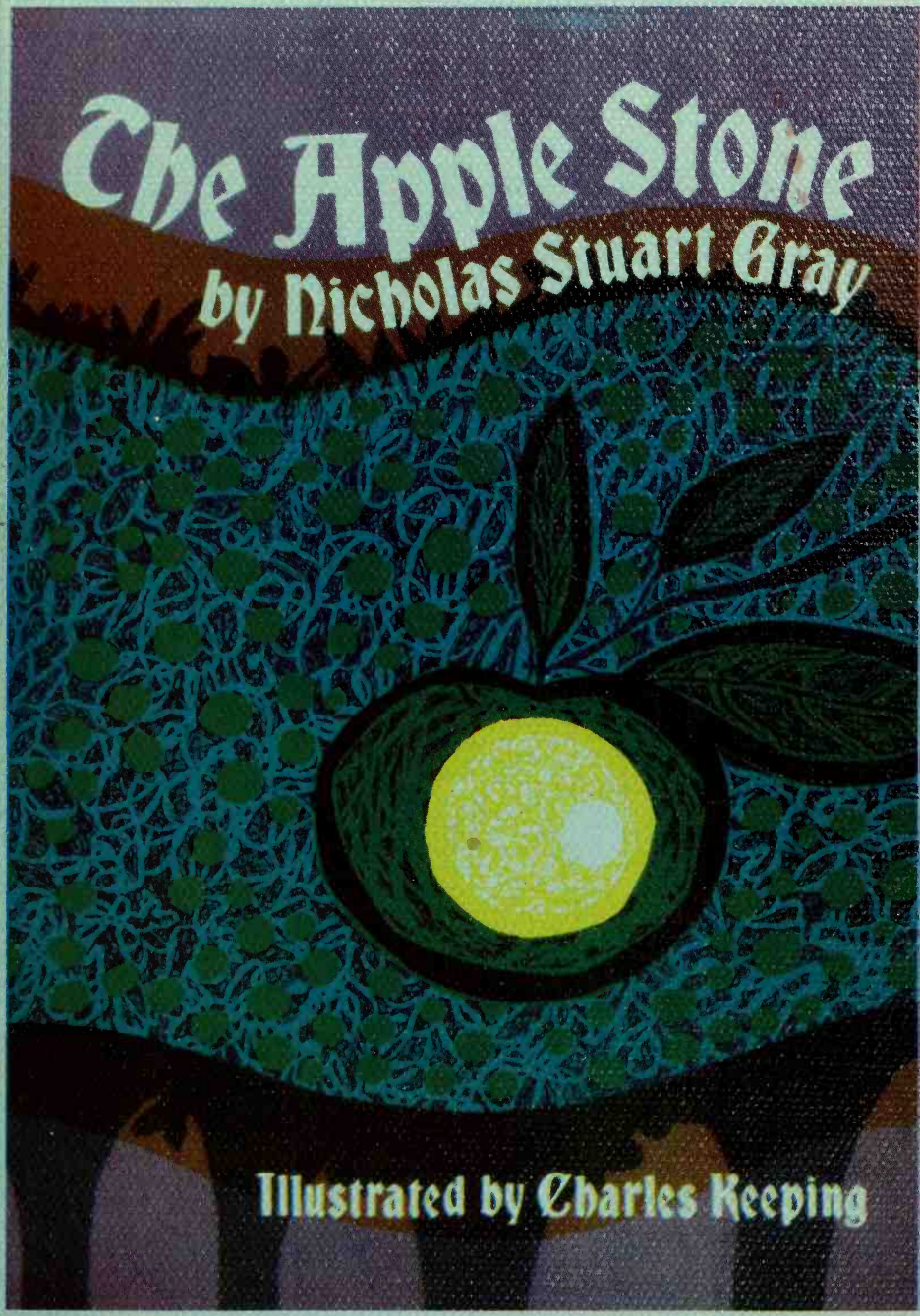
The Apple Stone

by Nicholas Stuart Gray



Illustrated by Charles Keeping

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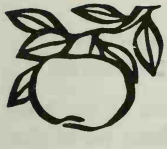
Also by Nicholas Stuart Gray

GRIMBOLD'S OTHER WORLD
MAINLY IN MOONLIGHT

THE APPLE STONE



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MEREDITH PRESS NEW YORK

First U.S. Edition

MEREDITH PRESS

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 69-16293
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FOR MEREDITH PRESS

for my brother Dudley

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THE APPLE STONE

1

THE GOLDEN APPLE

We were down in the orchard, and the Clans were at war. The rest of us took no notice; we rarely did, unless they got too noisy. This time they'd only reached the snarling stage. Besides, they were almost out of sight by the far hedge, with a good many apple trees between us and our two cousins.

My sister Josephine was sitting on the mossy trunk of a fallen branch, rambling on about some palace that had been dug up at Nineveh. She was in the middle of one of her sudden crazes. Archeology, this time, of all things! Jo is apt to snatch at any new idea that may be rash enough to cross her path, though she always comes back in time to her main interest, which is animals. She'd just written to Sir Mortimer Wheeler, telling him she had a theory about the lost town of Stabiae. When she told me this, I said I bet he had an even better one.

Jemima, my younger sister, was astride a fork in a big, nearby apple tree, and she was busy peeling an apple. It was a sheer waste of time, as she always ate the peel anyway. I pointed this out, and she said she liked peeling apples, and I should mind my own business. Saucy, she is,

and we're all a bit wary of her, although she's so much the youngest of us. We call her Missie. It suits her.

"Jeremy!" said Jo, loudly. "You're not listening!"

I dropped the apple I was eating into some stinging nettles.

"I'm *half* listening," I said.

"What word did I say last?"

"Er—Egypt."

Jo gave me a scornful look.

"Nineveh isn't *in* Egypt. It's Assyria."

"Next door," I said, hopefully.

"All right, *stay* ignorant!"

There was a terrible yell from one of the Clans. We glanced toward them. Battle had been joined. Our cousins were rolling over and over one another at the side of the ditch, arms and legs whirling. They then vanished into it, and a wallowing noise started.

"Will they drown?" said Jo.

"Not enough water," said Missie.

"Pity," said I.

Jo began about Nineveh again. I started prodding through the nettles with a twig, to see if I could retrieve my apple. Missie ate her bit of peel, and then complained it was bitter. I told her to throw it away.

"It's not as if there was a shortage of apples," I said.

"I like sour peel," said she.

I snorted, and went on with my search. Missie said impatiently why didn't I go and get myself another apple. And added in a mincing voice, "It's not as if there was a shortage."

"It just so happens that this one had a nice taste," I informed her, coldly, "and I don't remember where I got it. If you're clever enough to point out the exact tree—"

She pointed.

"That one," said she, "and you took it off the second-lowest branch on the right. And it's a Scarlet Pearmain," she added, smugly.

"How do you . . . ?"

I stopped. I remembered she had a bosom friend in Old Arthur, the gardener, and that he was very interested in the orchard, and knew all the trees by all their names.

"What are you eating, Missie?" said Jo, idly.

"A Blenheim Orange, and it isn't anything like ripe."

"What a chronic pain you'll have," said Jo.

Our sister merely grinned. She looked like some mad garden gnome, up in the tree, with her round brown eyes, and two short pigtails of brown hair sticking sideways. She said through a mouthful of sour peel, "D'you know what I'd like? I'd like to eat one of every kind of apple in the whole orchard."

"Greedy pig," I said. "It would take hours. And the pain would be more lethal than chronic."

She said she didn't know what I meant. Jo said it was ever since Dad had given me a secondhand encyclopedia for my birthday.

"She knows quite well what I mean," I said. "And if I'm ever going to be an author—"

My sisters said all right, all right. We went on eating apples and looking around us at the enormous orchard. It must have been there for centuries. Some trees were so ancient that Old Arthur had propped them with poles to stop them falling flat on their faces. Even so, they leaned this way and that as though they were tired. They were very beautiful, I thought, in all their seasons . . . in Spring and blossom . . . in winter with their black curves and shadows . . . and now, all bright with apples. Yellow

apples, red ones, green, striped, and flecked ones. Smooth or wrinkled or streaked with russet. Some of the trees were short of fruit this year, and others so heavy with it that Old Arthur had set forked stakes under the branches to help them carry the weight.

The October sun shone through leaves and apples as best it could, making dapplings of light on the tree trunks, and the rough-cut grass. It was hot in the orchard, though only about an hour before twilight.

The autumn was trying to make up for a dismal summer. After each day at our schools, which were only a bus ride from home, we made up for it, too, by making a beeline for the open air—for fields or woods or the orchard. We like the open air, and in Devon there is a lot of open air to like.

"We needn't actually *eat* them all," said Missie.

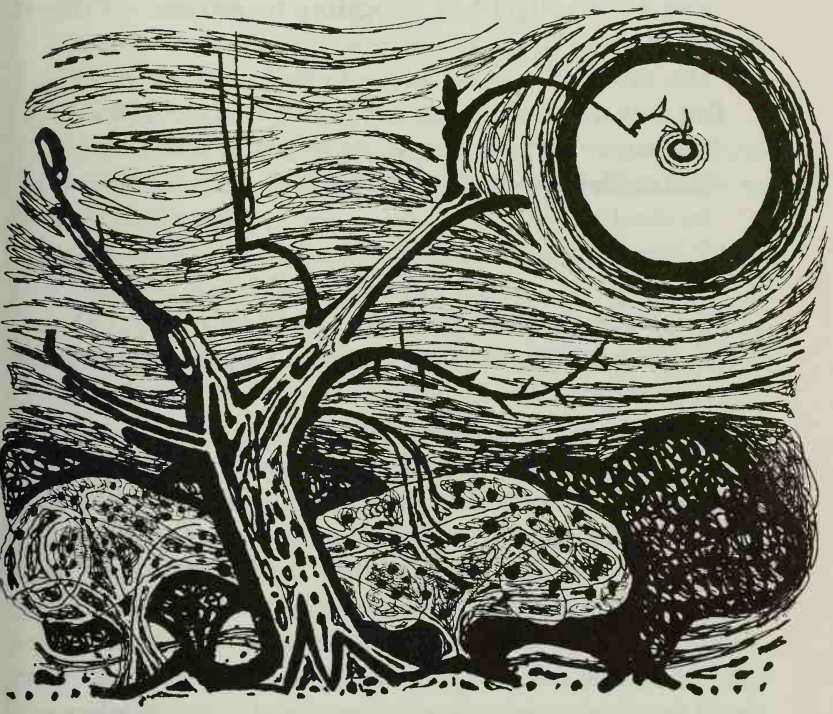
I said, "Eat what?" She said eat what she'd been talking about.

"The apples," she said, impatiently. "Why do you go wandering off in your head when I'm explaining things? The apples, Jeremy, that we could pick. One of every sort, like I said. Then we could look at them all, and eat those we liked the best."

At this moment, the Clans came out of the ditch. They looked awful, smeared with mud, twigs in their hair, and soaked to the skin. They were chatting affably together, as they came toward us, tucking in the tails of their shirts, dragging down their sweaters, and pulling up their socks. Then Douglas Macdonald gave a shout, and rushed ahead. He had a wild expression—but then he often has. He yelled as he came, "There's a—!"

"Let *me* tell!" bawled Nigel Campbell.

Being thinner and smaller, he overtook Douglas and



passed him, but Douglas grabbed his sleeve and hauled him back.

"I saw it first!"

"But I-I—" Nigel was struggling to get free. "I c-c-cut my hand on it!"

"Oh, shut up!" I said. "Both of you."

But they went on, in a sort of yelling chorus, "It's a—"

"I saw a—"

"Cut my h-h-hand on a—"

"In the ditch—"

"In the mud—"

"I saw—!"

"I cut—!"

And they ended, in perfect unison, as if they'd practiced, "A man trap!"

I said, "Rubbish."

We all went and looked in the ditch. It was a rabbit trap, one of those beastly things with spikes that snap shut on an animal's foot, and hold it in agony till someone comes to kill it. They're not allowed in England anymore, and a good thing, too. It's gruesome that they ever were allowed. We all had a burst of indignation. I then informed the Clans that such traps were still legal in Scotland. They were much abashed. Nigel went scarlet with vexation and shame. Douglas scowled furiously. And then Missie said anything could happen in a place where our cousins belonged. They glared. Then they decided to justify their existence by plunging into the ditch again. As they each did it without warning, they landed in a sprawl together, and disappeared in a mass of churning mud, long grass, and stinging nettles. But they came up holding the trap between them.

It was old and muddy and red with rust, but you could still see the hateful spikes and the spring.

"It could easily be cleaned and oiled," said Douglas.

"Why?" said Jo.

"Well—we could catch something."

"What, for instance?"

"Well. . . ."

There was a pause, while he wracked his brain to think of something that wouldn't mind getting itself mauled in a spiky steel trap.

"Old Arthur," he said, feebly, at last.

"Too big," said Missie, ever practical.

"Throw it away, Douglas," I said, "this minute."

"We've only just found it."

"Then you can just lose it again. It's revolting."

"C-can't we have it for a k-keepsake?" said Nigel.

"What a good idea," said Jo, scathingly. "It would be so pretty hanging on a wall with bows of pink ribbon. . . ."

"Chuck it away," I commanded. "Go on, I tell you. It's my orchard."

"It's your father's orchard," said Douglas.

"I'm the heir," I said, sternly.

The Clans eyed me for a moment. But tradition runs strongly in their blood, and they were guests in our house while their respective parents were abroad for a year. So Douglas gave a loud and exasperated sigh, and heaved the trap into the thorn hedge. One of the spikes caught in his sleeve, and he went with it.

"Never mind," said Jo, soothingly, as he emerged looking more battered than ever. "Come and pick all the apples."

"*All* the apples?"

He looked appalled. So did Nigel. Not having heard our earlier conversation, they thought we proposed to strip the orchard, which would have taken a week at least.

"*One* of all the apples," explained Jo.

She and Missie told them the idea. They were not much impressed. Nigel said he was tired, and reminded us that he'd been told by some doctor to take things easy. I reminded him in return that this only referred to mental things. Douglas said everyone knew Nigel was going around the bend. Jo said Douglas was a monster, and had no right to say horrible things like that. Douglas laughed. Nigel rushed at him and stuffed a handful of nettles down his neck. Douglas screamed. Missie said they should *both* take it easy. I said, "Apart from all that, shall we perform this apple project, in the interests of science?"

They calmed down.

"Remember," I told them all, "one apple from every tree. *One* only from *each* tree. Don't leave any out. I've some bits of chalk in my pocket, and we can mark the trees so that we don't miss any. Here." I handed out the chalk.

It was a trickier job than it sounded. We had to stop from time to time for argument and discussion. Were two similar apples, from different trees, the same species? We took both, in case they weren't. Were two from the same tree, but dissimilar, the result of grafting? We took both, in case they were. The Clans nearly went to war again when they shinnied up the biggest tree from opposite sides and met in the top fork. I had to go up and drive them down. Then they joined forces, and tried to make me climb for the apple they'd both been after. I went, to save argument.

We made a pile in the middle of the orchard, where

the grass was fairly short, and we settled here at last to inspect our haul. Suddenly, Josephine gave a startling yell.

"Where's Missie!"

"Ssh," I said. "She was here a moment ago."

"She isn't *now*."

"Come on, then," I said. "Find the little brute!"

We began to search and bawl for Jemima. Ever since I'd once found her sitting in the old well bucket, preparing to lower herself into the depths by turning the handle —and who knows why she thought she could keep *that* up!—we didn't care to let her out of sight too long. She *is* only eight, after all.

It wasn't so easy to find anything in that orchard. It was like a jungle. Low-hanging branches, trees leaning almost to the ground in places, clumps of tall weeds, nettles that stood above one's shoulder—the thought came into my head suddenly (and I really can't help the way thoughts come into my head suddenly) of how it would be in a real jungle, and how a python would be coiled around a branch, right in one's path, and staring into one's face. There'd be scorpions as well. . . .

Jo came and prodded me and said, why was I standing still, staring? I said I was thinking about snakes. She said, why? I said there were lots in Devon. She said she'd never seen one. I said that didn't prove there weren't twenty-five just under our feet at that moment. She said it was a fine time to start saying things like that. . . .

The Clans yelled that they'd found Jemima.

She was up in a tall, fragile tree. A very old tree. A tree whose trunk was wrinkled and gray, and whose branches were dead—except for one right at the top, as thin as a shadow, with three leaves on it and an apple.

Missie was so busy trying to get this apple that she hadn't heard us shouting—or just hadn't bothered to answer.

"That isn't safe!" exclaimed Jo, as we arrived under the tree. "Do come down. Missie, come down! Before the whole thing collapses! Look, it's rocking! It's dangerous! You'll break your neck."

Still our sister didn't answer. She put her foot on a dry gnarl, and stretched her arm to its fullest extent, but she couldn't quite touch the apple. The tree creaked dismally.

"Come down here, Jemima!" I shouted.

"One of *each,*" said she, stubbornly.

She balanced herself on a slender dead twig and stretched again. The whole tree shook. The apple fell. I caught it. The twig broke, and Missie fell, too, and the Clans unintentionally caught her. They all fell in a heap, and yelled.

Jo sorted them out. No one was really hurt, but Missie was cross because she had not actually picked the apple.

I held it out on my hand, and looked at it. It was an odd-looking one, dull-yellow and crinkled all over as though from extreme old age. But it had a sweet smell, like that of a Gravenstein. And it was very small and heavy.

"Take it, then," I said to Missie, "and stop crabbing."

She cupped it between her hands, as if it were something precious.

We all returned to the center of the orchard. We busied ourselves, choosing apples from our heap, comparing them with one another, tasting them, and trying to see if we could identify them by name. Some we could, by their look or their taste or scent.

"Worcester Pearmain, red-and-green, tasting of strawberries."

"Wycken Pippin, greeny-yellow with dots of russet—not nearly ripe . . ."

"Nor is Ellison's Orange, but smell the scent."

"Here's a big red Queening, and ripe already."

"It would be. So's James Grieve."

"Talking about scent, smell this—Devonshire Quarrenden. . . ."

Only Jemima sat silent, with the little wrinkled apple in her hands, and she never even glanced at any of the others. At last Jo asked her what was so special about it.

"It's magic," said Missie.

We all gaped at her. She was the last person you'd expect to turn whimsy on you. Then Douglas laughed, and she gave him a very cold look.

"What a kiddish thing to say," he scoffed.

"A very sensible thing to say," said the apple.

Missie dropped it as if it were red hot.

"Clumsy!" it squeaked.

No one else spoke at all. We sat with dropped jaws and bulging eyes. I thought if my mind was going to wander this far, I'd better get it inspected or something. But the apple went on talking, in a small, soft voice that sounded extremely irritable.

"First they shake me off my tree; then they fling me about as though I were a mere and useless trifle! And they dare to laugh, when one guesses at my quality. Rude, ignorant, and totally irresponsible infants!"

"We're not infants," said Douglas.

But he didn't sound any too sure of this. Missie went on hands and knees to where the apple lay.

"Don't be cross," said she, "we didn't mean it."

The apple seemed to simmer down. It said it supposed we couldn't help what we were.

