie in a little ball on the floor, pleading for mercy.

"Susan," said Tabitha, "you are the smallest and least frightening of us. Do try to get the silly little thing to pull himself together."



Susan knelt down and patted the goblin gently.

"It's alright, we are not going to eat you - just take us to the King."

The goblin suddenly leapt to his feet and scampered off down the passage at a great rate. Luckily he had decided to head for the royal apartments. He banged on the door, gave the party a terrified grin, and then fled again. Kobold opened the door. When he saw the visitors he went very white and seemed rooted to the spot. Ambrose gently pushed him to one side and they entered the throne room. The King was still asleep, having recently said good-bye to Thigh Thumper.

Millie Boot was sitting on a stool quietly knitting a rather off-white vest for Agony Bogget's baby. She looked with great surprise and disfavour at Tabitha and Daphne, and seemed about to pass some remark, when she saw the elves. A look of great terror appeared on her face and she managed to sink to her knees and, at the same time, kick the King sharply on the shin. He awoke and opened his mouth to shout. Then he also saw the elves and joined his wife on his knees.

"Please rise, we come in peace," said Ambrose, but the royal pair seemed to be rooted to the spot. King Orky tried several times to speak and at last he managed:

"I have seen your portraits in the ancient book. Surely you must be - the Dreamers?"

"We have been so called," said Florian. "Do please get up, we shall do you no harm." He stretched out his hand and, grasping the King's hand, he pulled him to his feet. Ambrose did the same for Millie Boot.

"We thought you were a legend," she gasped. "If you'll excuse the liberty, Sirs."

"No indeed, we are real enough," said Ambrose. "We have been awoken because the hill is in great danger."

"Yes, yes that's it," muttered Orky. "That's what it said in the book. Oh, by Pan's hooves, what a miracle, what a day, what a thing to tell my fifty seven grandchildren!"

"Shut up, dear," said Millie Boot quietly. "Ask them to sit down, do."

When at last everyone was seated and had declined the offer of goblin wine, the problem of the mysterious Notification of a Public Enquiry was discussed.

"We must contact the dwarves at once," said Ambrose. "They should join in our discussion. They may understand more about this Public Enquiry."

"Oh, certainly," said Orky. "Their ambassador was here only this morning. He dropped in for a drink and a chat."

"I am pleased to hear it," said Florian, in some surprise. "You are more friendly with the Dwarves these days then; no more wars or anything?"

"Wars?" replied the King, opening his black eyes wide in amazement. "Oh, good gracious, no - we are the best of friends."

Turning to the guard who had entered with the visitors, he continued: "Kobold, my good man, just nip up to the dwarf kingdom, will you, and ask the King to come down

here and meet the Dreamers, who have woken up and require his attendance on a matter of great importance?"

Kobold rather spoilt the effect of this impressive speech by turning as white as a sheet and dropping to his knees.

"Oh, Sire, don't send me up there!" he begged. "They'll eat me for breakfast."

"Do not fear!" said Florian. "You shall attend your King, as is only proper. But he will come with us to speak to the dwarves. This matter is much too important for sending messengers."

The King went very pale, turning from his natural grubby olive colour to a sickly yellow.

"Me? Come too?" he squeaked.

"Certainly! You are such good friends after all," replied Ambrose, with a faint elvish smile. "Let us go at once."

The King stumbled to his feet and followed the elves. As he passed Millie Boot he muttered:

"Where is the dwarf prince, for Pan's sake?"

"The prince is back with his mother, and no thanks to you," replied his wife. "And I wish you'd stop swearing, it don't help at all."

She stumped after her husband with the intention of keeping him out of trouble if she could.

When Kobold knocked nervously on the door in the dwarf King's apartments it was opened by Thunder Brow. He stared in absolute fury at the goblins. He then saw the witches with the children and familiars and his look changed to one of bewilderment. Finally he saw the Dreamers standing quietly at the back and his expression changed to one of awe, and he dropped to his knees.

Kobold was much too tongue-tied to deliver his message, and Ambrose stretched out his hand and raised Thunder Brow to his feet.

"We must see the King at once, good dwarf," said Florian. "Please take us to him."

By the time they had all arrived in the throne room, King Orky had pulled himself together sufficiently to put a brave face on the situation.

"Greetings, Brother Monarch," he said to the astounded Stand Fast. "May I present the Venerable Dreamers who wish to have words with you on a matter of grave import."

The sight of the dwarf King on his knees, his face white, his eyes popping and his mouth wide open, probably made this the happiest day in Orky's long life. Queen Fair Pearl recovered first. She handed the prince to her eldest daughter, the Princess Sugar Plum, with a muttered instruction to take him away and guard him with her life. She then begged the company to be seated and sent for wine and refreshments. The dreadful paper was shown round once again. All felt the presence of evil but nobody could explain what the horrid thing meant.

Tabitha Marigold took charge of the situation.

"I know this is a human thing," she said. "The solution lies outside the hill. We will go home and try to find out what it is about and meet you all back here as soon as we can."

The dwarves escorted them to the nearest door out of the hill. A perfectly normal door on the inside, when they were outside and it was closed, it disappeared completely among the cracks and crevices of the red rock. Once outside, Tabitha marked the door with a 'finding spell'. She put a line of green light round the door which would only appear at the sound of a magic phrase "Quo in loco ianuae est?"