"Had you been properly educated . . ." it began. Then it sighed and went on sadly, "But there, it's been the same for so many centuries now. I hope always to find myself in an enlightened age again, but always and always I fall into the hands of barbarians."

There was a pause. I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't make me feel silly. I mean, making light conversation with an apple!

"Er—you mentioned centuries," said Jo. "Have you been in many?"

"Thousands," said the apple.

There was another pause. I wondered if it was showing off, but decided not to ask. Then it went on, "Not each time do I fall into human hands. Sometimes I merely drop from the branch and lie in my apple until the fruit decays, and I go sliding underground again. Then I burrow to find another apple tree. I may go for miles and miles. It may take years and years. Then, oh, then—creeping up through the roots, through the trunk, the twig, and into the bud. And the blossom forms, with me in its center. And the fruit. And again I am in the open, and there for the taking. And just occasionally someone finds me and knows me for what I am."

After a moment's silence, Jo said carefully, "You said there was a time—you said—a more enlightened age. . . ."

"The Greeks knew me of old," said the apple. "Few others, since their day. The knowledge was lost with so much else when that great culture passed."

"When the Alexandria library got burned?" suggested Jo, in her studious voice.

The irrepressible Douglas gave a slight snigger. But the apple ignored him, and said it was likely.

"The books held much wisdom. The world was poorer for their loss," it said, glumly. "Ignorance has prevailed since then, in so many ways. Therefore I stand no longer on my full rights. I do not insist on being addressed by name before offering my power to my discoverers. To recognize my magic is enough—provided that word is spoken aloud in acknowledgment."

This time there was no pause at all. We all spoke together.

"Power?" we said.

The apple made a disapproving noise.

"How swiftly they take the bait. Though they know nothing of me at all. Tell me," it said, "has the very last, least memory of me faded into oblivion? Is no glimmer left, in legend or song or poem?"

"Not that I know," I said, "and I read a good deal. . . ."

"We're very sorry," said Jo.

She spoke as gently as if it were an animal in trouble. And I suppose we were all beginning to think of it as a sort of—well, a parrot or something.

"So am I sorry," it said. "There was mystery and glamor in the world once. All faded now, and nothing left. The minds of men grow gray. Once upon a time the whisper of my name would set them searching the world for me. And in that search the nations grew."

"How?" said Nigel.

"Oh, my dear boy! Simple herdsmen left the pastures where their tribes had always stayed. Fishermen, safe near the familiar shore, took suddenly to the deep waters. A word had come to them—a rumor, a couplet of song, or a muddled tale. Off they went, and took with them their customs and their knowledge to spread abroad, while they searched for the Golden Apples of the Sun."

Jo gave a sharp exclamation, and so did I.

"I've heard of *them,*" I said. "They grew near Mount Atlas and were guarded by a dragon."

"They were never guarded," said the apple, "and they grew everywhere—but always just over the horizon, on the far side of the hill, beyond the isles of sunset. In fact, they grew wherever men didn't happen to be at the time. So the young and adventurous went to seek them. Miles they went, and years they went, and the races mingled, and knowledge was shared, and the new civilizations were born. And there were no Apples of the Sun," it said, a bit bleakly. "There was only me. And I might be anywhere, in any shape that an ordinary apple wore. Though it is true I have always been golden in color. And some men found me and used me."

A name had been drifting at the back of my mind, just out of reach. Now it came close and I seized it. I said, "Hercules. Didn't he once—?"

The apple snorted.

"He *said* he did!"

"I've got a p-painting of him finding you," said Nigel. "But you're a lot bigger and b-brighter."

"Hercules wasn't a real person," said Douglas.

"My memory isn't what it used to be," murmured the apple. "Whether real or not—whether he found me, or not—he was an extremely unreliable character. Noisy, too," it added.

It seemed to brood awhile, whether over its declining memory, or the failings of the Greek hero, was hard to tell. Finally Douglas broke into its reverie with the sort of remark that he describes as "direct," and others as "tactless." He said, "Why did they want you?"

"Shush!" said Jo and I together.

"Because it's pretty," said Missie, "and has magic patterns on it."

"Correct," said the apple. "It was for my magic that they wanted me. Recollect how your own innocent ears pricked up at the first hint of it!"

Nigel went scarlet, and Jo and I began to stammer some sort of apology. But Missie and Douglas, who are not troubled by conscience or convention, merely looked intrigued.

"I am not criticizing you," said the little voice from the ground. "Desire for magic is not necessarily greed; it may just be for the glamor of it. Men scoff at things they do not understand—which is just about everything there is—and they pretend not to believe in magic anymore. But let the wind blow the slightest scent of it, and up go their ears—and off they chase in pursuit."

"Of the wind or the magic?" said Douglas.

"They look for the second, and usually find only the first."

"And for us magic came toppling out of a tree," I said.

"You can't blame us for our curiosity," said Jo.

"No, no," said the apple. "All humans are curious—very curious, indeed!"

Douglas cut in. He has a one-track mind. But, to be quite fair, I think all our minds were on that same track for the moment. He said, "What sort of magic have you?"

There was a little pause. Then the apple said, slowly and clearly, "One touch from me animates the inanimate."

"Oh," said Douglas, baffled.

The rest of us kept quiet, trying to work it out. Then I said, "You can bring things to life?"

"Yes."

"What sort of things?"

"Any sort. Nothing in all the universe is truly lifeless. It's just a matter of rousing it. And the simplest way by far is—me."

"What about my guinea pig?" cried Douglas, excitedly, "I'd like him alive again. He got so old, and a month ago—"

"No," said the apple, gently. "No, boy. You must not disturb him. The little beast has better to do than be dragged back into an aged and worn-out body."

"Besides," said Nigel, practically, "we haven't got the body. We had a pyre, Douglas. A f-funeral pyre. You sang 'Lochabar No More'—"

"It's better not to meddle with the mysteries," said the apple, in a kindly sort of voice. "Your pet is about his business."

"If we can't bring back things that have died—" began Jo.

"Not *can't,*" said the apple. "Just *don't.*"

"Then what sort of—?"

"What about pictures and statues?" said Nigel.

"There was a fellow called Pygmalion," said the apple.

It stopped. It seemed to be thinking about him. I looked around at the circle of my relatives. Jo was smiling. She looked rather pleasant. She'd curled her long legs under her where she sat on the grass, and her hair had fallen right forward over her face. She blew it aside. Missie seemed to be in a trance, with eyes like round chocolate drops staring at the apple, and her mouth wide open. The Clans were staring, too, crouched on knees and elbows, with their chins in their hands. The sun's last rays touched them all. Jo's red hair and the sandy hair of Nigel seemed even brighter, and there were streaks of light over the black curls of Douglas.

For once it seemed the Clans were united. They began to talk in a chorus that started quietly and grew noisier and more excited as it went on.

"Can my electric train come alive?" This was Douglas.

"My spaceship?" said Nigel, eagerly.

"My machine gun?"

"My m-man from Mars?"

"My atomic submarine?"

"My prehistoric m-monster?"

"My death ray?"

"Over my dead body," said Jo.

"What about my teddy bear?" said Missie.

The apple wobbled to and fro. It looked as if it were nodding.

"Toys have always been favorites for bringing alive," it said. "Have you heard of Achilles? The bright one. I was in his hands for a while. He knew me, but did not use me, for he was wary of magic. But there came the day when he wanted Troy to burn. He would have fired it, single-handed—but he fell. He told Ulysses what to do, and died. And Ulysses took a toy horse from a child—a wooden, hollow, little horse—and he did what Achilles had told him to do. And Troy burned."

The hair had risen on my neck. I seemed to feel a cold wind blowing, and to hear the heavy grinding of wheels as the great wooden horse rolled slowly through the gates. I opened my eyes, and shook my head to clear away the fumes of smoke. I looked nervously at the apple.

"Do you wish to destroy cities?" it asked.

Jo sniffed, and one of the Clans coughed. No one spoke. I think we had all, for a moment, been out on the windy plains of Troy.

"Relax, my dears," said the apple, kindly. "I am not

merely a weapon for warriors. I am a charm for lovers, a plaything for children. It all depends how I am used, and why. I can be life or death, pleasure or torment, or just simple fun. But do be careful. It would probably be wise to throw me away and forget me."

"We've only just found you," said Missie, dismayed.

"How could we forget?" said Jo.

"Why can't we have some fun?" demanded Douglas.

"We d-don't much like cities, but we've nothing special against them at the moment," put in Nigel, reassuringly.

"We'll promise to be careful," I said.

The apple bobbed about, rather agitatedly.

"If you insist on keeping me, kept I must be. But one day you will have to let me go—so that I may rest again in the cool earth when I grow weary, so that I may gather strength to start my journeying once more, so that I shall see daylight dawn in another age."

"We'll do exactly what you want us to do," I said.

"We swear it," said Jo earnestly.

"Solemn vow," said Missie.

"Yes, yes, of course we promise," clamored the Clans.

"Then eat me," said the apple.

There was a burst of horror and protest from everyone.

"Now, look here!" snapped the apple. "You said you'd do as I ask. Use your brains, if you have them! How can my power be used, good creatures, while I myself am imprisoned?" And then it added, in contempt, "Untutored infants, surely you are not under the impression that you are talking to an *apple?*"

"It—er—did seem . . ." I faltered.

"If not, what?" said Missie.

"I am inside!" it cried, shrilly. "Covered with a layer of unripe but edible fruit. And that fruit must be cut

away in equal parts—take care not to cut too deeply and scratch me—and each of you must eat a part of the apple."

I looked at the others—but all their eyes were fixed on me. I am the eldest, and they all remember this when there's anything unpleasant to be done. I hesitated. Jo picked up the apple and gave it to me. Missie handed me her penknife. I felt myself turn a bit pale.

"Here, are you sure about this?" I asked the apple.

"Quite sure."

I set my teeth. I marked five equal slices, with a broken end of chalk. I divided the wrinkled fruit into sections. Don't think I liked doing this. My relatives sat in a circle, watching me with distaste. The apple fell apart in my hand like a sticky yellow star—and its center was a small, bright, golden ball, about the size of a marble.

It shone softly. There were beautiful, intricate, minute designs all over it.

"Come on, now," it said. "Eat the fruit."

Its voice was a lot clearer, now that it wasn't talking through a layer of apple. And we did what it told us. I've no idea if the segment that I swallowed was sour or sweet, for I tasted nothing at all. I might have been eating cotton or peppermint. And none of the others made any comment on its flavor.

"So," said the golden stone, "so that is that, and you are mine. And I am yours while you are mine. Do, for pity's sake, be careful."

"We've said we will," I told it.

"Yes, I know. But do remember. Things can get completely out of hand, if you lose your heads. Touch me against an inanimate object, and it will rouse. If anything goes wrong after that . . ."

It paused. I gave a small shudder. For a while now, I'd

had the nervous notion that we were on the edge of something dangerous. It was far too exciting to think about drawing back, of course. But now that sense of foreboding came nearer and loomed over me. I wondered if any of my family could feel it there. They often jeered at me for imagining things and letting my mind wander. . . .

"Listen to me, infants . . ." said the golden stone.

I did wish it would stop calling us that. But I suppose, compared with it. . . .

". . . in the event of any future trouble," it was saying now, "you must close your eyes, all five of you, and remain absolutely silent for at least two minutes. And during that time, no one must think of me. Do this, and whatever you have roused will return to what it was before."

"But suppose we aren't all together?" I said, worriedly. "Suppose only one of us is in trouble? How would the others know when to start shutting their eyes and that . . . ?"

"I never said it would be easy," said the stone. "Mistakes do get made. Dolls and lizards become giants and dragons. It often takes ages to get 'em cleared up."

"We ought to think this over," I said.

"Oh, but if we're terribly careful—!" cried Jo.

"And s-stay together," said Nigel.

"And do what the stone tells us," said Missie.

"And use the stone properly," said Douglas.

"And do stop calling me 'the stone'!" said the stone. "Use my great name. I am the Apple Stone. The only Apple Stone. The Apple Stone that saw the start of the galaxy—that assisted in its formation. . . ."

It fell silent and lay in my hand, warm and gleaming and as still as though it had fallen asleep.

And Ragnar the Dane burst through the hedge in

a turmoil of flying leaves and twigs, and hurled himself on me. I fell over. The Apple Stone was shot into a thicket of nettles. And the sun set.

Later, with darkness on us, we were angry and tired and burning with nettle stings. Douglas had managed to split his thumbnail on the blade of the shears, and I'd grazed my ankle by swinging a sickle too frenziedly. We'd cut the center of the orchard till it was like a lawn, but even so I doubt if we'd have found the Apple Stone if it hadn't shone so brightly in the gathering night. It was tucked under a tussock of grass, half-buried in the earth.

"Let me look after it," cried Missie, as I picked it up. "It can live in that dolls' handbag that Aunt Martha gave me, and I'll hang that on my locket chain. . . ."

I hesitated. She said she'd found the Apple Stone in the first place, anyhow. This being perfectly true, I handed it to her, and she put it carefully in the pocket of her jeans. Ragnar paced across to her and stared into her eyes in a fixed sort of way. After a moment or two, she said crossly, "Go away! Don't stare at me, you big stupid!"

The Great Dane whined. He then went to Jo, looking worried. She put her arm around his massive neck, but this didn't seem to cheer him noticeably. We were all rather thoughtful as we went in to have high tea. I hung back behind the others. They were talking about the Apple Stone, naturally, but it seemed to me that they were suddenly unsure about it.

"We've got to be *extremely* careful," said Jo. "You know how things always seem to go wrong in all the stories about magic. . . ."

"Nothing will go wrong for us." This was Douglas, of course, but even he sounded less confident than usual.

"We're not as stupid as it th-thinks we are," said Nigel, hopefully.

"It will look after us," announced Missie, but she gave the statement a sort of question mark.

"And we do know what to do in an emergency," said Jo.

But the foreboding had come back to me, and twice as dark and creepy. I felt like Achilles . . . and I don't mean bright or heroic, I mean wary of magic, for of one thing I was very sure—the Apple Stone had been burrowing under that grass, trying to hide in the ground . . . trying to get away. And as I'd picked it up, I'd heard a sigh and whisper from it, "Trouble! Always and always and always . . ."

2

BIRD OF PARADISE

Before we went in for tea, we agreed to rush up to the attic as soon as we'd gulped it down, in order to start experimenting. There was some argument over what to start *with*. Missie was still on about her teddy bear, and the Clans had some idea about an old rocking horse. I insisted that we ought to begin with something small. They said I was craven. Jo said what about the Dresden shepherdess? We overruled the suggestion on the grounds that she—the shepherdess—had a frightful simper, and would obviously be a dead bore. Jo said she couldn't be worse than a horse in the attic, with or without its rockers.

The attics are our playrooms. There are several of them across the top of the house, of mixed shapes and sizes, with low-beamed ceilings, and dormer windows in two of them. They are our private property, as long as we play fair like not setting fire to them or anything of that sort. It keeps us out of our parents' way while they're being Inspired. I mean the parents of Jo and Missie and myself.

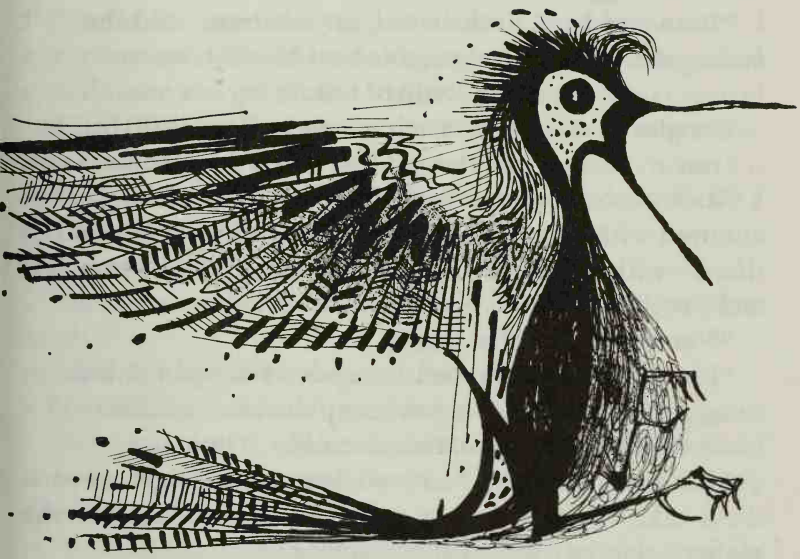
I regret to say they are "Auntie Monica and Uncle Dudley," who work some horrible little glove puppets

called "Ben and Bet Bun" for television. They write the scripts—our parents, not the dolls—and handle the tiresome, popeyed, rabbit things. The series is, of course, strictly for the tots. But our parents call it Art, and they mean this with a capital A. Once I heard my mother actually say it was "poetry in pattern," and she wasn't laughing! There always seems something odd about people who get embroiled with puppets. They are never quite human anymore. We're fond of our Mum and Dad, and hope they may grow out of it in time.

To return to our attics. They've been furnished with all the odds and ends thrown out from the rest of the house over the years. Mrs. Chugg, a lady who comes every day to cook and clean up, is allowed in the attics once a week—and she mustn't disturb anything we've left about, like Nigel's drawing, or Jo's photographs of animals, or my books and half-finished stories. We've all promised *not* to leave anything lying about unless we're really in the middle of doing something with it.

At teatime this particular evening, Mrs. Chugg was in one of her stern moods. She gets them from time to time, when she decides we're all neglected and need discipline. Both of the Clans were forced to change their clothes completely, owing to their goings-on in the ditch, and Nigel had to change his socks twice—though it was his own fault for only changing one the first time. Douglas had to wash four times before Mrs. Chugg passed him as clean. My grazed ankle was smothered in iodine with little outward sympathy. And poor old Ragnar was banished to the scullery in disgrace when he suddenly laid his head sideways along the table and ate a plateful of kipper bones in one gulp.

"Shouldn't be here in the first place," snapped Mrs.



Chugg, when Jo pleaded for him. " 'Tisn't right to have dogs about at mealtimes—if you can properly name that beast a dog!"

"What would you name him?" I said.

"He'm more like an elephant."

"Where's his trunk?" said Douglas.

Mrs. Chugg said she didn't want any sauce from him.

"Born and bred in the wilds, as you were," said she, "all among them eagles and stags at bay! You'll have to try and behave civilized among civilized folk."

Douglas does live in Scotland, near Fort William, but it's not all that savage, though Ben Nevis does tend to loom a bit. And once I saw an eagle there; deer, too. Douglas was annoyed with Mrs. Chugg. He said, "If you call Devon civilized—with all those Doones and things, and smugglers and wreckers—!"

"Not *now,*" said Mrs. Chugg.

"I bet there are," rapped Douglas, "I bet you're a secret smuggler yourself. I bet you creep out on the cliff with a lantern and lure ships to their doom!"

Mrs. Chugg said he had a wicked mind. Nigel asked if she'd take them wrecking with her one night. And she snapped that he was as bad as Douglas.

". . . and from the same outlandish place!" said she.

Actually, Nigel lives in rather a grand house, a few miles south of Oban. His mother had married Sir John Campbell, who invented electrical gadgets; and Douglas's mother had married Mr. Niall Macdonald, his assistant; and ours had married Mr. William Westray, an Englishman of Devon. All our mothers were sisters, and Scottish, and once named Ramsay. So the Clans were our cousins and each other's. And both their fathers had gone to America to fit some gadget of theirs on a rocket, and taken

their mothers with them—I mean the Clans' mothers. So Douglas and Nigel had to stay with us for a year, and go to my school. They were both homesick, and it was mean of Mrs. Chugg to rub it in.

"Three of you is bad enough," she was now saying, "but five is beyond anything! And months to go before you'm back where you belong. I wish you were going tomorrow!"

"So do I!" snarled Douglas. "I wish I'd never come! I wish the rotten rocket would explode *now,* so that Dad would come and get me out of here!"

Nigel had gone crimson, and was stuttering like a machine gun.

"I w-w-wish the whole of D-Devon would explode! I w-wish *you* would exp-p-lode—!"

"You naughty heathen!" said Mrs. Chugg.

But she sounded milder, as if she knew she'd been too harsh.

I said, "What about the attics, now?"

Nigel said he wished the attics would explode.

"No, you don't, you're just cross," said Jo. "It would be very insulting to your hosts if you wished to destroy their home."

"It wouldn't bother a Campbell," said Douglas, rapidly changing sides.

I saw what was coming. The Clans were now fighting mad, and they didn't care who they attacked. At any moment one of them would speak the Forbidden Word, and we'd get no more sense from either of them the whole evening. Nigel's eyes were almost sparking with rage, and Douglas was laughing in a high, wild sort of way.

"If you say it," I told him, sternly, "you'll never play with the Apple Stone."

I saw the Word die on his tongue. And Mrs. Chugg gave

us all a harassed look. She said, "Yes, you run along to your old attics. You're *all* a bunch of savages, and that's about the truth of it."

"Savages are nice," said Missie, who knew nothing about them.

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Chugg.

She opened the pantry door and took out a full package of mixed cookies.

"Here," she went on, "take these with you, and share them around—"

"Keep your rotten old—" began Douglas.

"P-poisoned cookies!" said Nigel.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Chugg," I said quickly, taking the package. "That's very kind of you. Thank you."

"All right, m'dear. Don't eat too many," said she. "Now take yourselves off, do."

We took ourselves off.

As we went along the hall to the backstairs, I could hear a lot of whispering and giggling behind me, from Missie and the Clans. I was glad our cousins had simmered down. But no foreboding came to me.

The backstairs were narrow and twisty, and we liked them better than the grander affair in the front hall. I noticed vaguely that Mrs. Chugg's hat and coat were on the wooden chest at the foot of the stairs. Her best hat and coat, which meant she wasn't just going straight home. She always went to the local cinema on a Friday evening. I wondered why she had such a staggering taste in hats. She was a large person, and usually dressed in blue or gray, and quite plainly. When not being stern, which was mostly, she looked like a plump wood pigeon. But her hats were rowdy. And this was the worst of them all. It was

covered with green net, and flowers, and a gaudy bird sitting on top.

As I rounded the first bend of the stairs, the bird flew past me with a piercing shriek, and vanished into the dark hall above. I stopped dead. I looked back at my relatives. Jo, just below me, had turned also to look at them.

"Jemima!" she exclaimed. "You wicked little girl!"

"Serves her right for being horrible," said Missie.

"It was my idea," said Douglas, defiantly.

"You must be mad!" I told him.

"What a terrible thing to do," said Jo.

"It was a terrible thing to have on a hat," said he.

"It was asking for it," said Nigel.

"That's not the point," I snapped.

Jo said they must put it back immediately, before Mrs. Chugg got through with the dishes. I pointed out that we'd have to find it first. We all tore upstairs, and I switched on the light—but there was no sign of the hat bird.

We could see the whole corridor, with its two rising steps halfway along, the pictures on the walls, the little dower chest, the balustrades, and the top of the front staircase, the wider hall beyond, the tall oak cupboard there. . . .

"It's gone on up to the attics," said Jo.

Douglas had rushed up there, and now he came halfway down the narrow stairs and said the door at the top was shut.

"It must be *some*where," I said.

"Maybe it went th-through a window," suggested Nigel.

"They're shut, too!" I said.

Jo opened a tiny window at the near end of the passage,

and craned her neck to look out. There was a shrill scream behind us, and the bird came shooting from under the cupboard in a swirl of green-and-purple feathers, and whizzed past Jo's head into the night.

"Crafty, too," said Douglas, admiringly.

There was a pause. Jo and I looked at Missie severely. She looked back, with her mouth clamped into a straight line and two large tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't blink or sob. But she cries so seldom that Jo instantly softened.

"Oh, it wasn't your fault, love—" she said.

"It was entirely her fault!" I said. "We trusted her with the Apple Stone, and she went fooling about behind our backs—"

"Not behind mine," said Douglas. "I held the hat."

"And I h-helped," supported Nigel.

"Behind the backs of everyone sensible!" I snapped.

Missie took the locket chain from her neck, and loosened the mouth of a little red siik bag she'd hung on it, and let the Apple Stone roll out into her hand. She gulped, and then said in a small voice, "Please—what shall we do next?"

The Stone mumbled something.

"What?" said Missie.

Then she remembered her manners and asked it to repeat what it had said.

"Don't bother me," said the Apple Stone. "You really must learn to manage on your own."

Missie stroked it cautiously with one finger.

"Oh, please," she repeated, "do help. We'll get into such trouble. And—and it *was* my fault. I was meant to look after you—and I let—I shouldn't have let . . ."

A tear plopped off her chin and fell on the Stone, and it shook itself and made a noise like a yawn.

"I scented trouble," it said, moodily. "What have you done?"

We told it, in turn and in chorus. And, at the end, it giggled.

"A thunderstorm in an egg cup," it said. "If you'd seen some of the botchery—!"

"Mrs. Chugg will be terribly upset," put in Jo.

"Why be concerned?" it asked. "I heard a few snatches of her conversation, and it serves her right to lose her pet. It will be happier away from such a bully."

"No, no," I said, "she didn't mean any of it. Not really."

"And it's not exactly a pet," added Jo.

"M-more of an ornament," said Nigel.

"A load of glue and feathers," said Douglas.

"Mrs. Chugg likes it," said Missie, sadly. "And usually we like her. We ought not to upset her."

"Then why are you waiting? Why ask me what to do?" said the Stone. "You know how to restore the thing to its nature. I told you clearly."

Then we remembered.

"Of course! We're mad!" cried Jo. "Shut our eyes for two minutes, and not speak, and not think about you."

We all sat down on the stairs and shut our eyes. While we were doing this, two words came floating into the back of my brain, in the way things do float so often—for me, anyway.

"Horse's tail."

They drifted about a bit and faded again. I wondered how we'd know when the two minutes were over. I couldn't look at my watch, in case it was too soon

and spoiled everything. I concentrated on not thinking about the Apple Stone.

I heard Missie give a hopeless sigh. There was a grunt from Douglas, and then Nigel coughed restlessly. Jo moaned. And the two words suddenly came back to me, and this time they made sense. I said, "All right, everyone. You can open your eyes. It's impossible. Piebald horses' tails!"

They stared at me. Then Jo's face fell, and she said slowly, "Oh, yes—of course . . ."

The Clans looked staggered, and even Missie got the point. We had all been told, when we were young, that anyone could have a wish who saw a piebald horse and didn't think of its tail. We'd proved again and again that it was a hopeless condition. You could see a piebald horse a dozen times without a thought of its tail—until you remembered about the wish and *not* thinking of its tail, and so you'd thought of its silly tail, and that was that.

"I *only* thought of the Apple Stone," said Jo.

The rest of us nodded in gloomy agreement. And Missie lifted the Stone on her hand, and said in deep reproach that it must have known what would happen.

"Not knew. Guessed, perhaps. Yet you might have done it. Nobody else has, in a hundred million years," it said, "but you might have been the first."

"Well, we aren't," I said. "We'll never break the magic by that method."

"There is no other," said the Stone.

Silence fell.

"Then the bird is gone," said Jo, in a voice of doom, "and Mrs. Chugg will come looking for us. She'll guess we did something with it—"

"She won't guess what," said Douglas.

Missie and Nigel giggled. And Jo turned on them in the rage that comes over anyone about to be caught red-handed in a crime they didn't commit and can't explain. Jo likes things to be fair, and they so seldom are.

"Since you've been so clever," she said, through her teeth, "you'd better invent what we're going to tell her! She'll want her bird, you know. And we're going to look a bit silly, saying we don't know where it is."

The Apple Stone gave a small cough. It said. "If I might offer a suggestion—"

We all begged it to do so.

"I know I shouldn't," it said. "I should let you face the consequences of your folly."

Douglas threw back his head and shouted angrily that it was nothing to do with anyone but himself.

"I thought of it—to annoy old Chuggy—so don't go blaming the others—"

"I b-backed you up," put in Nigel.

"And I actually *did* it," said Missie.

"Apart from actual blame, I am speaking of carelessness," said the Stone, "and that applies to all of you. Can you not assimilate the fact that you are in possession of very dangerous power? This time you have loosed a harmless bit of magic, but another time you may find yourself in desperate straits, if you act so rashly."

"Look—please, Apple Stone," said Jo, "you did say you had a suggestion. . . ."

"Can any of you draw?" it said.

The question took us by surprise. It was a moment or two before Missie said, "Nigel can. He won a prize."

Nigel scowled at her. He gets very touchy about it, but

in fact he's rather good—what our Art master at school calls "highly promising." Sometimes he'll let you see what he's painting or drawing, and sometimes he carries on like a maniac if you merely look over his shoulder. Jo says this is temperament and a sign of genius. I think it's temper and a sign of bad manners. All the same, he did win a prize.

"Then Nigel must draw a hat bird," said the Apple Stone.

We thought this over. Then our faces cleared—all but Nigel's. He said, suppose he refused? He said he couldn't just do things to order.

"Of course you can," said Jo.

"Of course you will," I said.

"Come on, Rembrandt," said Douglas.

Missie offered to go and get her crayons and slate.

"Thanks for nothing," snarled Nigel. "I wouldn't use that messy rubbish. I've got my own stuff."

He was so rattled that he forgot to stutter, and he dashed up to the attics with terrific speed. We followed.

A space was cleared on the big old kitchen table under the light, in the biggest of the attics. Nigel got his best drawing block and a lot of poster paints. And Jo filled a jam jar with clean water and set it by his elbow. Then we stood about him, breathing heavily, until he told us to stop.

"How can we? We'd die," said Missie.

He said he didn't care.

"Anyway, stop l-l-leaning!" he growled.

We retired a bit. He scribbled for a while, in a sort of frenzy. Then he ripped the sheet from the block, crumpled it into a ball, and flung it at Douglas. Douglas flung it back, and it knocked over a bottle of black Indian ink that

dripped off the table onto Missie's foot. Nigel sprang at Douglas's throat. They both rolled under a chair, shouting.

Jo and I dragged them apart, while Missie bawled at them, and we told Nigel sternly to pull himself together and get back to work. After considerable nagging, he did so.

Ten minutes later, the floor was covered with crumpled paper, and he was spattering bright colors over everything in reach. We retired a bit farther. And at last he gave a huge sigh, and slouched back in his chair. In front of him lay a picture of the hat bird. At least, it bore a slight resemblance. There was a garish blaze of colors in streaks and whirls; an angry head, cocked at a watchful angle; and a pair of mad and glittering eyes. I didn't remember the original looking so lively, not even in flight.

"Oh, well," I said, "it'll just have to do."

"What do you mean," demanded Nigel, furiously, "*have* to do?"

Missie touched the painting with the Apple Stone.

The splashes of red and orange and purple went into a frenzy on the paper. Long feathers fluttered and lifted, and sent a couple of pots of paint crashing to the floor. Bright eyes blinked. With a high shriek, the bird leaped into the air, and clung to the light fixture, flapping its wings.

"Touch me and I'll bite!" it screeched.

At this moment, the little cat door at the bottom of the attic door was pushed open from outside, and Jo's cat, Mrs. Blossom, came padding into the room. She stopped, with one foot lifted delicately, and her eyes became round as she saw the bird. The bird saw her, too, and it gave an ear-piercing yell and flew straight out of the window.

It took quite a time to calm Nigel.

We gave him all the chocolates Jo had left over from her birthday—three, to be exact—which he ate, scowling; we said how clever he was, and how we relied on him to get us out of this emergency; I told him he was a credit to the Campbells. Douglas tittered. Missie offered to be Nigel's slave for life, and he said he wouldn't have her as a gift. But at last he consented to try again.

Jo made sure that Mrs. Blossom had gone into the toy cupboard, and up onto the shelf where she kept her kitten. I made sure all the windows were shut. A lot more paper got torn and crumpled. But finally Nigel managed to produce another drawing not unlike the first. He said it lacked inspiration, but I snatched it away before he could destroy it. And Missie touched it with the Stone. I put it quickly back on the table.

From the paper rose the bird, very slowly. It yawned.

"I was tired when I did it," said Nigel, defensively.

"Good job, too," I said. "We don't want to be knee-deep in mad birds."

"Come to me, chickie," said Jo, holding out her hands.

It took a couple of listless steps toward her, and collapsed into them. She stroked it, while it muttered sleepily, with its eyes shut. Its tail feathers fluttered drearily as we went down the stairs.

Mrs. Chugg was moving about in the kitchen, and we heard her closing up the stove. This meant she was on the point of departure. We were just in time. Jo put the bird on top of the hat, and it clucked softly and put its head under its wing.

"It shouldn't be doing that!" I hissed.

"Ssh!" said Jo. "Don't wake it. It'll just *have* to be like

that. If only it keeps still, maybe she won't notice any difference."

Mrs. Chugg started when she found us all standing in the hall.

"*Now* what're you up to?" said she.

"Just come to see you safely off," said Douglas.

"To wish you good night," I said, hurriedly.

"And hope you enjoy the f-film, whatever it is," added Nigel.

We were all talking in a whispering sort of way, not to wake the bird, and she eyed us doubtfully. But she decided we were just being a bit weirder than usual, and said quite amiably, "All right, m'dears. Good night, then, and thank you. Don't go raising a lot of din when I'm gone, because your parents are working on their scripts. And just try to get some of that warpaint off Nigel. He looks a proper red Indian."

She put on her hat, glanced into the hall mirror, and turned away. She didn't see the bird lift its head, cast a bemused look around, and go back under its wing. I gulped nervously and helped Mrs. Chugg with her coat. She took up her gloves and handbag from a chair, thanked me, and went to the door. She turned again. We were all watching her closely. A nervous look crossed her face.

"Don't stare so," she said, opening the door.

She patted her hair self-consciously, and then her hat.

"Don't disturb it," said Jo. "It's lovely as it is."

"What, my bird-o'-paradise? Oh, it's a poor old thing. Had it for years, but I'm fond of it," said Mrs. Chugg. "Now don't go forgetting your proper bedtimes, will you?"

"No, we won't. Good night," we whispered.

"Good night," said she.

"Good night," said the bird.

Luckily, she assumed one of us had spoken, and she just nodded and went out. The door shut behind her.

"Phew!" said Douglas.

"Lumme!" said Missie.

"We must go and catch those other birds," said Jo. "We can't just leave them flying about."

This proved more difficult than it sounded, and it didn't even sound easy.

We searched the moonlit garden. We searched the shrubbery and the grove. We went across the deep lane into the farm fields beyond. We saw neither of the missing birds. Though once I heard wings go rustling overhead, leaves moving in a tree, and a sharp little voice high on a branch saying, "One step nearer and I'll bite!"

A big owl shot out of the tree with a yell, and behind it the voice shrieked, "Told you so!"

Nigel happened to be near me, and I asked why on earth he'd made the creature so cross.

"I put a b-blob of white on its eyes," said he. "It gives things an evil look."

"I didn't say *how,* I said *why!*"

"I like cross birds," he told me. "I forgot to put the wh-white on the second one."

Then there was a flutter of long tail feathers, and the original hat bird went sailing over us in the moonlight.

I heard Missie ordering it to come down at once, and Jo making cooing noises at it. But it just flew on into a tree, and its voice floated back, crying dismally, ". . . cold—want my hat. . . ."

When we got to the tree, it swooped out and away.

It was hopeless, and to make everything worse Douglas went and got Ragnar, which was absolute madness. The

Dane entered into the spirit of the hunt with such abandon that he managed to catch a pheasant. Being soft-mouthed, he didn't hurt it, but it bit me when I released it. Then Ragnar thought he'd track me. He did this, cornered me, and gave a great bay of triumph, and knocked me flat on my face over the rubbish heap. Wanting an audience, he went and got Jo. He dragged her by her sleeve all over the asparagus bed, and showed me to her. Hearing our lifted voices, Missie came running, and Ragnar gave her so hearty a welcome that she fell down, too, and yelled with rage.

We lectured our dog, while he sat with a silly smile. And the paper bird came over, flying rather low, and the Dane hurled himself into the air at its tail. He missed it by a yard and fell into the cucumber frame. Luckily no one got cut by the smashed glass, not even Ragnar, who deserved to.

We lost count of time.

Then Father came. He found us in the field by the far pond. He said it was eleven o'clock, and why were we wailing and yelling so? Missie said Ragnar was doing it.

"I didn't know he had such a vocal range," said Dad, "and a marvelous power of mimicry. He sounded—well, not exactly human, but verging on it."

He then escorted us indoors.

As I got into bed, I knew I would not sleep for worrying. And I heard wings go swishing past my window, and a thin little voice saying it couldn't find its hat. . . .

At some point in the night I dreamed I opened the window and the bird flew into my hair and made itself a nest there. And I dreamed that Jo was shaking me. And she was. It was morning.

"It's on my head—in a nest . . ." I said, blearily.

"It's back on her hat," said Jo. "I just went down to look. And it's half-past seven, and you'll be late for breakfast. Both the paper birds are on their paper in the attic. The cross one looks crosser than ever, and I'm going to ask Nigel to give me the sleepy one. I got fond of it."

I must have been looking quite blank, for she sat on my bed with a thump, and said, "Oh, Jeremy! We all went to sleep. None of us spoke for over two minutes, and all our eyes were shut, and nobody thought of the Apple Stone."

"I'm surprised. We should have been writhing in nightmares about it."

"There must have been two minutes when we weren't."

I thought it all over.

"I wonder why the Apple Stone didn't tell us this would happen?" I said, at last.

"We asked it," said my sister, "and it said it forgot. It said this was a special dispensation only allowed to people under fifteen. It isn't very flattering," she sighed. "It means we're expected to do silly things."

"We haven't let loose dragons yet!" I said.

Ragnar had followed Jo into my room, and he now heaved himself upon the bed beside her. The springs twanged protestingly. He stared at us.

"*He's* had some bad dreams," I said.

My sister hugged the Dane.

"Don't worry," she told him. "We'll be so careful from now on that nothing will go wrong again—ever."

He whimpered in a morose sort of way.

3

LOST—ONE OLD RUG

A good deal of this was my fault.

We had a long discussion over breakfast; being Saturday, we didn't have to go to school, so we took plenty of time to thrash the matter out properly. And we all agreed not to use the Apple Stone unless everyone was present and approving. This way we could make quite sure we did nothing silly. We all felt strong-minded, intelligent, and far-seeing.