"It will make it easier to get back in," she said. "Quicker than finding our way through the oak tree."

King Stand Fast and Queen Fair Pearl took Ambrose and Florian to the best guest rooms and asked if there was anything they needed, but there was not. They were accustomed to sleeping on the ground in their full armour and they did not eat mortal food. They drank a little pure water and pronounced themselves well satisfied.

-----oO-----

## Chapter 14

When the adventurers emerged from the hill they were amazed at the brilliance of the day. All the humans covered their eyes and Robert said he wished he had some sun glasses.

"Your eyes have become accustomed to the half light in the hill," said Tabitha. "You will soon get used to the sunlight."

They walked down the hill till they reached the sacred oak. It seemed a lifetime since they had stood there at the beginning of their adventure. Tabitha reached up and pulled her broom stick out of its' hiding place. As she held it the green leaves that covered it began to turn to gold and crimson. They withered and blew off in the breeze.

"Instant Autumn - that's clever!" said Daphne.

The broomstick seemed to know what was expected of it and started to stretch itself out to accommodate the extra passengers.

"Will there be room for you, Daphne?" asked Susan.

Daphne smiled.

"I never use a broomstick!" she said. "You will see."

Tabitha mounted in front, with Erebus, purring happily, round her neck. Robert and Susan got on behind as they had before and with a whoosh they shot off over the hedges and up into the sky.

After a few moments the twins were aware of a dark shadow beside them and looked across to see Griswold, his great wings outstretched, flying alongside, the only sound the strange singing of the wind in his wings. Then they saw there was a second goose just behind him. But, whereas Griswold's eyes were beady black, the eyes of this goose were a gentle grey and her feathers were a bit tatty and could have done with a really good preen.

"Good heavens!" gasped Susan. "It's Daphne - our old Daffy Duck! Who would have believed it?"

"And we said she was dull," said Robert. "What a couple of idiots we were!"

"Ah well, if you've learnt that, I suppose your visit hasn't been entirely wasted," said Tabitha.

Susan felt like changing the subject.

"What will happen if someone looks up?" she asked. "I never knew you rode a broomstick in day light."

"Oh, they will think it is just a microlight or something," replied Tabitha. "People never see what they don't believe in."

It was early evening when they landed in the garden of Rose Cottage.

Tabitha said: "Erebus and I won't come in; we must get home and see that everything is alright. We will come back tomorrow morning and we must all decide what we are going to do."

The children did not see Daphne change back. She was just standing beside Griswold, looking as ordinary as can be. He waddled off to see his goslings, who had grown amazingly. They were past the fluffy endearing stage and were now rather tall and scruffy with bits of stubby brown feathers starting to grow. Griswold seemed delighted with them and his two fat wives.

Daphne and the children went indoors and made themselves scrambled egg. They were suddenly so weary they could hardly keep their eyes open.

"I can't think why I'm sleepy," said Daphne. "I have been asleep for about a fortnight!"

"I think that's always the way," said Susan. "You feel much more tired if you oversleep. Let's have an early night and decide everything tomorrow."

"Yes," said Daphne. "We will wash up in the morning."

Then she noticed the dishwasher and her mouth opened in amazement.

"Good gracious, where did that come from?" she asked.

"I think Tabitha installed it," replied Robert. "She found taking your class quite enough, without having to wash up when she got home!" Daphne laughed.

"Infants are rather an acquired taste," Daphne said, "I shall have to give back the dishwasher. Come on, let's all go to bed."

In spite of their excitement, they slept well and woke rather late the next morning, and came down to find Tabitha already sitting at the kitchen table while the kettle made her a cup of tea.

"As soon as you have all had breakfast we must go to the Town Hall in Westchester," she said, "and find out all about this Public Enquiry. I feel there is no time to lose."

Neither witch had a motor-car and so they, and the twins, queued for a bus, leaving Griswold and Erebus at home. When they got to the Town Hall in Westchester they discovered almost immediately what their problem was. There was a large model in the main hall showing the new motorway through Shellford Down and right through Pook's Hill. Apparently planning had been applied for, public meetings had been held, many complaints had been made about the damage to Shellford Down. Nobody seemed to have noticed that Pook's Hill was also in the way of the M402. There were no interesting butterflies, lizards or orchids on the hill. In fact, apart from a few patches of scrubby grass, it was almost completely bare rock. It was not held by anyone to be a site of outstanding natural beauty and none of the villagers from either East or West Pookshill had objected.

The witches were aghast. They could hardly believe that the plan could be so far advanced without anyone finding out about it. Of course the truth was that the inhabitants of East and West Pookshill were not ordinary villagers. They watched no television; they read no newspapers. Their interests were quite different.

While the witches and the children were staring at the model of the M402, the Town Clerk came bustling up to chat to them. He was a friendly chap and always glad to explain the model, of which he was very proud.

"This is the cause of all the trouble," said the Town Clerk, pointing at Shellford Down. "See for yourselves. The only other routes would be through the suburbs of Westchester or else you're into the River Shoma. But these protesters don't seem to understand. They are camping out now in the way of the bulldozers, making no end of a fuss!"