"After all," said Douglas, through a mouthful of marmalade, "we could set everybody by the ears, if we chose. We could do some frightful things."

He sounded a bit wistful. I said coldly that he would do nothing frightful while I was watching him. He said there was no law against thinking. I said there ought to be for some people.

"And what's more," I said, "I'm going to take charge of the Apple Stone myself."

Missie burst into loud protests. So did the Clans.

"Jeremy didn't mean—we *do* trust you," said Jo, soothingly. "All of you."

I said as far as a seasick mouse could throw an elephant. The meeting broke up.

When we got up to the attics, Jo hurried to feed Mrs. Blossom. She's a lovely-looking cat, pale gray and white, but she has an odd temper and a quick paw. Jo found her when she was a lost kitten, and now she has a kitten of her own. As I see it, there's no reason why we shouldn't end up with about five hundred gray-and-white fiends. Anyway, while she was eating her fish and hissing at Jo, the rest of us went on discussing the Apple Stone.

"Let's do my Centurion tank," said Douglas.

"What about when it f-falls through the floor?" said Nigel.

"We'll take it out to the road first. Then drive it through the village," said Douglas, eagerly. "Give everyone a terrific surprise. They wouldn't know it was us inside."

"They'd think it was soldiers, and a war," said Missie.

"Who's going to drive?" I asked.

Douglas got extremely passionate, assuring us that one glance at a dashboard would make anyone, especially himself, the world's expert on tank driving. He fell over the rug and hit his head on the table. Nigel laughed. Douglas grabbed his leg and dragged him down, too. He hit *his* head on the table. We managed to separate them.

"That was aggression," I told Douglas, "and I've warned you about it!"

"It was the rug did the aggressing," said he.

"Rubbish! You fell over it, being silly, and then attacked Nigel—"

He laughed! "Because a mangy, rotten, moth-eaten old sheepskin—!"

"Bearskin," said Jo.

"It's a deerskin, actually," I said. "Mother brought it down from Braemar—"

"Uncle Niall shot it in India. I'm almost certain," insisted Jo.

Missie cut into the conversation.

"It's a lamb, poor little thing. It must have died of something."

"Yes," I said, "a bullet. At Braemar."

"In India!"

"I'll tell you what it is, it's a wolf," said Nigel. "My f-father gave it to yours, Jeremy, ages ago. And he had it given to *him* wh-when he was in D-Denmark—or somewhere. . . ."

"When was your father in Denmark?" Douglas demanded, hotly.

I was wondering that, myself. Nigel does tend to make things up. He says it's to add interest to the conversation.

"I said 'or somewhere,' " he told Douglas.

"I bet anyone sixpence it's a deer," I said.

We examined the rug. But it was too faded and squashed and worn to be recognized as anything in particular. I noticed suddenly that Missie was holding the Apple Stone on the palm of her hand, and looking thoughtful.

"Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"I *know* it's a lamb," said she, crossly. "I just *know!*"

And she stamped her foot, and the Apple Stone fell with a thud on the rug.

Looking back, I'm almost sure I could have caught it before it touched the ground, and that I hesitated from sheer curiosity. I was convinced I was right, and that it was a deer. . . .

There was a furry, fuzzy upheaval from the floor, and something streaked out of the attic like a flash.

"Oh, no!" I said. "Not again!"

I took a deep breath and looked at Missie. She looked back defiantly.

"It was an accident," said she. "I dropped it by accident."

Well, I'm not saying she didn't. I couldn't be certain. And no one likes to accuse their little sister of telling lies, or breaking promises. But. . . .

"It *was* a lamb," said she.

"No lamb ever went that fast," said Jo.

There was a pause. Missie picked up the Apple Stone.

I suddenly remembered what the Stone had said about reviving the dead. Surely a skin rug was. . . .

"Jeremy," said Jo, "it—it may be a wolf."

"Or a b-bear," said Nigel, fair-mindedly.

I said whatever it was, we'd got to find it.

"Yes," said Douglas. "It may be eating people."

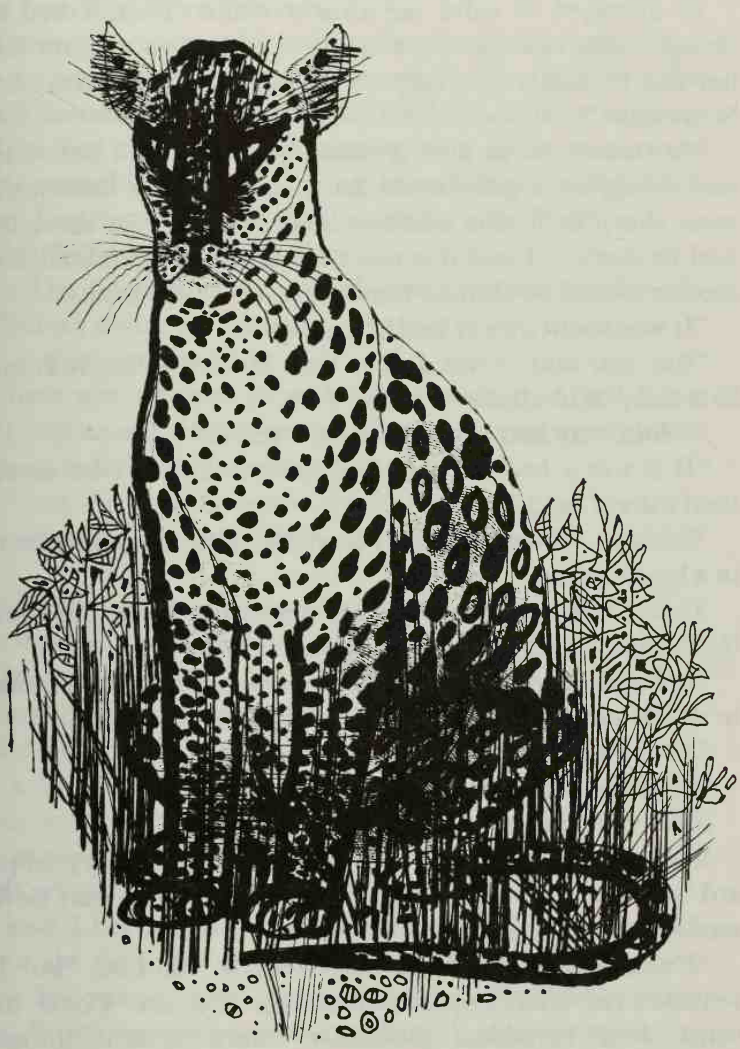
We didn't go very quickly—but we did go.

It wasn't in the house. The back door was open, and Mrs. Chugg said something had gone through the kitchen. She thought it was Ragnar. But the Dane was in his basket by the fire, and he rolled his eyes and wouldn't come out.

Later, meeting Jo in the orchard, I said, "I am *not* going to spend the rest of my life looking for oddments that Missie has let loose with the Stone, and so I tell you!"

"We'll take it away from her," said my sister. "One of us will keep it. You're right, Jeremy, she's too young to know what she's doing."

"She knows quite well what she's doing. And, in my



opinion, she's a monster, and as crooked as they come! So's Douglas. He's raving mad, and he eggs her on."

Jo managed to calm me after a while. Then I had a thought that uncalmed me again. I said, "We mustn't let her out of sight! She may be doing something with the Stone now!"

We rushed off to find Jemima, and we found her. She was sitting on a gate in the lane, looking at a field with some sheep in it. She said her lamb had gone in there to find its mother. I said if it was a lamb, which I doubted, its mother would be about a hundred years old by now.

"It was about ninety itself," I added.

"But you said it was a deer that Mother brought from Braemar," said Missie.

"I didn't say how long it had *been* there."

"If it was a bear Uncle Niall shot, it couldn't be more than thirty," said Jo.

"Even so," I said, "it isn't going looking for its mother in a load of sheep!"

Then Douglas came shouting across the field, and sent the flock scattering in all directions.

"It's a leopard! I saw it!" he panted, wildly, as he came to us. "Up on the moor . . . ! All spots and that—"

"Are you certain?" said Jo, worriedly.

"I left Nigel stalking it. He saw it, too."

"Who saw it first?" I asked.

It would be like Nigel to introduce an imaginary leopard into the proceedings. But Douglas assured us that he'd seen it before Nigel did.

"I was going to get Ragnar to track it," said he, "but I remembered that leopards like dogs. To eat. Come to think of it," he added, ghoulishly, "there's a lot of things they like to eat."

I wished he wouldn't harp on this theme. And as we crossed a meadow and made our way to the open moors, I can't honestly say we hurried.

The bracken was gold and red in the October sunshine, but we weren't in the mood to admire the scenery. We stared around apprehensively at the long, rolling upland. Only a few sheep were grazing quietly some way away. Then something came crawling from behind a clump of gorse. Jo gave a shrill yelp. It turned out to be Nigel.

"Ssh!" said he, "it's over there."

And he pointed to an isolated group of trees not far off.

"What's it doing?" I said.

"Washing its face."

There was a pause. Jo said, why couldn't we just leave the thing alone? And it would turn into a rug again when we went to sleep that night.

"What will it be doing till then?" I said.

Suddenly the sheep began to bleat, and walk quickly away.

"Maybe the leopard wants its lunch," said Douglas.

"Oh, shut up!" I snapped.

"Jeremy, we'll have to try to stop it," said Jo. "It does belong to us in a way, and you know what everyone's like about sheep worrying. . . ."

I knew. There had been suggestions once that Ragnar —but nothing came of them, because I said I'd been with him at the time of suspicion.

"It's dogs that worry sheep, not leopards," said Missie.

I said I bet they'd worry *more* if attacked by a leopard.

But the flock had stopped again, and was grazing peacefully. We went toward the grove, with a good deal of caution. When we got near, and nothing had come pouncing out, we all dropped into the bracken and began to crawl,

in the proper stalking manner. Nigel, crawling beside me, said suddenly, "What happens when we catch up w-with it? We haven't a gun. And besides, can you sh-shoot an animated hearthrug? I mean, doesn't it come under witchcraft, and n-need a silver bullet or something?"

Trust Nigel to start getting practical about a completely crazy situation! Not only that, he was scarcely stuttering at all. He doesn't when something really nerve-racking happens, which is odd.

"We'll think about that when we come to it," I said, vaguely. "It may be asleep. And we can keep watch and ward until night, and then all dash to the house and go to sleep ourselves."

"What will Mrs. Chugg do, when we don't come in to lunch?" whispered Jo, crawling a bit to our left.

I said I didn't know, and had more things to worry about than Mrs. Chugg.

"Well, *don't* worry," said Missie, from behind us. "It'll be tame, you see, and it'll eat out of our hands."

"Eat the hands, more like," said Douglas.

The crawling slowed down all around. In fact, we halted completely, and sat up and looked at the grove with some nervousness.

Then we heard a shout. Three men were coming toward us across the moor. Three men with guns.

"Hey, you kids!" bawled one.

It was a farmer called Dobbs. He was a big, burly man with a soft voice, and the largest moustache I've ever seen. It was he who'd accused Ragnar of sheep worrying, and we hadn't forgiven him.

"What are you doing?" he shouted, now.

I said we'd been having a walk. It was true, in a way. He told us to go home at once.

"There's a wild beast escaped from Ilfracombe Zoo," said he, "and it'll do in the lot of you if it comes on you."

"It's tame," said Missie.

He said it might seem so in a cage.

"But not running loose," he went on, standing over us and scowling at us. "It's ate one little boy," he said, "over at Muddiford."

"No—" said Jo, in a wail.

My knees felt limp. I said, "Are you sure?"

He said he was perfectly sure.

"Didn't it, Dick?" he appealed to one of the other men, who nodded.

"That's right," said the third man, solemnly.

"So you'd best be off, the whole bunch of you," growled Mr. Dobbs. "You don't want getting mixed up with tigers."

"It's a leopard," said Douglas.

"Been hearing tales, have you?" said the farmer. "Thought you'd come and help search, did you? Well, you ought to know better."

Missie said she wasn't afraid, even if he was. And all the men grinned. The third one, the little, old, weather-beaten one called Webber, said, "Ah, you're a proper hero! You just take your little sister and brothers home, and see they don't come to no harm."

We were all offended. Even Missie. But before we could speak, Webber went on, "Now I'm not jokin' entirely, m'dears."

And Mr. Dobbs, frowning blackly, said he wasn't joking at all.

"Off with you," said he, "and leave us to settle the old tiger—"

"Leopard," said Douglas.

"Have you s-seen it yourself, Mr. Dobbs?" asked Nigel.

"Yes indeed, son," said the farmer. "It come runnin' through my farmyard, and all the dogs howling," and then he added, sternly, "Has any of you seen it?"

"Yes," said Jo and Missie and Douglas.

"No," said Nigel and I.

We all spoke together, and the three men looked at us a bit sourly.

"This isn't a game," said Mr. Dobbs. "There's a lot of people out after this beast—police and soldiers and all—and if you don't get yourselves eaten, you may get shot by mistake."

"Not on purpose?" said Douglas.

Dobbs told us, even more harshly, to stop playing the fool, and get up and go home. Then the three men went striding off over the moor, looking grim and purposeful, with their guns aslant over their shoulders. They were going away from the grove. We relaxed.

"Why did you say you hadn't seen it, Jeremy?" said Jo.

"I haven't."

"Yes you did, in the attic."

"Not in its present form."

"Well, Nigel saw it," said my sister, accusingly, "and *he* said he hadn't, too."

"I d-don't like Dobbs," said Nigel, simply.

"Who hasn't seen it himself," put in Douglas. "He says it's a tiger, and it isn't."

"And apart from all that," I said. "I wonder where it is now?"

It sat up among some nearby ferns and yawned. And it *was* a leopard.

Missie recovered first. She held out her hand, and said, "Hello, ruggie. Come here, then."

It came. We were all too stunned to make the slightest move. But Missie patted it.

"There," said she, in triumph. "It is a lamb, in a sort of way."

She was right, in a sort of way. It was a very lamblike leopard. I suppose because of all those long years of being trodden on, and sat on, and brushed, and spilled over. We sat in a circle with it sitting in the middle, and Missie had her arm around its neck, and it purred at us. He was a big beast, about the size of Ragnar, and his coat was much nicer than it had been as a rug. Tawny-gold, he was, and dappled with beautiful dark rosettes, in definite rows all over him, even on his white stomach and throat. His eyes were golden, too, and he had long, white, curving whiskers. When I stroked these, they lifted upward as though the beast was smiling. Maybe he was. He couldn't have been more affable, for all his huge white teeth. He was like a gentle cat, which is just about what he was. We patted him and rubbed his chin, and the leopard rolled on his back and waved his big feet in the air, still purring his head off.

"Let's call it Lambie," said Missie, and he licked her ear until she giggled.

I said what about lunch? If we didn't go back, someone might come looking for us. Not our parents, because they were in Exeter, recording. But Mrs. Chugg might easily. . . .

"I'll go and get some sandwiches," offered Jo. "It's a nice day, so she won't think it's odd. We can't take—er—Lambie home, and we just can't go off and leave him alone here. He might get shot by beastly old Dobbs. One of you come with me, and the rest stay with him. You'd better go into that grove," she added, "and keep quiet."

Nigel got up, and they went off together.

We took Lambie into the grove.

"What about keeping a lookout?" said Douglas to me. "In case Dobbs comes back, or the police and that, and has a shot at our leopard. Maybe it really did eat someone in Muddiford," he said, hopefully.

If Douglas had an animal in tow, he wanted a lethal one! We looked at Lambie, lying with his great head on Missie's knee. He didn't look very lethal, I decided thankfully. And Missie said if he'd eaten anyone, they deserved to be. I felt she'd missed the point.

Douglas and I climbed to the top of the one pine that stood solitary among the birches, and we sat on a branch that gave us a clear view over the surrounding moor. It was nice up there. The pine resin smelled hot and soothing, though tending to come off stickily on our hands and clothes. And it was a very good thing we were keeping a lookout. We hadn't been up there long before old Grandma Webber came in sight. She was no relation to the man who'd been with Dobbs. There are lots of Webbers in Devon. Maybe they're all some sort of distant relatives. Anyway, this one was a strange old thing, who lived alone in a remote cottage at the edge of the moor, and was very shy with people. I once heard someone say she was a witch, but didn't think they were serious.

When she saw us, she waved and shouted, "Hello there, m'dears! Getting primroses, are you?"

It would have been a funny place to do it, and a funny time of year, but I only called back that we were having a rest. She smiled and nodded, and went on past us. Then she stopped. She stared back across her shoulder at the grove. She looked extremely odd, with wisps of white hair blowing in the wind, her thick gray dress and sweater, and

her old, old pretty face. She said softly, "Pussy, pussy, pussy . . ."

Below us, the leopard's head lifted quickly.

"Down!" I hissed.

"Pussy . . ." sang old Mrs. Webber, again.

"There isn't a cat here," shouted Douglas.

The old lady looked bewildered.

"Oh—isn't there?" said she. "I was sure I felt a pussycat nearby."

"There was," said Douglas, "but he went away."

"Ah, that would have been my Skippie," said Mrs. Webber. "Did he say where he was going?"

"To the Cornish's barn," I called, "to steal the farm cats' milk."

This was almost true. I'd seen Skipper there as we came by earlier. The old lady laughed.

"Thank you, love," said she. "I like to know he'm busy and happy."

And off she went, along the almost invisible track across the moor. I don't know where she was going. People said she looked for buried treasure and gathered strange herbs, but all I ever saw her look for and gather was firewood and blackberries. Sometimes we collected these for her and put them by her door. We liked her.

Then I thought of something nasty, and wished I hadn't. Once, not so long ago, upon a time, people would probably have chucked stones at a lonely old lady living with her cat—ducked her, and tortured her, and burned her, and her cat, too. Except that they didn't ever burn witches in England, unless they poisoned someone—but then, people always do think they're poisoned if they eat too much, or pick a toadstool by mistake. And is hanging all that much better than burning, anyway—?

"Jeremy!"

It came to me that Douglas had been shouting for some time. I found he'd gone down from the tree, and was helping Missie sit on the leopard.

"Wake up, Jeremy!" bawled Missie. "Lambie wants to chase Mrs. Webber!"

I went down. But as I reached the ground, Lambie rolled over on his side, and then rolled his head in a winsome sort of way. He seemed contented enough.

"He's better now," said Douglas, idly pulling the leopard's tail, "but he was mad keen to go galloping after the old girl."

"He liked her," said Missie.

"Wants his lunch," said our cousin, darkly.

Whatever he wanted, Lambie gave up any thought of leaving us for the time being, and this was just as well. The three of us combined couldn't have held him, if he'd made up his mind to go. Instead, he let us play with him. We tried to train him to jump through a hoop that we made from twisted twigs. He very nearly did it. Only the hoop wasn't quite big enough, and he sat there with it around his neck, looking a bit surprised and growling to himself. Douglas told him to shut up, and he did. I dragged the hoop off him, and he rubbed himself against me till I nearly fell over with his weight.

Then Jo and Nigel came back with the sandwiches.