"What are they objecting to, exactly?" asked Robert.

"Oh, everything," groaned the Town Clerk. "There is some blue butterfly apparently, and a rare orchid or something, and a Saxon Fort - the whole things an absolute nightmare!"

"What about Pooks Hill?" asked Tabitha.

"What's that?" asked the Town Clerk. "Oh, you mean that huge lump of sandstone to the South. Oh, nobody has protested about that, thank heavens. As a matter of fact the local people don't like it. I think they quite want it removed."

Tabitha looked at him appalled.

"Want it removed?" she gasped. "But why?"

"Well, there are all sorts of funny superstitions about it," went on the Town Clerk. "People won't go there at night, that sort of thing. Of course it won't all be removed. We shall just cut the road right through the middle. I'll tell you a funny thing. Some years ago there was an attempt to survey that hill. There was some story of valuable minerals there - even gold."

"What happened?" asked Susan.

"Well, although it is such soft sandstone, they had trouble with the drills. They kept bending and breaking. Then the manager of the company started going peculiar. He woke up one morning convinced he was a fruit bat. I used to know his wife. She said it wasn't so bad having to live on fruit. It was him trying to hang upside down that really caused the trouble. He kept falling on his head, and that didn't help his mental condition."

"No," said Tabitha. "I don't suppose it would. What happened then?"

"Well, he had to give the whole thing up, and the survey sort of fizzled out," replied the Town Clerk. "Last time I heard of him he was making a lot of money writing poetry."

"You can't make a lot of money writing poetry," said Daphne firmly.

"Well, there you are then," said the Town Clerk, "that just goes to show. Anyway, the Shellford Down Enquiry has gone to appeal now. Lord Bangham is in charge. He is a retired high court judge, you know, a very peppery gentleman."

"Who else will be there?" asked Daphne.

"Well, Mrs Popplewell for one. She is representing the Ministry of the Environment. She is a really formidable lady. Sweeps all before her if you know what I mean."  
"Not really," said Tabitha.

"Well, she is very large and she doesn't suffer fools gladly. In fact she won't take any nonsense from anyone."

The Town Clerk mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. He had several times suffered the rough side of Mrs Popplewell's tongue and spoke from bitter experience.

"Then of course there is the Committee for the Preservation of Shellford Down. They will be there in force. Mrs Fanshaw-Sidcup is the leading light there. Her family used to own most of the County in the old days. They have come down in the world a bit, but I don't think she has noticed. Her estate will be cut in half by the motorway, so I suppose I can understand her being upset. But she's so bossy she puts people's backs up."

The Town Clerk suddenly felt that perhaps he had been chatting too freely, but there was something about the lady with the green eyes which seemed to loosen his tongue.

"I say," he said nervously. "You are not from the press are you?"

"Good gracious no!" said Tabitha, twinkling her green eyes at him. "Do go on."

The Town Clerk felt he had never had such an interested and fascinated audience. "Well," he continued, "there is Mr Binns from the planning department - he made the model - it's pretty good isn't it? Of course, this rock you were asking about - what do the locals call it, did you say?"

"Pook's Hill!" said Daphne.

"That's it, Pook's Hill, well, it won't be completely removed! High banks will be left on both sides to baffle the noise of the traffic."

"But why can't the motorway go round the hill?" asked Tabitha.

"Well they would have to go right round one of the villages, it would take them miles out of their way. The sandstone is quite soft. It shouldn't cause too much trouble."

"I wouldn't bank on it!" said Daphne.

"When is this meeting?" asked Tabitha. "Are the public allowed in?"

"Day after tomorrow, come early, it is bound to be packed. We shall get some fireworks, I shouldn't be surprised."

He bustled off to speak to some county councillors who had wandered in to look at the model. The witches and the children came down the broad steps into the sunshine.

"You see what's happened?" said Tabitha. "Everyone is so concerned about Shellford Down, nobody cares about Pook's Hill."

"Whatever shall we do?" demanded Daphne. "There must be some way we can stop them."

"Well," said Tabitha, "first of all we must return to the hill and explain to everyone exactly what is going on. Then we must make plans to save the hill. This meeting seems to be our last chance."

So the depressed little group set out once more for the hill. Even riding the broomstick did not seem quite as exciting. But Susan once again felt the furious surge of joy as she powered her way through the sky. When they landed on the hillside Tabitha said the finding words:

"Quo in loco ianuae est?"

The outline of green light immediately showed, marking out the dwarf door and she knocked. Thunder Brow answered and let them in. They were shown at once into a room where Stand Fast, Fair Pearl, Orky and Millie Boot were conferring with the elves.

It was not at all easy to explain about the motorway. The company stared at them in gradually increasing horror as Robert tried to tell them about the internal combustion engine and how people had to have more and more roads. Ambrose lifted a beautiful long hand.

"Didn't you just say this machine gives off gases that will poison the atmosphere and make people ill?" he asked in complete disbelief. "Then why do the top dwellers want them so badly?"

Robert broke off and looked at the witches for help.

Daphne said: "It is hard for you to understand. The people feel they must get from place to place."

Even as she said it she thought it sounded feeble.

"They must get to their work, you see, and then home again."

The hill dwellers just stared at them in total incomprehension.

"But surely the upper layers of the atmosphere will be affected?" said Florian. "Then what will happen?"

Tabitha intervened firmly.

"You must believe us! They will destroy the hill unless we stop them. The final meeting is the day after tomorrow in the court-house. We must all go and do what we can."

Ambrose shook his head.

"What a pretty pass humanity has come to while we slept," he said sadly. "Nevertheless, we shall be at the meeting. We will see you all there. May Pan help us."



-----oOo-----

## Chapter 15

The little company went quietly home. They passed a restless night. Everyone thinking of the model they had seen showing a motorway and no Pook's Hill.

"So there is nothing we can do till Friday," said Daphne the next morning. "Everything depends on the Enquiry."

"It is terribly late in the day," said Tabitha. "If only we had paid more attention to local affairs. The real trouble is that no protest has been made and now it is the final stage and it's almost too late to stop it."

"Oh, don't you worry," said Daphne fiercely. "We will stop it - we must!"

"Well, so we will," agreed Tabitha, "somehow or other. In the meantime, we have a whole day to wait, whatever shall we do?"

At that moment they looked out of the window to see Hobb leaning over the fence. They noticed he had a large bruise on the side of his face.

"I don't know if I want to live next to Hobb Obling any longer," said Daphne with a sigh. "I used not to mind, but somehow after all we've been through ....."

She looked at the pile of wet washing on the draining board.

"I've washed the goblin's white robe; it is really lovely and very old, I believe. But I don't like to put it on the line with him hanging about."

"I always wanted you to come and live in West Pookshill near me," said Tabitha. "It really is much nicer."

"Oh, I know," said Daphne, "but I do love this cottage."

"I tell you what," said Tabitha. "I've had a brilliant idea - you can move house!"

"But I've told you - I like this house!" said Daphne.

"That's what I mean," said Tabitha, clapping her hands "We'll move THIS house. There is plenty of space in the field next to my house. Plenty of room for this house and for Griswold and his family."

"Oh, do you think we could?" cried Daphne. "That really would be the answer. How do we begin?"

"Call Robert and Susan in from the garden - they can help."

Tabitha pulled a pile of books out of the cupboard and started to flick through the pages.

"We need a reducing spell," she announced.

Before long Robert and Susan were dashing about looking for the items needed in the reducing spell.

"I'm going to alter this a bit," said Daphne frowning. "I'm a vegetarian you know and I don't think there are any vegetarian spell books. Perhaps I might write one. Do you think tongue of shoe would do instead of tongue of dog?"

"We can but try," said Tabitha. "Children, take the herb book out and see if you can find the herbs I have marked - they have all got illustrations so it shouldn't be too hard."

"It says they must be collected at midnight," complained Susan.

"Oh, phooey, I never take any notice of that - how on earth could you see them at midnight?" replied Tabitha. "I think some of the old witches made it difficult on purpose to frighten people off."

By lunchtime they had all the items collected in a pile on the kitchen table.

"I don't know about eye of needle," said Tabitha, doubtfully.

"Well, I am certainly not going to hurt a poor little newt," replied her friend.

Tabitha shrugged.

"Ok, let's try it!" she said.

"Robert, my cauldron is in the coal shed," said Daphne, as both witches put on their cloaks and pointy hats.

"We had better light a fire in the field, because if the house does shrink we don't want to shrink with it."

They went outside and lit a campfire. Susan had just been to guide camp and she was really good at it.

"Now," said Tabitha, "half fill the cauldron with running water from the stream; then we all dance round it and drop in the items one by one, as the water boils — are you ready?"

Erebus and Griswold came over to help. Erebus contributed a shrew, but luckily Daphne was not looking.

"Anyway, I'm sure it was quite dead," said Robert in a whisper to Susan. Griswold flew round and round overhead and contributed a tail feather.

"It really should be from a wild goose," said Tabitha.

"Oh, he can be pretty wild sometimes, you should have seen him when Hobb ate his wife!" replied Daphne.

Susan found some pop music on the radio and left the kitchen window open. She said she felt silly dancing without any music. As they danced, the cauldron boiled and the mixture gradually turned black and sent up great bubbles that plopped and splashed.

"Looks good," said Tabitha.

Suddenly, there was a sort of creaking groan from the cottage. It seemed to shiver and shift as though shaken by an earthquake and then - yes - it was definitely shrinking!

Faster and faster they danced as the cauldron boiled. The mixture turned a sort of vile green, and then suddenly bright pink, throwing up silver stars that caught the sunlight.

"Oh, pretty!" said Susan.

The cottage groaned again. It was about the size of a bicycle shed.

"Faster!" said Tabitha. "We can't move it yet!"

The children fairly flew round the cauldron.

"This would be a riot at the disco," gasped Robert as he flashed by. The mixture was lying very still now and seemed to be full of rainbows. The cottage was about the size of a rabbit hutch. Suddenly the cauldron shot a great fountain of golden water high in the air, splashing all over everyone. They stopped, wet and exhausted. The cottage was the size of a shoebox.

"Done it!" cried Daphne.