It wasn't a big grove, and by sitting in a fairly wide circle we could keep an eye out all around. It was very quiet, except for a few bees humming in the sunshine, and once or twice the jet planes ripping the sky across with a noise like tearing canvas, as they flashed toward or away from Barnstaple. There was no sign of anyone out hunting for the so-

called tiger. I wondered why they thought he was a tiger—someone must have had the merest glimpse, and started the rumor.

We divided our sandwiches with our former rug. He liked the beef ones best. So did I, but I didn't cheat, and he got his fair share. Then he went to sleep, flat on the ground, with his paws crossed, snoring slightly. It made me feel sleepy myself, just to look at him. Nigel yawned. Silence fell on the grove.

I got a frightful turn when Douglas shook me violently. I yelped, and he put a hand over my mouth. I gurgled.

"Ssh, Jeremy! Wake up, do!" he hissed.

Then he removed his hand, and I said indignantly that I was wide awake, thank him very much, and what on earth was he playing at? He said we were surrounded. I said, by what?

"Soldiers—and men—coming close—"

"What shall we do?" said Jo, across his shoulder.

Her face was as white as paper. She's a fairly law-abiding sort of girl, as a rule, but now she looked grim and determined and terrified all at the same time.

"We *must* get Lambie away," she said.

If an animal is involved, my sister will fight to the last ditch.

I rolled over, and looked out of the grove, and saw a line of men spread over the moor, coming slowly toward us.

"There are more at this side," said Nigel, in a piercing whisper, from the far edge of the birches. "They're closing in."

I could see the uniforms of policemen and soldiers.

"They're beating the moor properly," said Douglas, under his breath.

"They're making a mistake," I said. "They think it's a savage tiger escaped from the zoo. We must go out and tell them—"

"Don't be silly!" snapped Jo. "Can you see them when you start up about the Apple Stone and the attic rug! Think of something sensible."

"Jeremy, don't let them hurt Lambie," begged Missie. "Stop them."

She was clutching the leopard as close as an eight year old could possibly clutch so large a creature. Not for the first time, I wished they wouldn't all turn so hopefully to me whenever some really dreadful crisis arose.

"If I crawl out," said Jo, tensely, "perhaps they'll follow me, and—"

"I'll crawl the opposite way," said Douglas, "and growl loudly, and then they won't know who to shoot—"

"I'll go out and point at you—" began Nigel.

"No, no," I said.

Then the thought came to me, and I was very glad to get it.

"There's a deep, dry brook running from just outside these trees to the wood over there," I told the others, "and plenty of bracken to hide us crawling into it—if we go *now*."

We went then.

Another ten seconds and someone would have seen us as we wriggled through the bracken into the little ravine. In normally wet weather this would have contained a swift-running brook, but now it held only a thin trickle of water and us. We had to go on all fours. The leopard was on all fours anyway, in a manner of speaking, and he was the only one who didn't find it tiring. He wouldn't. In fact, he showed a tendency to think we were playing and to

frolic about. I slapped him, and told him in a hiss to behave himself. He gave an excited coughing bark, and Jo hissed at him too, and he subsided. He walked along rather sedately, casting puzzled looks at our rapidly crawling line from time to time, until we reached the wood.

I was the last to wriggle into the shelter of the big trees, and I looked back to see what was going on behind us. The line of men had got to the grove, and was just going in with guns at the ready. I shivered. I've always hated people who hunt things, because I've always thought I knew how the hunted would feel. Now I did know, it was even worse than I'd thought. I heard someone whispering my name urgently. I caught up with Douglas, who was waiting for me.

"If only this was a huge forest," he said, "but it isn't. It's quite small, and they'll come here next."

"They may not."

"Why not?"

I couldn't think of any reason why not, so I told him to shut up and run.

We got to the big dead tree in the very middle of the wood, where we'd often held meetings and picnics and such, and here we stopped and panted and gasped and looked at one another with alarm and despondency. Jo was almost in tears of worry and fury. We'd been fond enough of our leopard during all the years he'd been our hearthrug, and now we loved him dearly. And in the distance were men who carried guns and wouldn't think twice about killing him. I wondered what would happen if they did. Would he suddenly turn into a rug again in front of their startled eyes? And then—if we used the Apple Stone —and made him a leopard again, would they shoot again? And then, if . . . ?

"Let's burrow into some bushes," said Jo, "and keep dead still and quiet, and maybe no one will come poking around too closely—"

"Some of the men had dogs," said Nigel, in a voice of doom.

"Leopards like dogs," said Douglas.

"You said that before," I told him, snappishly, "and it wasn't funny then!"

"It wasn't meant to be."

"Let's go up a tree," said Missie.

I said if she thought a lot of grown men were going to miss seeing all five of us and a great shining leopard sitting in a row on the branch of a tree, like starlings. . . .

A man came out of the shadows of the wood, and stared at us.

We froze.

"Pussy!" he said.

The leopard sprang at him.

"Heel!" I said, shutting my eyes.

I heard the man's voice saying, "Pussy, where have you been, you stupid old fool? Oh, get down! Stop it, you clown!"

Cautiously I opened my eyes. And the leopard was cavorting around the stranger, nudging at his hands, and whining and grunting and mewing. And the man was laughing.

"Where did you find him?" he asked us.

Douglas was the first to find words.

"In the grove on the moor," said he.

"Do—do you know him?" asked Jo.

"He belongs to me."

"But he's our hearthrug," said Jemima. "His name's Lambie."

The man laughed again, and stroked the leopard's head where it rested lovingly against his thigh.

"I've had him since he was a baby," said he, "and his name's Pussy."

We goggled at him. He was a youngish man, rather short and broad-shouldered; his face was good-natured, and he had bright blue eyes. He glanced around our circle, and said more seriously, "I'm very glad you did find him, and looked after him. I was afraid he'd get hurt. He got out this morning when some idiot left his paddock gate unlatched, and there's a bit of a hue and cry on. I've told everyone he's perfectly tame. But you know how it is when people get excited. And once a hunt starts—"

"All the men have guns," said Jo.

"And there's soldiers," put in Douglas.

"And police d-dogs," added Nigel.

"And Mr. Dobbs," said Missie, broodingly.

"Have you got a zoo?" I said, "and did he eat someone at Muddiford?"

"No, to both questions," and the man grinned widely. "He lives with me at Combe Heanton as a pet. And he hasn't been brought up to eat people. He had a perfectly good breakfast this morning, what's more. I don't say he couldn't bite and claw," he added, "but only if he was frightened."

"Er—what would be likely to frighten him?" I asked.

"Well, if anyone were afraid of him—fear is catching, you know. It's very lucky for Pussy that none of you feared him."

"We like him," said Jo, thinly.

"We thought he was our hearthrug," said Missie.

"Bless you," said the man, vaguely.

During all this, he'd taken a collar from his pocket and

put it around the leopard's neck, and now he coupled it to a chain leash. Douglas said, in a brisk voice, "There are men coming into the wood now. The ones from the moor."

"Oh, get him away!" cried Jo. "Run!"

"But they'll see I have him on a leash—"

"They may shoot first, and see that afterward."

"But I must explain to them—"

"No, no!" said my sister, frantic with worry. "Please run! Get him safely away."

"All right, love," said the man. "My car's just out in the lane there. I'll let the police know in the village that he's found. I don't want a lot of excitement around Pussy, anyway. It gives him hiccups." He gave us one of his cheerful grins, and added, "Say good-bye to your friends, you hearthrug."

And he let go of the leash.

The leopard trotted to me. Just for a moment, I quailed. But I'd been playing with him the whole afternoon; I'd shoved him into a hoop, and slapped him, and shouted at him—I stroked his head, and he loped away to the others, purring. They all patted him, and Missie kissed the end of his nose.

"Good-bye, Lambie-Pussy," said she. "Be a good boy."

"Do please hurry!" said Jo, urgently.

"All right. Come and have tea with us," said the man. "My name's Rivendel—Major David Rivendel. The Little Manor at Combe Heanton. Telephone 32."

We said thank you, and he said no, thank us. And he went away with his leopard. I scarcely noticed their departure, for a thought had suddenly come to me, and it came as a shock. Suppose the hunters weren't after Pussy at all—but our escaped rug? I said, "We don't know now

where the rug is, you know. It may *be* a tiger. *It* may have eaten that boy."

Jo gave a gulp of dismay. Douglas said we'd better start looking for that, then. Nigel said we didn't know where to start, and he wanted his tea, and as far as he was concerned, the rug must look after itself.

The first of the hunters walked into the clearing. It was Mr. Dobbs. He glared at us, as other men came up behind him. They all glared.

"I told you kids to go home," said the farmer. "Have you lost your wits? There's a wild beast loose—"

I had to say something. I crossed my fingers in my pocket and said, "Not now, there isn't. Major Rivendel has found it, and taken it home on its lead. It's his. And it's tame. And if you go to the police station, they'll tell you."

At least I was giving our rug a chance to get away, I thought.

"Rivendel?" said Mr. Dobbs. "Ah—he has got some wild creature in his house . . ."

"It's a leopard," said Douglas, and added scornfully. "Some people can't tell stripes from spots!"

"Cheeky monkey!" said Mr. Dobbs.

But the men had lowered their guns, and now they leaned on them, and discussed going on to the village and checking with the police; and one went back to the moor to tell the rest of the hunt.

We went home. With the honors of war, I rather thought. And then I began to wonder what our rug was doing, and my spirits took a plunge.

But the rug was back in the attic. Squashed and drab, and unrecognizable as ever. We all stared at it, with dropped jaws.

"How on earth . . . ?" I said.

Jo gave a shaky laugh. She said it must have happened after lunch, when we all went to sleep in the grove.

"Just a snooze," I said.

"At least two minutes. Time enough," said my sister, "to make whatever it was into a rug again. That means things come back to where they started, when the magic breaks. Oh," she cried, "I'm glad to see it! If it was being chased about, and being frightened—"

"And eating people," said Douglas.

"That wasn't true," said Nigel, loftily. "Don't you know when old D-Dobbs is trying to be funny? I do. His ears t-t-twitch."

"We should have guessed the leopard was a real one," said Jo. "He didn't talk."

Missie cast herself suddenly on the rug, and sneezed as the dust rose.

"Dear darling Lambie!" said she, stroking it fondly.

"What was it, anyway?" I said.

"Try it again and find out," said Douglas.

We shut the doors and windows. We tried it again. But the rug remained a rug.

"I see," said Jo, thoughtfuly. "We can't use the Apple Stone twice on the same thing."

"Clever girl," said the Apple Stone.

"Anyway," said Douglas, "we know it was a sheep."

"A wolf," said Nigel.

"A bear," said Jo.

"A lamb—"

"A deer—"

4

THE BLEEP

There was still an hour to go to teatime. And we had another problem on our hands. A letter was waiting at the house from Nigel's father. This was extremely depressing for everybody. It's bad enough for me, and for my sisters, when Douglas gets one—well, just think of what the Clans' fathers are doing, and then think of Bet and Ben Bun!—but at least he doesn't instantly abandon himself to a fit of the mopes. Nigel is rather devoted to his dad and misses him. Douglas says he can take or leave his.

We went to the orchard, to console ourselves by eating apples. But this activity didn't help much. We fell into a glum silence, the rest of us glancing from time to time at Nigel, who sat moodily gnawing his thumbnail. Jo had tried to cajole him into a better frame of mind, and only got leave him alone and mind her own business for her pains.

I had firmly taken the Apple Stone away from Missie, saying I would look after it myself, but the others had ganged up on me. They said I was too much of a wool-gatherer to be trusted with it. I said I didn't know what they meant—I certainly did a lot of thinking, but that was

not the same thing as woolgathering. They said the results were the same. And Jo took charge of the Stone, and the bag and the chain, and hung it around her neck. Missie made a fuss, but not a big one. I think she was relieved. The Apple Stone was a responsibility. She was now trying to make conversation with Nigel.

"What did your letter say?"

He gave her a black look.

"It d-didn't say anything, s-stupid! How c-could it? It's only p-p-paper and ink."

"You know what I mean," said Missie.

He grunted.

"What did your father write in the letter?" said Jo, carefully. "And don't tell me to mind my own business again. We're all interested in the rocket, and what Uncle Niall and Uncle John are doing, so don't be horrible. Tell us the news."

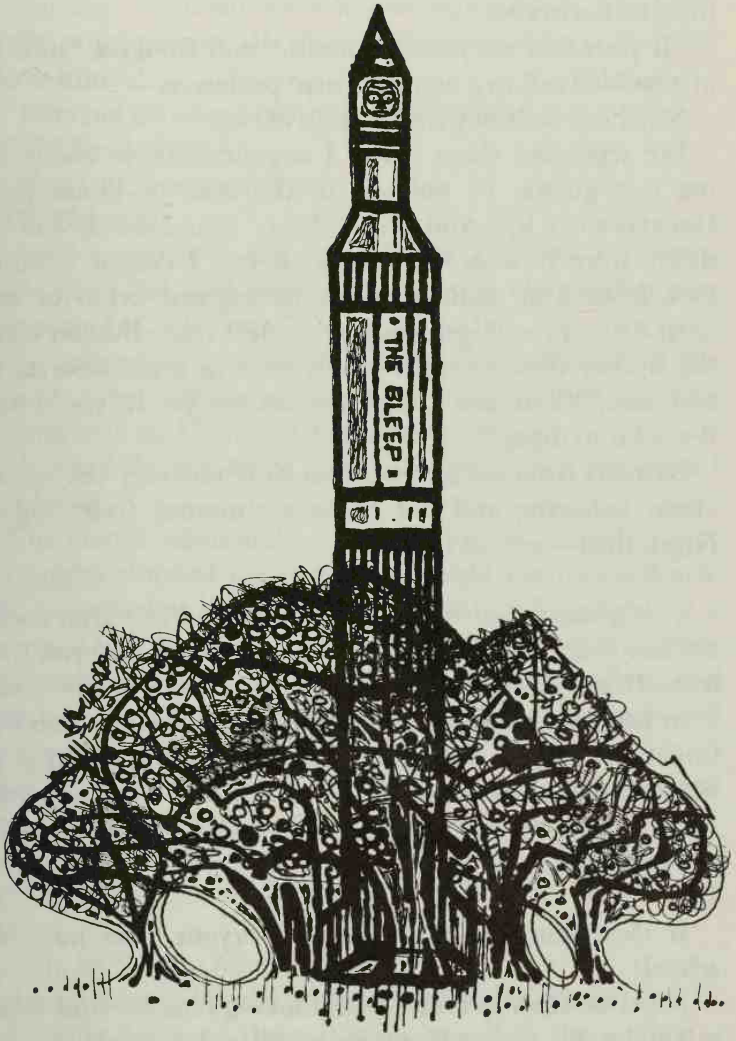
This was rather nice of her. It was awful to hear such interesting news, really. While our uncles were sending rockets into space, there was our own father wiggling his fingers inside a furry glove, and saying in a squeaky voice, "Did 'oo see the naughty foxie, then, Bet?"

I suppose it *is* a job of sorts, but . . .

"I bet the whole thing's blown up again," said Douglas, with gusto. "Five—four—three—two—one—zero—BANG! Bother! Bother!"

"No, it hasn't!" snarled Nigel. "And it w-won't, with Dad's stuff on b-b-board. It's n-not launched yet, and you know it!"

"If your dad was left to himself," said Douglas, "he'd still be inventing the wheel. It's only because mine tells him what to think about that he ever invents anything new."


THE BLEEP

Nigel gaped at him, and then said through his teeth, "If *your* dad was left to himself, he'd be p-putting nuts and b-bolts on bicycles! It's only that m-my dad gives him a job from t-time to time—"

"If your dad was left to himself," said Douglas, "he'd be in a padded cell in a home for mad professors—"

Nigel fell on him with a scream of rage.

We separated them twice. I reminded them about being our guests. Jo pointed to the flow of blood from Douglas's cut lip. And Nigel slowly simmered down. My sisters were furious with Douglas, but I caught a funny look from him, and knew his outrageous behavior had been deliberate. Nigel was a great deal more human when the uproar died away. He even gave us a crooked smile, and said, "You can r-read my letter, Jo, if you l-like. R-read it to them."

Extracts from his letter—most of it was very boring, all about behaving and not being a nuisance (referring to Nigel, this)—were as follows:

. . . getting exciting here. It's a shame you aren't with us. But there will be many more launchings, and you'll be here. If my generation succeeds in its efforts, maybe you'll even be at the controls, and heading for the stars. Don't be impatient, laddie, your turn will surely come. Things go well, this time, so cross your fingers, and with any luck there will be a Campbell and Macdonald token sitting on the moon. . . .

It then relapsed into love to everyone, and how was school!

Nigel sat silently for a while, looking remote. And we all talked loudly, to give him time to collect his thoughts. After

a minute or two, he gave a gusty sigh. He said, "He's wrong. I won't be a s-scientist or a rocket pilot. I'm an artist."

"Who says you're not?" said Douglas.

"No one." As usual when he was very serious, Nigel was hardly stuttering at all. "But Dad would like it if I did follow him—"

"Why not get ahead of him?" said Douglas.

"Eh?" said Nigel.

"Now—this very minute."

"Eh?" I said.

"Send a rocket to the moon," said Douglas, carelessly. "Beat your dad, and mine, and everyone else, with a new type of rocket. That one."

He pointed to a model rocketship that was stuck in the fork of a tree branch, where it had landed when we were playing with it. There was a breathless silence.

"It can't do any harm," said Douglas. "No one would ever know."

The silence continued.

Douglas climbed the tree and brought the rocket down. We all looked at it, still without speaking. It was rather a nice model. It had been given to Nigel by his father, to console him for being abandoned. It was painted silver and green, and it had realistic fins and jet tubes and things, and observation ports. Its name, *The Bleep,* was scrolled on its sides, and it had a label under its nose that said it was made in Birmingham.

I'd been wracking my brain to think of any reason why we shouldn't carry out Douglas's idea. But I couldn't think of one.

"Oh, let's!" said Missie, eagerly.

And suddenly Nigel's green eyes began to glitter.

Douglas balanced the rocket on its tail in the middle of

the orchard. Jo produced the Apple Stone. Then I did think of something.

"Hold on a minute," I said. "That little thing will just melt if it goes belting off faster than light, or whatever it has to do to get away from Earth. We should make it bigger. . . ."

"How?" said Jo.

"I don't know."

"Ask the Apple Stone, if it's awake," said Missie.

The Stone was glimmering golden in Jo's hand. It certainly didn't look awake. Missie leaned over it, and said loudly, "Hello . . . hello, Apple Stone! Are you pretending not to hear?"

"Don't deafen me," said the Apple Stone.

"We only want to ask your advice," said Jo, "if you don't mind."

"What is it, then? What trouble have you encountered this time?"

"None . . . as yet," I said.

"It's purely a technical matter," said Douglas.

"Ask away, then," said the Stone.

We told it the plan and the problem. It rolled about a bit, and Jo put up her other hand quickly just in time to stop it rolling off her palm.

"Careful, dear!" she exclaimed. "If you fall on my shoe, we'd have it alive on our hands. You know what I mean," she added.

"There was once an old woman who did just that," the Apple Stone remarked. "Made a lovely cottage, it did, for her and her kiddies, when it was thatched and fitted with some furniture."