Robert fetched a spade and carefully slipped it under the cottage. Carefully they placed it in a large cardboard box from the supermarket.

"Can we balance it on the broomstick?" asked Susan.

"Yes, I think so," said Tabitha.

She gently rubbed the broomstick and the clever thing flattened itself in the middle to make a little shelf.

"Robert, you sit behind and hold it steady and I'll steer," said Tabitha. "There really isn't room for you Susan. I'll come back for you as soon as I can. Off we go!"

Susan watched the broomstick depart with its usual whoosh, with Erebus doing his fur collar impression. She felt a bit flat, but there really wasn't room. Daphne and Griswold were looking at her in a funny sort of way.

"What do you think?" the witch asked the bird.

Griswold honked and ruffled his feathers.

"He says you are a sort of cousin. We could try!" said Daphne. "Now hold one of his feathers in each hand. Close your eyes and really feel you are a goose."

Susan clutched the two grey feathers and closed her eyes. She really imagined herself to be a goose. She could feel her long neck, her yellow bill, her round body, her fine big wings and funny webbed feet.

"Flap your wings - fly - fly!" came Daphne's voice from a long way off. Susan flapped and flapped and flapped and suddenly she was flying.

"Now don't panic, but open your eyes!" instructed the witch from somewhere beside her, and she did. There was the countryside, whirling round miles below her. She felt the wind under her great wings and a marvellous feeling of power, of contempt almost, for all poor creatures who couldn't fly. She opened her bill and let out a great honk.

"Steady on, dear," said Daphne. Griswold was honking too. "He says if he loses any more feathers he'll be quite bald," said Daphne.

"I know, I heard him," said Susan.

All too soon they saw the broomstick far below them, flying steadily. They flew down towards it in a triangular formation with Griswold in front, and levelled up alongside.

Tabitha looked across at the third goose.

"Well, well!" she laughed. "Whatever next?"

They landed, all together, by Tabitha's house. Before she realised it Susan was a girl again with a strange feeling of loss.

"Where would you like it?" asked Tabitha. "I thought over there in the corner of the field facing south. You'll get all the sun, plenty of field for Griswold and the road passes just behind."

"Perfect!" said Daphne.

They carefully unloaded the cottage, leaving plenty of room for it to expand.

"Do we have to dance again?" asked Robert, rather nervously. His feet were still burning from last time.

"No," replied Tabitha. "This is much easier. We just wait for the spell to wear off; I should think it will take a couple of hours. Come into my house and have some bread and cheese. I think we missed lunch in all the excitement."

Tabitha's house, number 7, Coven Crescent, was modern and comfortable.

"I must give you back the washing-up machine and the new cooker," said Daphne firmly.

"Don't you dare!" replied Tabitha. "That was a present. I shall be most insulted if you give them back. Anyway I've already got both so what would I do with them?"

"Well I must say they are wonderful. I don't know how I ever managed without," said Daphne. "If you really are quite sure?"

"Course I am," said Tabitha, and gave her friend a hug.

They went out to see the cottage after lunch. It was creaking and groaning again and back to the size of a bicycle shed.

"It won't be long now," said Tabitha.

By tea time the cottage was back to its normal size, covered with roses and looking as though it had always stood there. They went inside and the kettle made them all some tea. Daphne went into the sitting room to tidy up. Although they had been most careful, lots of books had fallen out of the cupboard and she tried a 'tidy up' spell. When Tabitha came in she was sitting disconsolately on the floor and the books were flapping round the room like large clumsy birds.

"I can't get them to go back into the cupboard," complained Daphne.

Tabitha looked at the 'tidy up' spell.

"You are using garden hellebore," she explained. "You know - Christmas Rose. That might do for ordinary books but magic books have minds of their own. You need wild hellebore; hang on, I'll get you a bit."

Soon the books were meekly arranging themselves on the shelves. Apart from some spilled flour and rice and a broken cup, there seemed to be no damage at all. Daphne gazed out of the window.

"How lovely to see your house, Tabitha, instead of that grubby old goblin staring at me over the fence," she said. "When this is all over I shall sit down and paint my new view."

"I will fly back with the cardboard box and collect the goslings," said Tabitha. "Griswold had better come too; I don't know if his wives would let me pick them up. We'll all be back in time for supper."

And so they managed to get through the last day before the meeting. They all went to bed tired and slept well in spite of their worries.

-----oOo-----

## Chapter 16

Following the Town Clerk's instructions they arrived at the courthouse in good time for the meeting on Friday morning. They found the elves already there, in their full golden armour.

"It's just as well we got here early," said Daphne. "What a crush!"

Luckily, nobody seemed to crowd the elves. For some reason, a path cleared for them as they approached and the others, taking advantage of this, closed in behind them. A policeman with an angry red face whispered to the Town Clerk.

"Funny looking pair over there in the fancy gold gear."

"Motor cyclists, I reckon," replied the Town Clerk. "Look at their crash helmets. I hope they haven't come to make trouble!"

Lord Justice Bangham arrived and the large crowd gradually settled as best they could, many having to stand at the back. Lord Bangham looked around him. A space had been left in the middle of the courtroom for the model of the M402 brought in specially from the town hall. He peered short-sightedly through his half moon glasses.

"Town Clerk, could you point out the people I should know?"

The Town Clerk indicated Mrs Popplewell from the Ministry of the Environment, Mr Binns from Planning and Mrs Fanshaw-Sidcup, the chair of the Committee for the Preservation of Shellford Down.

"There seems to be a lot of very small people among the public," said Lord Bangham in a puzzled voice. "Are they children? A school party perhaps?"

"I don't think so," replied the Town Clerk. "Lots of them seem to have beards."

"Very irregular," said Lord Bangham, and he brought his gavel down sharply.

Mrs Clarissa Fanshaw-Sidcup rose to her feet, she was very tall and elegant. She bred Afghan hounds and looked remarkably like one; she was accompanied by Major Fitzrogers, Master of Foxhounds, who thought she was wonderful. On this occasion she was wearing a very expensive dress of yellow silk. She addressed Judge Bangham.

"As Chair of the Committee for the Preservation of Shellford Down, I protest once again about the wicked intrusion of the proposed motorway through this area of outstanding natural beauty."

"Hear! Hear!" said Major Fitzrogers.

"Please sit down, Madam," said the judge severely. "We haven't even started yet."

"My family have farmed Shellford Down since the days of the Prince Regent," continued Mrs Fanshaw-Sidcup loudly. "I have every right to speak. Also as Chair of the Committee I am entitled to be heard!"

"Hear! Hear!" said Major Fitzrogers.

The judge banged his gavel furiously.

"I know this Enquiry has already endured a good deal of disturbance," he announced. "I am warning you right away that if there is any trouble at all I shall clear the court!"

"He can't do that," said the Town Clerk quietly to the policeman. "It's a Public Enquiry."

"Silly old ass!" said the policeman crossly.

The policeman's name was P.C. Proudfoot, and this was very inappropriate because the poor man suffered from chronically bad feet. At that moment the day was so warm, and his boots so tight, that he found it impossible to concentrate on anything but the excruciating pain from his two bunions, five corns and one large blister.

"Ambrose," said Florian. "Did the lady say she was a Chair?"

"Yes," said Ambrose. "Twice. What can it mean?"

"I suppose it means - she is a chair!" Florian raised his beautiful slanted eyebrows.

"Magenta for madness, do you think?"

Ambrose shook his head.

"I do not think it is quite so serious, just pink for peculiar."

He stretched out a finger and a ribbon of pink light whipped across the room and wrapped itself three times round Mrs Fanshaw-Sidcup and she turned into an elegant regency chair, upholstered in yellow silk. Major Fitzrogers looked round.

"Hello," he said: "Where's Clarissa? Gone to powder her nose, I suppose." He noticed the chair and gratefully sat down. It was a hot day and he was tired of standing. Nobody else seemed to notice a thing.

"Mr Binns, will you be so kind as to outline the scheme for the proposed motorway?" asked the Judge, in slightly calmer tones.

Mr Binns indicated the model.

"As you will see, ladies and gentlemen, we have been at great pains to route this motorway so as to cause the least disturbance to this attractive area of the countryside," began Mr Binns.

Florian turned to the witches. "None of these people is actually saying what he thinks. They all have quite different things in their minds. You see that angry looking policeman? He is only concerned with the pain in his feet."



At this the elf flicked a green spark off the tip of his finger, it ran spluttering across the courtroom floor like a little fuse burning, until it reached P.C. Proudfoot's boots where it exploded in a shower of sparks, like a little green firework. A look of bemused delight slowly spread over the policeman's face. He rose once or twice on his toes and his expression changed to one of pure joy.

"I think we should have some truth in here," said Ambrose. "Then at least we shall know what is really going on."

The two elves stretched out their arms and streams of the pure white fire of truth flew all over the room with a crackling noise.

"Good heavens, what was that?" asked Lord Bangham. "Lightning? Are we in for a storm?"

P.C. Proudfoot leant forward and said in a loud, deep voice, "I have absolutely no pain in my feet!"

The judge and the entire room turned to stare at him. He beamed happily back at them, quite unaware that he had spoken out loud.

Lord Bangham banged loudly with his gavel. He meant to call the meeting to order but what he actually said was: "I don't think Mrs Popplewell should wear that pink hat. It is such a warm day and her face is so red. I think that hat is a mistake."

Mrs Popplewell stared at the judge in consternation, but Mr Binns leapt to his feet. There were dwarves somewhere in Mr Binns' remote ancestry. The only sign of this in him was that he was rather shorter than average height and had to shave twice a day. For several years Mr Binns had very much admired Mrs. Popplewell from afar, but had never had the courage to do anything about it. Now, however, he felt his moment had come.

"I don't think Mrs Popplewell has to choose her hats to suit you, you silly old buffer," he shouted. "Anyway, I think Mrs Popplewell looks perfectly charming."

Mrs Popplewell turned to Mr Binns, and very much to her surprise said: "What a nice little man you are. I have always liked the way your hair curls round behind your ears."

She stopped, went even pinker than her hat and put her hand over her mouth.

But Mr Binns beamed.

"Do please call me Joshua," he said.