"Oh," I said. "Well, that has some bearing on our own

problem, hasn't it? How did she make the shoe bigger than its normal size?"

"My dear boy, the question of size depends entirely on how long you hold me against the chosen object. Surely you understood that? Stonehenge—the wooden horse . . ." And then it said, "If that old woman had kept going, she could have filled the universe with her shoe."

My mind followed this statement until it began to boggle. Then it returned to the orchard to hear Missie saying, "Can we make a rocket strong enough to carry us all?"

"Here!" I said. "*We're* not going."

"Why not?" demanded Douglas.

"But I *want* to go," said Missie.

"I'll take my paints," said Nigel, eagerly, "and make the first pictures of the moon."

"I'll take my camera—" cried Douglas.

"You're not going," I said. "In fact, if you mention the idea again, any of you, we won't even send the rocket."

"Why, Jeremy?" said my elder sister. "Do you think we'd get into some trouble?"

"No," I said. "I think we'd be dead."

There was an outburst of protest from the younger ones, but Josephine continued to look at me inquiringly. I said, "This model is hollow. It has no equipment. It isn't airtight. It's not even furnished. What would we do for breathing, and eating? Astronauts are trained for months before they take off, and then they're all strapped into safety belts and cushions and things. They have oxygen and helmets, and radios for signaling that everything's under control. . . ."

"Oh," said the others.

". . . I'm not even sure we ought to send it at all," I

ended. "But I'm prepared to agree, if there's no more talk of any of us going too."

Douglas sighed, and said I was unenterprising. Nigel said he could probably do a picture of the moon from imagination, and the real thing was most likely dead dull. He only said this to annoy Douglas, but I was grateful to him. Then the Stone chipped in and said think about Daedalus. I thought about Daedalus.

"Did he use you?" I said. "To make the wings . . . ?"

"He did, indeed. And was doing very well, until he and Icarus lost their nerve and fainted, and—well, the wings were a sparrow's wings again, and it all ended in disaster. I tell you," said the Stone, "you really can't be too careful."

"Will it—will it be all right for us to send the rocket to the moon?" said Jo.

"Use your own judgment. And please don't keep bothering me about minor matters," said the Apple Stone. "If you can't think for yourselves, you'd better put me down and let me go, here and now."

"Oh, not yet!" cried Missie. "Please not yet."

It made an irritable grunt and a noise like a yawn. It then went to sleep. At any rate, it stayed quite still and wouldn't answer when we spoke to it. After a few tries, Douglas said impatiently, "It's asleep! Let's get on with the moon shoot."

"All right," I said. "Touch the rocket, Jo—but take it steady. Don't make it too enormous, or it'll knock down the whole orchard."

"You do it," said she.

She handed me the Stone. My relatives then looked at me expectantly. I said it would be fairer to let Nigel launch his rocket. He backed off a bit. I said it would please his dad. He said he had no intention of telling his

dad, as the explanations would be a bit complicated. I said, apart from all that, he should accept the honor of being the first to send an engineless rocket to the moon. He had gone rather pale, and he shifted uneasily. Douglas held out his hand.

"Give it to me, then," said he, "*I'm* not scared."

"Nor am I," said Missie. "I'll do it."

Nigel took the Stone. He stooped and touched it to the side of the toy. The rocket began to shimmer and grow. We all moved back, fairly speedily, except for Nigel. He stood his ground, holding the Stone steadily against *The Bleep* and just stepping back with it as it grew and lengthened and thickened. The nose now pointed high into the air.

"Er—Nigel," I said, "don't go too far, will you? You'd better stop."

The nose was lifting above the treetops, and glittering in the last of the sunset. It only needed someone to see it from the house, or the lane, or the village, and the questions would start. Then a horrifying memory of the Stone's remarks about the old woman and her shoe came to me. I thought if Nigel filled the universe with the rocket, there would be no need to send one to the moon—it would push all the stars out of its way—where would they go, when there was no more room for stars?

"Nigel, *stop!*" said Jo.

He seemed to be hypnotized by what he was doing. The base of the great rocket was touching the circle of trees that stood around it; one or two began to creak as it forced them outward. Douglas ran to his cousin, and dragged him away to where the rest of us were standing. Nigel struggled for a moment and then went limp.

"Lumme, look at it!" said Missie.

We were all looking. The orchard seemed full of rocket.

"If it fell over," said Douglas, "it wouldn't half do some damage."

We moved even farther back.

"Now what?" said Jo.

"What sort of what?" said Douglas.

"Well, it's not doing anything, is it? It's just sitting there. How do we send it to the moon?"

"Ask it," said Missie, and yelled. "Hey, rocket!"

There was a moment of silence, and then a voice replied—an odd voice, hoarse and hesitant, as if it wasn't used to speaking. It said, "What can we do for you?"

"Who are you?" asked Jo.

It paused, as though it was not quite sure, then the voice said, "I think—I—am—the pilot."

Nigel gave a gasp.

"It's the little f-face painted on the window," said he.

"Oh," said Jo. "Well, that's that, then. We can't possibly send it to the moon. It might come to harm."

"Hi!" shouted Douglas, up to the rocket's nose. "Will you be all right if we send you into space? You won't melt or anything?"

"I shall—not—melt. I am—part—of the rocket. What it—can do—I can do."

"What about breathing?" I asked.

"I do not—breathe."

"And what about your dinner?" called Missie.

"I do not—eat. I am only—a face."

There was a pause, while we thought this over. Then I said, "How can you pilot the rocket, if you've no hands or feet?"

"I do not know," the voice was firmer, as though im-

proving with practice. "But—as I am a pilot—then pilot the rocket—I can."

"To the moon and back?" cried Douglas.

"To the moon—and back."

"Go then," said Nigel, loudly.

In the split second that followed, I remembered a film I'd seen of a rocket taking off. How flames spread flatly around it, and it rose very slowly, roaring, on a bed of fire and smoke. It's not going to be good for the orchard, I thought. It's not going to be very good for us, either, I thought.

But this rocket went without a sound, and faster than the eye could follow. No smoke or flame. One moment it was there, and the next moment it wasn't. The apple leaves were shaking a little, and one or two ripe fruits fell with thuds. But that was all. And the rocket was gone.

After a while, I said thoughtfully, "I do hope it comes back to where it started. It won't be good for the house if it lands there."

"We must rely on the little face to know what he's doing," said Jo.

"He was sweet," said Missie.

I said, "But is he competent?"

We went in to tea.

On Saturdays we usually had this with Mum and Dad. They were quite good company. They knew we didn't think much of their puppets, and so they never talked about them in front of us. They tried various other conversational gambits today, but we were all a bit absent-minded. When Dad suddenly said, "What about the rocket?" we all started and then said, "What about it?"

"Good gracious!" said Mother. "This is a new attitude.

You're usually interested enough. Don't you care whether they get their rocket to the moon?"

I mumbled that we had troubles of our own. Jo began to talk a bit wildly about a play they were going to do at her school. It sounded peculiar, the way she told it, but her mind wasn't really on the telling.

". . . then Sir Galahad rushes in," said she, "bawling that he's found the Grail, and Lady Elaine says it'll do for the sideboard. . . ."

"I'd no idea you were putting on a revue," said Dad.

The conversation flagged.

"Look, are you all coming down with something?" said Mother, at last. "If you are, I do wish you'd say so, then it won't be quite such a shock when the rash appears."

"It's the strain," said Douglas suddenly, with a wicked glint in his eyes. "The awful strain of waiting to see what the rocket does."

"It's g-getting on our nerves," said Nigel, instantly backing him up.

I gave them a repressive stare, but they took no notice.

"Father says it's the suspense that sends you around the bend," said Douglas, looking pathetic and slightly mad, which is not difficult for him.

"Well, he's right, I suppose," said our father, "and what does he recommend as a relief measure?"

"A dram," said Douglas.

Father coughed.

"I meant for you, not for him."

"For me, too," said Douglas. "It wouldn't be the first time. When I fell in the loch—"

"Let me know when you fall in again, and I'll give you a dram of whisky, too," said Dad. "Otherwise you'll stay strictly teetotal."

"Having a r-rocket loose in space is w-worse than lochs," said Nigel.

The wickeder elements of their Highland blood had taken over, and the Clans were enjoying themselves.

"Now, now!" I said, feebly.

"Let's go to the attics and play at something," said Jo, more constructively.

"Yes, why not?" said Mum, looking a bit relieved. "Leave your father to worry about the rocket, Douglas—"

"It's not his that worries me—"

He'd gone too far. I got up and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Come on," I said, "or it's the last time we let you play—at *any*thing," I ended, with meaning.

He got the message. He stood up, and looked winningly at my parents. He can do this when he chooses.

"We just can't help worrying a little," said he.

"If we could s-sleep it would help," said Nigel.

Mum and Dad looked slightly baffled, but smiled kindly at the Clans, and said they were sure everything would turn out splendidly, and the rocket would reach its target.

"If only it doesn't come back and land on the house," I said.

"Jeremy!" said Jo.

We went out of the room rather quickly. As I closed the door, I heard Father say, "Darling, do you think *our* parents thought *we* were mad?"

I would like to have heard the reply to this, but one mustn't listen at doors. I followed the others to the attics.

Jo and Missie were furious. They said we'd been taking advantage of Mum and Dad. I said it wasn't my fault, I'd got muddled because of the way the Clans behaved.

They said I was old enough to know better. I said I felt older since tea.

"I wonder when the rocket will come back," said Missie.

"When we go to sleep," said Jo.

"Then we'll never know what the moon is like."

No one else had thought of this. But Missie was right. Only the little face could tell us about the moon, and if we just let the rocket turn into a toy again, we could never bring it back to life to ask questions of it.

"We'll have to stay awake," I said, "and wait for it."

"But it might take years," said Douglas. "We don't know how fast it flies."

This depressed us all very deeply. To distract us from our new problem, Jo went and switched on our little radio. She said we might as well see if there was any news of the other rocket. And after a while we got some. But it didn't cheer us at all.

". . . unidentified missile," said the announcer, "heading for the moon, according to the message from Jodrell Bank. No one, as yet, has admitted sending it, and questions are being asked by Russia and the United States. If some other country has fired a satellite into space, this must mean a great advance in the technology of that country. Both the United States and Russia are accusing each other of backing a nuclear program somewhere in secret. A good deal of tension is building up."

"That's all we needed," I said, bitterly. "We've probably caused a war!"

"At Cape Kennedy," said the radio, "there has been some delay in the preparations for the new rocket's takeoff. Weather conditions are not favorable. . . ."

"They never are," said Douglas.

". . . but the possibility that another Power intends to

make a manned-rocket landing on the moon has made the experts decide to hurry the takeoff, in spite of the poor weather—"

I switched off the set.

"Right," I said. "We're entirely responsible if the thing explodes. I might have known! It would be better to let the Apple Stone go," I said.

"Maybe it won't explode," said Jo, soothingly. "Maybe the weather will clear for them. I think we should go down to the orchard and wait for our rocket."

"I tell you, it won't come back till we sleep—"

"The little face will bring it in time," said Missie.

"The little face is too little!" I snapped.

All the same, we went to the orchard. And there we waited. We had to hide and keep very still once, when we heard Dad go out, taking Ragnar for his evening walk; and an hour later we had to do it all again as they came back. Then we played hide-and-seek to keep ourselves alert. But we all fell into brambles and nettles, and Missie went up a tree and came down again with a terrible thump when a branch broke. Douglas tripped on a hard fallen apple and went straight into the ditch on his face, and Nigel disappeared altogether, and was found under a hedge fast asleep. We all gathered in a fractious huddle in the center of the orchard.

"We *must* stay awake—all of us, Nigel," I said, "if we're to talk to the face."

My cousin muttered that he hadn't been asleep, but unconscious due to nerves. I said it was due to laziness and lack of public spirit. He said it was late.

"If it gets to be midnight," I told him, "we must put up with it."

"If it gets to midnight, there'll be witches," said Missie.

I told her not to be silly. She said, had I ever been out at midnight?

"Yes, of course I have."

"Without Mum and Dad? In the dark? In the cold open air?"

"There aren't any witches," said Jo.

Missie clutched my hand with a freezing cold paw that gave me the fright of my life.

"Ssh!" said Jo. "They'll come out of the house if you scream like that."

I hadn't screamed. I'd just given a high sort of grunt.

"There's a witch in the orchard now," said Missie.

Jo gave a high sort of grunt. So did Nigel.

"Look!" said Missie, in a hissing whisper.

The moon had just risen, and there—leaning against one of the older and more misshapen trees—was a broomstick. It looked extremely sinister. When I recovered I said coldly, "That, Jemima, is the old garden broom that Arthur uses to sweep up leaves, and you know it."

"It's a witch's broomstick," said she, stubbornly.

Douglas went over to the thing. He would! He brought it back, and we all looked at it without enthusiasm. It had lost a good many twigs, and the handle was split and tied around with fraying string; there were dead leaves caught up in it, and wisps of dry grass and weed. It was not very nice.

"I wonder," said Jo, "if witches used some sort of Apple Stone to make their brooms come alive and fly?"

"Let's try," said Douglas.

"No you don't!" I told him.

"It would pass the time," said he.

The others agreed with him. I thought it over for a min-

ute or two. We were all getting very sleepy by now, and badly needed something to keep us awake. I nodded.

Nothing much happened when the Apple Stone had been applied. The broom merely quivered all over, and made a small whickering noise. Then it stayed still. After a bit, Nigel said, "It hasn't w-worked, Jo. Do it again."

"No," said she, "it'll get bigger or something."

"What's the matter with the thing!" said Douglas, impatiently.

"Let me get up on it," said Missie.

"No, me," said Douglas.

Each of them put a hand on the broom handle, and glared at one another. The broom gave a little kick and a whinny.

"Give me my broomstick," I said.

The others looked at me, startled. Then they all backed away. The broom fell, but I grabbed it. I didn't want to touch the thing, really—I hated it—and yet I had to hold it—to stroke it.

"Jeremy, don't look like that," said Jo. "It isn't a bit funny."

The broomstick whickered shrilly, like a little horse, and began to bucket about. And Douglas ran and caught me by the arm. I shook him off.

"Stand back, you fool," I said. "Do you want to be turned to a toad?"

He stood back. I couldn't think what had made me say such a mad thing. I hadn't meant to. I was appalled by what I was doing. I knew I shouldn't sit on the broomstick. . . .

We were in the air. We were rising fast. We were above the trees, above the house. I saw the white faces of my relatives staring up at me in the brilliant moonlight, and I

laughed at them. It's horrible to hear yourself laugh, when you don't want to laugh and don't mean to laugh. Then we went hurtling through the air over the fields and over the moors. It should have been a most nerve-racking and uncomfortable ride; yet I felt quite secure on the narrow handle of the broom. It came over me with a chill of horror that I was a witch. I remembered there had been plenty of men witches in the days when such things existed—before they became mere folktales for children. I gave a moan of despair, and a giggle of excitement, both at the same time. It sounded frightful.

Suddenly we began to circle around. Below me I saw the dark moors—and then I knew where we were. We were wheeling above the Black Tor, a lonely outcrop of rock that no one liked. It had a bad name locally, and was supposed to be unlucky. And now I knew why. It was the old meeting place of the witches.

As we swept down in spirals toward it, I saw the glint of eyes looking up at me. I saw shadows moving under the shadow of the stones. I heard whispering.

The broomstick began to sing to itself in a cracked little voice:

"Give a thing,
Take a thing;
Bogeyman's plaything."

I was afraid to think what would be waiting for me down by Black Tor. Who? Why? I was afraid that I would recognize them. And yet I wanted to be there. Down we went, lower and lower. Faces began to form around the watching eyes . . . whispers grew into voices . . . into words. . . .

"Bogeyman's plaything—"

Then there was a screeching whistle of air all around me. The broomstick screamed with terror, and started to buck about. We were whirled sideways and upward. We went skidding all anyhow through the night sky. We landed in a heap in the orchard. And everything went dim, and I lay with my hands over my face.

Then I found my head was lying on Jo's lap, and Douglas was sitting on my feet, and Missie was helping Nigel to tie the broom to a tree with yards of clothesline that usually hung in the paddock. They both looked frightened and furious, and the broom was jumping about and whickering. But they managed it. I said, dazedly, "What happened?"

"Oh, Jeremy!" said Jo. "How could you be so awful!"

"Everything was awful," I said.

Then I realized that the rocket was sitting in the middle of the orchard. Its nose glittered high above the apple trees, and the little face was peering anxiously from the window.

"It came back," said Jo, a bit shakily, "and brought you with it."

"Get off me, Douglas," I said. "Let me up. I—I'm all right now."

"If you touch the broomstick again," said my cousin, "I'll hit you on the head."

"I won't," I promised. "I don't even want to look at it."

"Come and talk to the rocket," said Missie.

She clutched my hand. This time I was glad of her cold paw in mine. We went with the others over the grass, and the face grinned down at us.

"Thank you," said Jo. "Thank you very much indeed, pilot."

"Not at all," said the face. "Just happened to be passing."

"What was it like on the moon?" asked Douglas.

"Fairly average dull. Miles of rock and cliff. See one bit of it and you've seen the lot. I would have come back to you long ago, but—and I hope you don't mind—as I was up there, I had a little look around. And I returned through the outer stars. The pretty way."

"The Milky Way?" asked Jo.

"Oh, far beyond that," said the face, calmly. "That's so near it's like your own back garden. But out where I went I found a real beauty. You must take a look at it next time you're there."

"Nobody has ever been—" began Douglas.

"You'll like it," said the face. "It's really nice. And within easy reach. About ten thousand from the second galaxy on the left."

"And—and how will we r-recognize it, when we d-do get there?" said Nigel.

"I left my label for a marker," said the face.

We all looked up at the nose of the rocket. There was a lighter square where the label had been.

"I puttered around it a few times, and I found the nicest landing place," said the little face, gaily. "But I didn't make a landing, because I knew you were expecting me back quickly. I just let my label fall there. You can't possibly miss it."

"It'll blow away or grow moldy before we ever get there," said Douglas, glumly.

"No, no. They will look after it."

There was a pause.

"Who will?" said Jo.

"Them," said the face.

It beamed down at us from that high round window. It said, "They liked it. They flew it from a flagpole, and planted flowers around the base, and they waved to me. They'll be ever so pleased to see you," it told us.

"Wh-what were they like?" said Nigel.

"Nice."

"Like us?" said Missie. "I mean, did they look like us?"

"No, not a bit. But nice."

My head began to ache. The broomstick was snorting to itself, and it was making cold shivers run along my spine.

"Jeremy," said Jo, anxiously, "are you all right?"

"No," I said, "I feel awful."

"Bedtime," said the face at the rocket window. "Sleepy-time. It's nearly midnight."

"Let's go," said Missie.

She and Nigel began to hurry me out of the orchard. I was glad to go. Glad to get away from that horrible broom! Douglas hung back, and Jo went and ordered him to come with the rest of us.

"But Jeremy had all the fun," he protested, loudly. "It's not fair. He didn't even enjoy it. And I bet I could ride the broom—"

"I bet you could, too," said Jo, "but you're not going to."