Mrs. Popplewell who was almost past being surprised heard herself singing in a pleasant light contralto,

"Joshua, Joshua,  
Nicer than lemon squash you are  
Joshua you are."

Major Fitzrogers stood up. He wanted to ask what on earth was going on, but what he actually said was: "I should like to propose that we all go down to the river bank and have a picnic. It is much too nice a day to sit in this stuffy old court-room."

Lord Bangham would have liked to point out that it was not up to members of the public to add ridiculous items to the official agenda. But he was terrified to open his mouth for fear of what might come out.

Daphne turned to Tabitha.

"I think a picnic is a splendid idea, shall we help?"

"Certainly!" said Tabitha. "Picnic boxes I think."

The witches started to wave their arms in the air and the room was suddenly filled with specks of golden light that swirled round like bubbles in a glass of champagne. They drifted slowly down onto the papers and everyone's agenda turned into a neatly packed and labelled picnic box.

"Oh, good!" said Mrs Popplewell. "Egg and cress sandwiches, my favourite."

"Smoked salmon, delightful," said Lord Bangham, surprised into speech.

"Hot dogs, jolly good," said Robert. They all picked up their boxes and streamed out into the sunshine.

"I suppose this is a dream," said P.C. Proudfoot.

"I expect so," said Lord Bangham. "But am I dreaming you or are you dreaming me?"

"I don't really mind, as long as my feet don't wake me." said P.C. Proudfoot happily.

Mrs Popplewell took off her hat and left it on the table. She could take a hint as well as the next person. Mr Binns offered her his arm and they walked out together. The Town Clerk found himself strolling along beside Major Fitzrogers.

"Do you know these villages by the hill?" he asked. "The most peculiar people live there. My car broke down once in West Pookshill; do you know the main street is called Blood Axe Road? Did you ever hear anything so awful? I stopped the local postman - short chap with a heavy beard - I asked him why they didn't get the parish council to change the name. Do you know what he said?"

The Major shook his head.

"He said the royal family would be most upset if they changed the name! I ask you, why should the royal family want a village street called Blood Axe Road?"

"Too much in-breeding in these villages," said Major Fitzrogers. "They are all potty if you ask me."

When the spells finally wore off in the court room, Mrs Fanshaw-Sidcup was surprised to find herself sitting on the floor. Everything was locked up and she had to find the caretaker to let her out. The only long term effect of her odd experience was an occasionally recurring dream that she was a yellow armchair. A psychiatrist friend of hers explained that it was probably due to some shock in early childhood.

## Chapter 17

The river Shama came bubbling up from under the hill, delighted to be in the daylight at last. It chuckled and bounced in its bed, catching the unaccustomed sunlight and chucking it in all directions.

Mrs Popplewell sat on the bank and kicked off her sandals. She dabbled her toes in the water and giggled.

"I haven't done anything like this since I was a girl."

"Well, that can't be very long ago," said Mr Binns gallantly. They were both still well under the influence of the truth spell.

"If I were to ask you to tea, would you come?" Mrs Popplewell inquired.

"I would probably wangle an invitation to stay for supper," said Mr Binns.

Orky, King of the Goblins and Stand Fast, King of the Dwarves, were sitting in the shade of a large tree. They were not used to daylight and found it trying to their eyes.

"I have always been jealous of you," announced the goblin, to his own surprise.

"Well, I have always been very nervous of you," said the dwarf.

"We shall get an better in future," said Orky.

"Yes, well, for a while, anyway," said Stand Fast.

The two witches and the children sat on the grass, a little way off from the others. Florian and Ambrose came to join them.

"So far, so good," said Florian. "But how do we protect the hill in the future?"

"Make everyone speak the truth all the time?" suggested Robert.

The elves smiled and shook their heads.

"I'm afraid the absolute truth is too dangerous a thing to leave unattended," said Ambrose. "My brother and I are experts in sleep, you know. I think we will arrange that every time the M402 is mentioned, everyone within earshot shall go to sleep for a few minutes and when they wake they shall have no recollection of what they were talking about."

So this is, in fact, what happened. It lent a rather strange dreamlike quality to many official meetings in the area. The Sleeping and Forgetting Spell often overran into Any Other Business and quite a few other items were forgotten as well as the motorway. It probably didn't make much difference in the long run.

Lord Bangham had been sitting on a rock, absent-mindedly throwing pebbles into the river.

"I used to be able to make them bounce along the surface," he said to P.C. Proudfoot, "but I seem to have lost the knack. Never mind, I suppose we shall have to get back to discussing this wretched motorway."  
As he spoke, his head fell forward heavily and his half moon glasses slid off his nose and lay glinting on the grass. P.C. Proudfoot bent down to pick them up and rolled gently down the bank. A loud snore shook his heavy body.

Tabitha looked round with satisfaction.

"Oh, that's great, it works!" she said. "Look, even the twins are asleep." She nudged her friend. "Wake up Daphne — it is not supposed to affect us."

"Let them sleep!" said Ambrose gently. "It will only last a few minutes."

Sure enough people started waking up quite soon. They stared round in a puzzled sort of way and started to wander off in twos and threes. Mrs Popplewell put on her sandals. She took Mr Binns shyly by the hand and they strolled off together along the riverbank. They were married a few weeks later and Mrs Popplewell's colleagues at the Ministry of the Environment put on a very good party for them. The Minister herself graciously attended and wished them luck. They all contributed and gave the happy pair a beautifully fitted picnic basket as a wedding present.

"Such a happy coincidence, Joshua," said Mrs Popplewell-Binns. "Since we became engaged at a picnic."

Her husband beamed at her. Neither of them had any recollection of the Public Enquiry and believed they had met on the banks of the Shama while picnicking with friends. They were always a little vague as to which friends had been there, but were much too happy to worry about it.

The twins and Daphne awoke to find Florian and Ambrose smiling at them.

"We have saved the Hill!" said Florian. "It is time for us to return to our sleep."

"Oh dear!" Susan's face fell. "Must you really return to your cave? It seems so cold and lonely."

"It may seem like that to you," said Ambrose, "but you forget we are the Dreamers. Our dreams are warm and lively and magnificent."

"Do not be sorry for us," Florian agreed. "We have wives and children and great adventures in the Dream World. We have been away too long."

There was a shimmer of gold. The armour of the brothers appeared to melt into the sunshine and disappear. The children heard elfin voices in the air, saying:

"Farewell Mortals."

"Are they really the last of the elves?" asked Robert. "It seems so sad."

"They are probably the last pure bred elves," said Tabitha. "But if you look round West Pookshill, you will see lots of people who remind you of them. Look there are quite a few here."

Robert looked round. A few small groups of people still lingered in the sunshine. Sure enough, he noticed several with pale hair and slanted dark green eyes.

"I think," said Daphne, "that if we get a move on we could catch the last bus to West Pookshill."

The sun dipped behind the hill and Tabitha shivered.

"Yes, come on, we'd better hurry; luckily the bus is usually late."

However, as they arrived at the bus stop they saw, to their annoyance, the back of the bus drawing away.

"Oh, bother," said Daphne. "It's early for once!"

"I know we really shouldn't do this," said Tabitha, taking an old fashioned fob-watch from her pocket. "It puts too much strain on the fabric of time and space, but perhaps it won't matter just for half a minute."

She started to turn the hands on the watch in an anti-clockwise direction and time started to run backwards. The bus came slowly backwards towards them down the street. The postman on the opposite side of the road emptied his bag of letters into the letterbox, locked the door and walked away backwards along the pavement. A thrush replaced a snail carefully under a stone and flew backwards into a tree. An early autumn yellow leaf, drifted up from the pavement and attached itself to a twig. The bus stopped and Tabitha and Robert got on.

"We could fly if you like," suggested Daphne shyly to Susan. "Nobody's looking."

Susan grabbed her cousin's hand.

"Oh Daffy, this has been the most fantastic holiday! I would just love to fly!"

She felt in the back pocket of her jeans for her two precious grey feathers, which she kept carefully wrapped in a tissue. A moment later two grey geese rose in the air, spread their wings in the early evening light, wheeled in the sky and headed for West Pookshill.

It was several hours later when the witches, the children and the Familiars had all had supper and were settled down by the fire in the sitting room of Rose Cottage.

"We don't really need a fire yet, I know," said Daphne. "But it does look so nice. Anyone like another cup of tea?"

She was just about to call the teapot when the doorbell rang.

Susan went to the front door. She was absolutely amazed to see her parents on the step.

"Oh, darling," said Mrs Blair, hugging her. "Did you think we were never coming?"

She looked up as Daphne entered the hall.

"You won't believe this, Daphne, but we got lost. After all the times we've been here, somehow we got on the wrong side of the hill!"

"My dear wife was navigating," said Mr Blair. "I'm sorry we are so frightfully late."

Daphne opened her mouth and then closed it again. She was not about to try and explain that the cottage was now on the other side of the hill.

"Do come in anyway," she said. "Have a cup of tea."

Susan whispered to Tabitha. "We haven't packed or anything. I'd completely forgotten they were coming today."

"I'll pack in a flash," whispered the witch. "Just get me that sprig of wild hellebore from the jam jar on the draining board."

Before the Blairs had finished their tea, Tabitha was coming downstairs with two neatly packed suitcases.

"I don't believe you have met my friend, Miss Marigold," said Daphne rather breathlessly, looking in considerable relief at the suitcases.

Tabitha shook hands with the Blairs.

Before long the twins were getting into the car and waving goodbye to the two witches, and also to Erebus and Griswold who had joined them by the gate.

"She shouldn't let the goose wander about like that," grumbled Mr Blair. "He could get run over or something."

"I think he is pretty sensible," said Robert. "Hey, Dad we've got to turn left here."

"I can't make it out," said Mr Blair, swinging the car round. "I could have sworn it was the other way."

Mrs Blair turned round to the two children.

"We have missed you," she said. "Have you been terribly bored? We really will find somewhere else for you to go next time."

The twins looked at each other in horror. The thought of going anywhere else was unbearable.

"It's alright, honestly," said Robert. "We have had quite a decent time really."

"Yes," said Susan. "It was not too bad at all. I think Daffy would be very disappointed if we went anywhere else."

"What dear kids you are!" said Mrs Blair.

-----oOo-----