I heard them all calling good nights, and thank you, to the rocket and its pilot. And the next clear thing I knew was the feel of my pillow under my cheek. And the last thought that crossed my mind was a very worrying one about the tension that was going to build up one day, when the first humans set foot on some unbelievably remote star, and found the label flying there . . . with flowers around it . . . saying "Made in Birmingham" . . . all very nice. . . .

5

THE SWORD AND THE PLANETS

I almost felt as if I'd been ill when I woke next day, fretful and aching. When Ragnar came and bounced on my bed, I was so nasty to him that he went away and complained to Jo. She and Missie came to see what was the matter.

"He was whining and staring at your door," said Jo.

"I don't care if he was standing on his head, singing the Soldiers' Chorus from *Faust!*" I said. "He jumped on my stomach, and he weighs a ton!"

Douglas came in and said, What should we do today?

I said he could talk more quietly for a start. He said, what was biting me?

"Let's do the carpet in the parlor," said Missie. "It's Persian, and we could fly on it."

"I've had enough flying," I growled.

Jo said so she should hope.

"Anyway," I added, "it's the Aunties' day."

"Bother!" said Missie.

"Let's pretend we're ill," suggested Douglas.

I said let's go. At least we could be sure of a bit of peace and quiet for a change. Douglas said, who wanted peace and quiet? I said I did.

We had to go, in any case. The first Sunday of each month was set aside for lunching with Dad's two aged aunts. They were about a hundred and ninety, if you added their ages together. Well, they *looked* it. And they seemed to enjoy our visits, so we never liked to disappoint them for any reason at all. One was called Auntie Martha, and one Auntie Johnnie—I don't know why, nor did Dad, since her real name was Mabel. They lived about twenty miles away, near Barnstaple, on a hill overlooking the estuary. They had a nice old house, with a lot of garden.

After breakfast we dressed in our neatest things, and climbed into the car, and Mum drove off. She always drove going, and Dad coming back. We were crowded, but it was fun. And my headache began to go, in the open air. We sang songs, and played a game of making up words from the letters in other car's license plates, keeping them in their order. Missie was not much good at this, as she didn't know all that many words. I usually got disqualified for knowing too many. I can't help it, can I, if I like reading? The plates with ZX in them are very difficult.

The Aunties received us with open arms. They are both thin and tall and old-fashioned, but very kind. And we answered their questions as sensibly as we could, even when the questions weren't sensible—like, were we being good at school? Why would we tell if we weren't?

Auntie Johnnie had a cairn terrier called Tod, so we'd left Ragnar at home to spare his feelings. Not Tod's, Ragnar's. Our Dane was terrified of Tod, who fell on Ragnar the moment he saw him, and tried to tear him to

bits. Naturally, he didn't get far with this mad plan, as (a) we all fell on Tod, and (b) Ragnar had much longer legs for fleeing. Auntie Johnnie also collected china.

Auntie Martha had two cats, black ones, called Minnie and Annie, who were sleek creatures with green eyes and baleful stares. The reason for the latter was also Ragnar. He liked cats. He thought they all wanted him to bounce around them, barking, and blow at them when they rolled on their backs, as ours did. Minnie and Annie never forgave him his first and only attempt at this game with them, and he will carry the scars on his nose forever. They didn't forgive us, either, for owning such a brute. Auntie Martha also collected dolls.

They were talking about the dolls over lunch. They asked if Missie would like one, and she said no thank you she hated them.

"Darling!" said Mother. "She doesn't mean she hates yours, Martha, just any dolls. She prefers toy soldiers."

"She's a hoyden," said Dad.

"I'm not very fond of dolls, either," said Jo, loyal to Missie. "I think they're rather sinister."

"Darling!" said Mother.

"Well, I do. They're like frozen babies."

"Like maumets," I said.

Dad's Aunties made curious noises, like coughing and laughing and tut-tutting all at the same time.

"Wherever did you hear about those, dear?" said Auntie Martha.

"I don't know," I said.

And I didn't know. I'd heard or read about them somewhere, but I hear or read so many things.

"What do you know about them, dear?" asked Auntie Johnnie.

"People call them by other people's names, and then stick pins in them, or burn them over the flame of a black candle—"

"Darling!" said Mother.

"Not the sort of people one chooses for one's friends," said Dad, cheerfully. "Any of you tried it?"

"Not yet," said Douglas, looking as if he meant to sometime.

"Witches do it," I went on, "when they want to put a curse on anyone—"

"Let's change the subject," said Mother.

Dad's Aunties laughed. Their bright little eyes were twinkling, and their ancient faces were filled with merriment. I said, "Do you ever go out at midnight, Great Aunties?"

"Where to, dear?" said Auntie Martha.

"Any sort of—of—Black Tors, for instance?"

Later, Jo said that they said "Tors, dear?" But I thought —and still do—that they said "Of course, dear." I let Mum change the subject.

When lunch was over, the two old ladies went off for their afternoon naps, and we had a look around the garden. There was a fine view over the valley, with the wide mouth of the Taw gleaming flatly in high tide and sunshine. Big clouds sailed the horizon, going toward the sea. Gulls were crying overhead like cats. And Auntie Martha's cats were wailing like gulls to get attention. But when we offered them some, they remembered Ragnar and stalked away haughtily. Then Dad drove us home, and we sang sea shanties.

Because it was Sunday, we had afternoon tea with the parents; then we went down to the village to post some letters that Dad had forgotten to post in Barnstaple. As we

passed the old church, Nigel suddenly announced that it was haunted. Jo said he was out of his mind, making up tales like that to scare Missie. Missie said she wasn't scared; she liked ghosts. I asked when she'd ever met one. She said she hadn't yet, but was prepared to like them if she did. Douglas said there were no such things, and Nigel said, what about banshees? Douglas said that was different. I said, apart from all that, what was supposed to haunt the church?

"Someone crying," said Nigel.

"Rubbish!" I said. "Surely you can invent something more likely than that. No one would go haunting a church. I mean, people used to pray at them to make them go away —I think they still do. . . ."

Douglas said he'd go away if prayed at, and I said that was not the point.

"It's very silly to talk about things we don't understand," said Jo sternly, "and Nigel should know better."

"Look, it's n-not my ghost," he protested. "I was t-t-told about it."

"By whom?" demanded Jo.

He mumbled something so inaudible that it was obvious he was making it all up.

"Let's go and look," said Missie.

"How can you l-look at crying!" said Nigel, crossly.

"Well, listen," said Missie.

It was cool and quiet inside the church. Nothing stirred. Nothing cried. We walked slowly all around it, with Ragnar pacing at our heels, and we stopped by the Crusader. We were rather fond of him. He lay full-length, carved in alabaster, with his shield beside him, and his sword hilt under his crossed hands.

In spite of all the hundreds of years that had gone over

the statue, making holes and crinkles in the stone and blurring details, it was extraordinary how much was still there to see—the chasing on the hilt, the intricate links of chain mail, the conical helmet with its broken nosepiece, even the fingernails on his hands. And most of all, the thin stern face, whose human look somehow hadn't been destroyed by the loss of the nose.

"I'll tell you something," said Jo, presently. "I bet nothing much could haunt the church with *him* in it."

"A statue couldn't do much to discourage a live ghost," said Douglas.

"How could a g-ghost be alive?" Nigel wanted to know.

This led to a fierce, though subdued, argument between the Clans, which Jo broke up by saying if a ghost could exist a statue could have power, one being as unlikely as the other. Neither of our cousins could think of any answer to this, so they shut up. We looked at the other statue on the tomb, the lady who lay alongside the Crusader. She had long thin hands, like his, but pressed together as if praying. Her face was a bit stern, too, but it may have been because she was made of stone. The patterns on her dress could still be made out clearly, here and there.

"If something does cry here," said Missie, "his wife would be kind to it."

"How do you make that out?" said Jo.

"She's got a kind dimple by her mouth."

"It's a crack," said Douglas.

"And anyone might have a dimple and be absolutely beastly," I added.

A soft, low voice broke in, saying, "Yes, she was very kind."

And out of the shadows of the side chapel came a dim figure. We all went rather rigid, but Ragnar waved his tail.

"Hello, m'dears," said the verger.

"Oh—Mr. Hurst!" said Jo.

"We thought you were a ghost," giggled Missie.

He laughed too. He said he took that as a compliment, seeing how fat he was. And Missie said, why couldn't a ghost be just as fat? And Jo cut in quickly to ask if he minded Ragnar being in the church. He said he didn't.

"I'd be glad to see some humans as quiet and dignified as that great dog," said he.

Actually, the Dane was a bit quelled by the dim light, which made him seem more stately than he really was.

"But you were lookin' at Lord Amery's lady," said Mr. Hurst, "and you were right about her nature. She did a lot for people hereabouts. Founded a hospital, she did, and a school for poor children, and wore herself out, and died too soon, good soul."

"Why did Lord Amery let her?" said Jo, indignantly.

"Ah well, he wasn't about, was he? He was away off on that Crusade."

"Did he Return Too Late?" said Nigel, in a dramatic whisper.

The verger looked slightly vague.

"Tesn't rightly known what did happen, for sure," said he. "The family died out long ago, and their great house is naught but some bits of ruined walls. You know as much as I do. There's just the tomb here, and a few tales that may or may not be truth. But if Lord Amery did come back after the years of fighting to find only an empty home—ah well," he sighed. "There's grief in the world, and always has been."

He nodded kindly to us and went out of the church.

After a moment or two, Jo put her hand on the hand of the stone lady.

"Shall we ask her about it?" said she.

There was another pause; then I said, "If he outlived her, he'd know more."

"Will he be cross if we wake him?"

"He doesn't *look* cross. He looks—"

"Dour?" suggested Douglas.

"Austere," I said.

Jo came around the tomb, and she took the Apple Stone from its place and laid it against the cheek of the Crusader.

In the small light that seeped through the windows from the dying day outside, the effigy started to change. A shimmer of movement swept over it; the blurred outline broadened and lengthened; the timeworn details were sharpened and elaborated. The chain mail became darker, and was metal instead of alabaster. The hands and face became a suntanned brown. Now that it was alive, I must admit the face was better with a nose. Lord Amery opened his eyes, of so light a gray that they looked quite colorless in that dark face.

He didn't seem cross at all, or even austere—he seemed a bit alarmed when he saw us standing there. He sat upright, with a creak and jingle of armor, and swung his legs sideways so that he sat across his tomb. This move dislodged his shield, and it fell on the floor with a clatter. Douglas and Nigel banged their heads together as they rushed to pick it up. Lord Amery drew a long breath.

"Let it lie there," said he, in a deep and pleasant voice. "I have no need of weapons. You are children."

"No," said Missie and Douglas, together.

"I didn't mean *little* children," said the Crusader. "It was a very general term, and not intended to offend your sensibilities."

The creases at the sides of his nose and mouth deepened

as he smiled. He had a gentle sort of face, not as thin as when he was a statue, but still thin enough. He put up both hands, took off his helmet, and then pushed back the chain-mail hood, which he wore under it, to lie in metal folds on his shoulders. He had a big scar stretching from his left eyebrow and vanishing into his hair at the right. And his hair was white. Yet he didn't look all that old.

"Tell me who you are," said he.

I introduced my relatives and myself, and he said he was pleased to see us. Then he flexed his shoulders, and Missie asked if he was stiff through being made of stone so long. He gave a quiet laugh.

"It was not I," said he, "but a mere likeness—and not so flattering at that."

"They s-simplified you," said Nigel. "They made a p-pattern, not a portrait."

"It's the custom," smiled the Crusader, "and truly, by the time one becomes an effigy on a tomb, it's late to grumble."

Then he glanced for the first time at the other statue.

"Annora . . ." he said, under his breath.

"Shall we wake her, too?" asked Missie.

Lord Amery looked thoughtful. And, after a moment, he said slowly, "No. No. She's busy elsewhere, and would not thank you for disturbing her. She was always busy. She never had time to chat, to play, to amuse herself—or anyone else."

"Didn't you like her?" said Douglas.

He got a reproachful hiss from Jo and a quick look from Lord Amery.

"Like her?" said the latter. "No one could like or dislike Annora. One endured."

"Oh, dear," said Jo.

"She was a very good, kind woman," said the Crusader, rapidly. "I'm not criticizing. But—"

"But you went to the Crusade," I said.

"I went to the Crusade."

Ragnar, who'd been keeping very quiet in a pew, now emerged, growling low in his throat, and I said to the Crusader that it was all right, he didn't bite—at least, he hadn't yet.

"As long as he doesn't bark," said Lord Amery. "I don't care for noise."

And he put his hand on the Dane's great neck, and told him to hush.

"He was trying to tell us that someone's coming," said Jo.

The Crusader stood up. He was fairly tall, and looked bigger than he really was because of his armor, his surcoat, and the helmet in his hand.

"Do we fear this someone?" said he.

"Well," I told him, "it's just that there'll be a lot of argument and questions, if they see you."

"Let us go elsewhere," he said, quickly. "At all costs avoid argument!"

Douglas had darted to the little side door, and opened it to peer outside.

"Main door, Nigel!" said he.

And Nigel went racing down the aisle to the arch of the front entrance.

"He'll hold them," said Douglas. "Come on—this way."

We went. The Crusader rattled a bit, but he moved easily enough for all the weight of his mail. He left his shield and helmet on his tomb, and pressed one hand to his sword to stop it clanking against his side. As we left the

church, I heard Nigel at the far end, employing his best delaying tactics on someone.

"C-c-c-c-could you p-p-p-p-possibly t-t-tell me the t-t-t-t-t-t—?"

He could keep up this sort of thing indefinitely. We went along under the wall at the back of the church. It was already twilight, and the ancient yew trees and beeches made shadows as black as night. At the end of a flagged pathway between the gravestones, there was a wooden bench against the churchyard wall, and here we waited until Nigel came running to join us. He gasped excitedly, "M-M-Miss M-M-Minter—to p-practice the organ. Sh-sh-she—"

"You've done your bit," I said. "Relax."

"Sh-she saw the s-statue gone. . . ." he gulped.

"Well, that's torn it then."

". . . and I s-said it had g-gone to the cleaners. . . ."

"Did she believe you?"

"She had to. It w-was gone."

"But what about the helmet and the shield?" I said.

"I t-told her they were spares."

Jo said in a worried voice that Miss Minter would tell the verger.

"No, she won't," said Douglas, confidently. "Her memory's as short as a pin. She won't give any of it another thought, once she starts on her old music. And it'll be pitch-dark by now in the tomb corner. No one will notice—"

"It's almost pitch-dark here, too," said Jo, with an uneasy glance round about.

"Let's go home," said Missie, "in case of crying."

We *all* glanced around uneasily, including the Crusader. He said, "Let us not have anyone crying. I hate tears."

"Have you ever heard—?" began Jo.

"I've heard too many," said the knight, "too often. It makes me sad to think of it. And there's so little anyone can ever do. Where are we going now?" he asked, changing the subject before Jo could say any more.

"Let's go over the fields to the barn," said Douglas, "then we aren't likely to meet anyone, especially if we go through the kitchen garden instead of the farmyard. Once Lord Amery is safe in the barn—"

"Who's Lord Amery?" said Lord Amery.

"You are," said everyone else except Ragnar.

"No, no, I am Sir Amias, merely. No nobleman. I was a farming squire of Devon until the king knighted me, mistaking me for another man who had just saved his life."

Our looks of astonishment seemed to amuse him. He said, "It was no use trying to explain. Richard would never admit he was wrong. He'd just have made a lot of noise and fuss, and the thing was done anyway."

"Oh, of course you knew him? Richard the Lion-Heart," breathed Missie.

She'd seen a fancy sort of film, and adored the hero it had portrayed.

"I knew him," said Sir Amias, rather dryly.

A wind ran coldly through the trees. Something gave a long screech that started above our heads and faded into the gathering dark.

"An owl," I said. "I think."

We left the churchyard.

Coming over the fields, we got a bit delayed by the boggy bit. The Crusader wasn't dressed for it. He very politely picked up Missie to keep her feet dry, and I bet he wished he hadn't when his first leap took him knee-deep. He had an awful job to clamber out of the mud. Douglas said he

was soaked to the skin, and Jo said he was *always* soaked to the skin if he came within a mile of the smallest puddle. I said it would keep him warm if he ran on ahead to make sure the coast was clear. He ran. Then Nigel announced that the heel of his shoe had come off. Missie complained that she'd bumped her nose on the chain mail. I said it would have been calmer to stay and face the arguments in the church.

"No, no," said Sir Amias, "anything but argument! Even this quibbling makes my head ache."

"I l-like arguments," said Nigel.

The Crusader gave him a look of mild horror, and said each to his own taste.

Douglas met us in the kitchen garden. He said our parents had some people in the house, and were entertaining them with sherry. We would be expected to wash and change and have dinner with some of them later, which I'd forgotten. But there was still a bit of time before this doom fell on us. Then I noticed that the Crusader had stopped. He was sniffing deeply.

"There's rosemary," he said.

" 'That's for remembrance'," I quoted, automatically.

"Why so it is," said he. "Under the Sign of the Sun. It clears the mind, quickens the senses, and restores dimming sight."

"Oh, do hurry," said Jo. "We're awfully near the house here, and someone might come."

But Sir Amias was stooping over another plant that was almost invisible in the gloom. He broke off a few leaves, and smelled them. I could smell them, too. Southernwood. I liked it, though not everybody did. It was sweet and sharp and sickly.

"Under Mercury," stated the knight, "and the scent will drive away serpents. Mixed with oil, its ashes can cure baldness—"

"Let's give Dad some," said Missie.

"Let's talk about it in the barn," I said.

Unfortunately, Jo now became interested in what Sir Amias was saying about the herbs, and was egging him on.

"What's this one used for?" said she.

"Catmint? Why for rheums, child. And so is Lovage of the Sun. Strong against the cold of the great planet, Saturn. *You* should eat Lovage," he told Nigel, "for it can remove freckles."

I thought this would annoy my cousin, as he's rather sensitive, but he merely picked another sprig of herbs from somewhere and handed it to Sir Amias, who said, "Lavender, belonging to Mercury, for fainting and toothache. Rue, under Leo, that removes warts—"

"Are you a doctor," said Jo, "or an astrologer?"

"A student," said he. "One must know the courses of the stars, in order to heal."

"Where did you learn all this?"

"From the Saracen doctors, and they from Galen the Greek."

"Who was he?" said Jo.

"You do not know of Galen?" the knight sounded amazed. "Ah," he said, "perhaps you incline rather to the views of Dioscorides?"

"N-not entirely," said Jo.

"Couldn't we go into all this later?" I begged.

But Sir Amias and Jo were browsing together over the herbs. I wondered how to make the Crusader pay attention. It would be impolite to lay down the law to one of the Champions of Christendom, and yet. . . .

Douglas felt no such restraint. He had very little respect for anyone. He now said, impatiently, "Get a move on, you idiots! Someone's coming. If you want a fight—!"

"Ah, no," said the Crusader.

He came back to us quickly, with Jo at his heels, and we hurried to the wicket gate that led to the back of the barn. But it was too late. Footsteps clattered on the brick path behind us, and a shrill, affected voice said, "Children! Children, I can hear you. Who's there with you?"

No one replied. None of us cared much for Miss Donoby. She was a scrawny little spinster, like a fussy old hen, who lived nearby. She considered herself artistic, and she made things. *Awful* things for charity sales and fairs—like rhubarb jam that didn't set properly and was all runny and sticky; lopsided, crocheted doilies; and potpourri that went bad and smelled worse. She painted horrible little pictures of the moors that made the wild places look like birthday cards. In fact, the only success she'd ever had was with a cake for a raffle, and people still talked about it. She was quite the silliest person we'd ever met. And now, there she stood in our herb garden, facing Sir Amias in the twilight, and twittering excitedly, "Oh, I know who you are! You're the scoutmaster!"

No one said anything, and she gave a high giggle and clapped her hands together.

"You're in disguise! Do tell me why. What a very effective costume, too."

When she still got no answer, she peered at us more closely and gave a slightly nervous titter. She said, "Wicked things, you're trying to puzzle me. Do let me play—you know how I adore little games. Perhaps I could dress up, too," she added, coyly.

Then she got fed up with us.

"You're being very sly," she snapped. "I'm surprised at you, Mr. Gammon—creeping about in the dark, in a lot of knitted string armor! And encouraging children to be impolite to their elders. Kindly answer my questions, now, or I'll fetch someone from the house. Just exactly what are you doing here?"

"Er—" said the Champion, weakly.

"We're l-looking at the garden," growled Nigel.

"In the middle of the night?" she sneered.

"The knight's in the garden," said Douglas, "and your watch is fast."

"We're rehearsing," said Jo, hurriedly. "Rehearsing our school play—my school play. It's all about the Round Table and that."

I thought this extremely bright of her, but Miss Donoby didn't like it. She gave a disbelieving sniff and said it was news to her that Mr. Gammon was a pupil at the High School for Girls. Jo said he was only helping.

"Coaching us," said she, gathering conviction, "and showing us how to wear the costumes, and swords and stuff. And please, please don't tell anyone, because it's a terrific secret—"

"Why?" said Miss Donoby.

Jo couldn't think why. Nor could I. And Douglas said, "Oh, people always like to make other people think they've done all the clever things on their own. Like Nigel, when he copies a painting, and pretends he made it up."

"Like D-Douglas," said Nigel, "when he s-sneaked that arithmetic book into the exam."

"Like you, Miss Donoby," said Missie, unexpectedly, "when you bought that raffle cake from Fuller's. I saw the label when the postman took it to your house."

There was a fairly thoughtful silence. Then Miss Donoby gave a feeble giggle.

"Little joke," she said, vaguely.

Then she said in a bright voice that she really must get back to the house, in case someone had drunk her lovely sherry. She said everyone must be missing her. She said she'd only slipped out for a breath of air. She said she should go and keep the party cheerful. She fell over a clump of fennel, and nearly went down, but she managed to keep her balance, and minced off muttering that people must certainly keep secrets . . . no matter how dishonestly they'd come by them . . . and she herself would never betray any, however infantile . . . stealthy . . . ridiculous. . . .

Her voice died away, somewhere between the words "playacting," and "blackmail."

We took our subdued Crusader to the barn.

"Damask roses," I heard him murmuring, "mingled with agaric—for melancholic humors . . ."

Whether he was considering this remedy for himself or for Miss Donoby, I couldn't say.

Later, we came back, bringing him milk that we'd taken from the kitchen, and some bread and butter and apples.

"We're sorry we've been so long," apologized Jo. "We just couldn't get away, what with parents, and dinner. Did you hate it, all alone here in the dark?"

Sir Amias said he'd been very comfortable and happy.

"There is so much peace in the scent of hay," said he, "and the moon has kept me company—not to speak of other friends over there."

He nodded toward the box stalls where nine young calves were rustling in their bedding. We'd brought some lumps of sugar for Bob the cart horse, and he whickered

with pleasure from another box stall. He was looking pleased with himself, and his black coat was shining in the light of my flashlight which I kept switched on.

"I've been brushing him down," said the Crusader.

"Bob likes that," said Jo.

"I liked it, too. We agreed well together, Bob and I. I've been calling him Roland. The name of my own horse," said Sir Amias. "He was a black one, too. But he died—"

"In battle?" asked Douglas.

"No, no—long after. It was age, not wounds, that ended his life. The Saracens called him 'Monster.' He was three times as big as their beasts."

Sir Amias had come to join us where we leaned over the gate into Bob's box. He leaned, too. And the cart horse rubbed his cheek against the gatepost, and made friendly breathing noises.

"They admired him, though," went on the knight. "For all his weight and lack of speed, he was kind and strong. They were good to him. And to me," he said, a bit sadly.

We all looked at him, and he smiled. He said he feared we were disappointed.

"You look to hear tales of heroism and glory," said he, "the victory of the brave and good against the bad barbarians. No war is quite like that. And the sort with which I was embroiled was far otherwise, I do assure you."

"You spoke as though you liked the Saracens," said Jo.

"And so I did."

"But weren't they cruel and evil?" said Missie, round-eyed with surprise.

Our Crusader turned away, and sat down rather heavily on some bales of hay. He looked quietly grand in the lamplight, with his armor gleaming dully, and his white hair and

scarred brow. He hitched his sword forward, so that he could lean his arms on the pommel.

"It seems time changes nothing," said he. "I know how many years have hurried by since my day ended in that time. I know the power you hold that has brought me here, in my shape as I was then. And almost I think that I myself can hear myself speaking as a child again—in terms of war, with good against bad, and always the eternal assumption that 'we' are good, and 'they' are bad. Dear my God in Heaven," he sighed, "is no lesson ever learned?"

"But—Saracens!" said Douglas.

"People," said the Crusader. "Just eating, sleeping, loving, talking people. Like those of the—civilized world. Oh, yes, we named them heathen and infidel—they had other words for things, you see. But as for cruelty—!" and he laughed, a bit bleakly. "Surely some of *our* doings are on record?"

"Yes," I said, "the massacre of the prisoners—a thousand unarmed—"

"Richard helped!" said Sir Amias. "He feared to be thought soft, and he killed with his own hands! And yet, he could be as gentle, as kind, and—Heaven knows—as human as any living soul on earth. All men contain all natures in themselves," said he.

"Did you get fed up with it all?" I asked him. "Did you just come home when you were wounded?"

He told us.

And while he spoke, my mind went wandering out of the dim barn, with the smell of hay, the sounds of the calves rustling and breathing, and the faces of the others in the glow of the flashlight. I saw churned dust and violent sunshine and a turmoil of horses and men. I heard the shout-

ing, and the sudden horrifying screaming. I felt the heat and fear and anger. . . .

There rode Sir Amias, high on a huge black horse that rose on its hind legs and struck furiously with the front hooves, fighting, as its master was fighting, against a wave of fast-moving men on thin fast horses. And then—there was Sir Amias in the dust, and his destrier standing snorting over him.

"They took me into captivity," said the deep, gentle voice of the knight, in the old barn, "and because of my knighthood—they didn't know there'd been a mistake—they offered to exchange me for a high ransom. But I managed to talk them out of this idea. I said no one could raise the money, so they might as well kill me."

"Oh, no!" cried Missie.

Jo said, surely the Lady Annora could have found the ransom money? And Sir Amias said it was quite likely.

"But everyone in the countryside would have been left the poorer for it," said he. "And she, my wife—well, I would never have been allowed to forget what I owed her. So I—and you must blame me if you will—so I stayed where I was."

"A captive," said Douglas. "How long?"

"Always."

I said, "You mean, you never did go home?"

"I never went home."

"Oh—" said Jo.

"I went to the Crusade for peace and quiet," said Sir Amias, "and I stayed for peace and quiet. Different men go to war for different reasons. That was mine."

Missie eyed him curiously, and then said, "What about Richard Lion-Heart?"

"Oh, he liked fighting. He really enjoyed every moment of it," said the Crusader. "It was all he ever wanted, and what Richard wanted, he usually got. He started his wars when he was twelve years old, by rebelling against his father. Then he fought his brother. He fought just about everyone."

"But wasn't he a splendid king—?" began Douglas.

"Of what? Of whom?" said the knight, gently. "He spent no longer in England than a few weeks out of his whole life. He spoke no English at all. All he demanded from there, and from his French domain, was tax money wrung from his people to pay for his wars. His popularity, such as it was, he owed to the fact that the English love a fighter. And that they certainly had!"

Missie, sitting beside him on the hay bales, looked depressed. I had known for some time that the first Richard was by no means an ideal monarch, but my little sister had seen him through the rosy spectacles of romantic fiction. It seemed that Josephine had done the same, for she now sighed and said, "Couldn't his Queen Berengaria do anything to keep him in order?"

"Poor soul, what chance had she?" said Sir Amias. "She only met him twice. Once when they were married, when he went away the same day and left her alone. And once again, when she followed him to Acre, and public opinion forced him to have dinner with her. The king had little interest in women. Except for one—his sister, and she was another Plantagenet, as wild as himself."

Jo looked as depressed as Missie. The Crusader gave them an apologetic smile, and said, "He liked children, in an offhand way. If Berengaria had ever been allowed near enough, he might have liked her, for she was a childish soul.

She married him for love—because of all the romantic songs she'd heard—and he married her for her dowry. Oh, not just for the money itself—to spend on his wars."

"Was Blondel childish?" I said. "There must have been some liking between them, for the minstrel to go searching Europe—"

"He was a singer and a soldier," said Sir Amias, "and he got all that he wanted from the king, because he asked nothing at all. Richard would not be constrained, or influenced—by wife, or friend, or persuasion, or force. He preferred to stand alone."

Nigel muttered that he felt like that himself sometimes.

"He was brave," went on the knight, "if heroism exists without imagination. He was generous, when he wished to be. Gentle, when it suited his whim. Bullheaded and savage, when he chose. He was—Lion-Heart."

"Did *you* like him?" said Jo.

"No. But I loved him."

Then Sir Amias began to tell us how he himself had studied among the Saracen people—their ways with medicine and surgery and the prevention and diagnosis of illness.

"Such things had always held my interest," said he, "and there was more knowledge in the East than in the West. When I grew to be old, and had learned a little and practiced much, they called me 'The Healer.' It pleased me far more than my accidental knighthood." He smiled, and then the smile faded, "I am grieved to hear from you that the hearts of the young are still with the battles."

"It's because of all the tales and legends and stuff," I said.

"They only tell of the banners and trumpets, not of the horror and loss."

Jo put her hand on his and assured him that she personally intended to become a vet. She then explained what this meant, and he looked pleased. He asked if she knew about the herbs and the stars. She said she'd just started studying. This was true—she'd started a few hours ago. Then Nigel said he was an artist, and added that although he liked painting battles, he was quite prepared to knock off a few flower pieces if that would make Sir Amias happy. The knight said gravely that it made him very happy. Missie announced that she was going to live on a star, and started telling him about *The Bleep*. He hadn't the foggiest idea what she was talking about. She hadn't much idea, herself. She was half asleep, anyway. And Douglas looked defiantly into the Crusader's eyes—his ambition being, at the moment, to be a soldier.

"Ah, well," said Sir Amias, "courage is always good, in any form. And you?" he said, turning to look at me.

I mumbled that I didn't know.

"I just read things—and write things—and my mind wanders—"

Jo said quickly that I only meant I had an active imagination, not that I was around the bend. She then explained what around the bend meant, and he laughed for a long time. He said reassuringly that he thought we were all fairly sane. Then he said what time was our bedtime? He was looking at Missie's drooping head.

"Hers is long past," I told him. "So is ours, really. But we've had some late evenings, because of the Apple Stone. That's what we used to wake you, you know. Did you ever hear anything about it in the Crusading time?"

He nodded.

"I believe there was some tale among the Saracens," he said, "but it's hard to tell where magic starts and finishes.

There are so many marvels in the world. And now," he stated, firmly, "tonight must end quietly, and you must all go to your sleep."

We protested. Jo said she wanted to hear more about the herbs and the planets, and Sir Amias said he was sure she could find experts on these matters in her own day and time. And Douglas demanded more details of the old battles, but was told to stick to ballads if he wished to keep his illusions. Nigel said none of us would ever manage to sleep, even if we did go to bed. The Crusader said he could give us a recipe that would help.

"Take the shells of poppies and boil them together with water and honey."

"Sounds delicious," said Douglas.

I wondered uneasily how I could explain to his father that he'd become an opium addict. . . .

"We can't go off and leave you here," said Jo, "all alone in the dark."

Sir Amias said he was used to it.

"But when we sleep," I said, "the power of the Stone will go, and you'll be back in your stone effigy."

Sir Amias said he wouldn't, not exactly.

"I merely return to my own place and time," he added. "Not in the old years, nor in these, but otherwhere."

"I do hope it's nice and quiet there," said Jo, fervently.

Sir Amias smiled and said it was.

"It w-would be if he's dead," observed Nigel.

We told him to shut up, and Sir Amias said he was by no means dead.

"Can you use your knowledge of healing still?" asked Jo.

Sir Amias said he used his knowledge still—and was learning still.

"I'll just stay here awhile," said he, "in the barn, among

the scents and sounds of England—for those I did miss greatly in the East. This is a happy place, among the quiet beasts, and here I shall be content until I go to my own place."

We didn't want to leave him, but he spoke with such gentle authority that none of us could resent or disobey it. He stooped to Missie, and she gave him a large and sleepy kiss. He held Jo's hands and looked at them, and said they might well be those of a healer. He said good night to the rest of us, including Ragnar. And so we left him, sitting on the hay, his mail and his white hair gleaming in the departing lamplight, the scar scarcely showing on his brow, and his hands folded on the pommel of the great sword that he seemed unused to wearing.

As soon as we got to our rooms, I forced Douglas to hand over the poppy heads he'd snatched in the garden. Even without the aid of these, we all slept very peacefully that night. Jo said later that she dreamed of the stars. Missie that she dreamed of the big horses. Douglas of the swords and the flying banners, and the pipes of war. Nigel dreamed of Richard, who stood alone and would not be constrained. And I dreamed of the man who went to the Crusades for peace and quiet and found them there. I don't know what Ragnar dreamed about, but he snored happily on my feet all night long.

6

THE FEATHERED SERPENT

At about half-past eleven the next morning, I got one of the biggest shocks of my life. Our form master was in the middle of a spirited account of the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1842—never, to my mind, a very enthralling subject, and, on this occasion made even more obscure by the lecturer having a bad cold.

". . . Sir Robert Peel made a speech—h!" he said, and sneezed. "Excuse me. Where were we? Oh, yes—Peel introduced a sliding scale. . . ."

My mind was wandering. I saw a long, sliding, scaly creature slithering through the House of Commons, with Peel holding the end of a ribbon around its neck, and saying he wanted everyone to meet a friend of his—and a small, folded bit of paper was pushed under my hand by the boy who sat next to me. I looked at it vaguely. On it was written, "Get this to Jeremy Westray. Quick."

I opened it and found it was a note from Douglas. He, being younger, was in a lower form than mine, and he must have arranged for various people to pass it along until it reached me. I read it. That was when the shock happened.

Dear Jeremy, all is lost! Nigel's got the Apple Stone! He's gone mad at last. He's done all those tropical butterflies from the library, and let them out. Gurt Jan announced they'd been stolen, and Nigel confessed, and now he's in trouble because he won't give them back. Yours sincerely, Douglas.

Gurt Jan was Mr. Ridd, our headmaster. I groaned.

"Yes, Westray?" said the form master. "You have some views, I take it, on Peel's program of fiscal reform?"

"Er—" I said.

"I'm sure we'll all be pleased to hear them."

The rest of the form smirked at me.

"Peel?" I said. "Yes, well—all those coppers—peelers—policemen—"

"Do go on," said old Jones, smoothly.

"They should have stopped it," I said.

"Stopped what, Westray?"

"The—the—that thing sliding about in the House."

"I'll tell you something," said Jones. "You will remain in school this afternoon until you have copied out the chapter in your history book with which we've been dealing during your mental absence for the last quarter of an hour," and he sneezed violently.

"Bless you," I said.

"You will copy it twice," said he. "Once to assist our efforts to educate you, and once for impertinence. Now, if I have your full attention—"

Taking this for granted, he went on with the Corn Laws. But my attention was elsewhere. To this day I don't know how Peel got mixed up with the farmers. I was wondering mostly just what Nigel had told Gurt Jan. "Confessed" was the word used by Douglas. Confessed what? Had he told

about the Apple Stone? If so, he was probably on his way to a mental specialist. Mr. Ridd would take a fairly dim view of magic, I felt.

"Westray," said old Jones, "are you coming down with anything?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "a nervous breakdown."

The bell rang for the end of class, in time to save me some of his slurs on my character. But I went through the geography class that followed in a sort of trance. I usually did, so there were no special recriminations.

I managed to collar Douglas as we went into the hall for lunch. He said it was no good blaming him.

"I told him not to fool around," said he. "I told him to leave the stupid butterflies alone. They're dead and forbidden. If he'd done the hand grenade that Roberts has for a paperweight—"

I shook him. I said, how had Nigel got the Apple Stone? He said Jo must have dropped it. Nigel had picked it up off the garden path at home as we left.

"He was in one of his crazier moods," said my cousin. "I couldn't do a thing with him. I would have handed it over to you," he said, virtuously.

"No, you wouldn't. You'd have blown up the whole place with a hand grenade. Where's Nigel now?"

I couldn't see the red hair of the Campbell anywhere, and Douglas said he was in solitary confinement. I said good. Then I thought of something that gave me another serious shock.

"Has he still got the Stone?"

"I suppose so."

I ate very little. Afterward I was called aside by one of the younger masters, who asked if I had any influence over Nigel. I said bitterly that no one had much, except his fa-

ther who was rather far away to be much use. He said I'd better come and see my cousin, all the same, as he was behaving very oddly. I said, was that unusual? He said it was more unusual than usual. I was taken to Nigel's prison.

He seemed very comfortable there. In the headmaster's study, with large easy chairs and a big desk with a tray on it, Nigel looked contented with his lot. He was lounging in one chair with his feet on another, and had obviously just finished a satisfying meal. He sat up a bit when we came in, and the master said in a doom-laden voice, "Campbell, I have brought your cousin."

Nigel said hello. Being then requested to stand, he did so. The master said he would leave us together. Nigel thanked him, and he went off looking rather soured. Nigel sat down again. I said, "What have they booked you for? Theft or lying?"

"Both," said he.

"Look here, did you tell them—"

"I only said I'd t-taken the b-butterflies. And they w-want me to give them back. But I don't know where they are, Jeremy. I m-mean, they're on their own, now. They m-might be anywhere."

I started to say, what had possessed him . . . but stopped. What was the use? Even Nigel didn't know what possessed him at times.

"You broke our agreement," I told him, angrily. "We promised each other not to use the Stone, unless we were all together and fully consulted. You're a sneaking, lying, disloyal, selfish, vile, rotten swine!"

"Yes," said he.

That brought me up in mid-harangue. Instead of enlarging on my theme, I merely ordered him to hand over the Apple Stone. He did so, without a word.

As I went to the door, he put his feet on the desk, and said casually, "I told them I t-took the butterflies for you. Because you l-like butterflies, I told them. I said I'd given them to you."

As I gaped at him, he hurried on, "I said you'd b-bring them back tomorrow. You'll have to th-think of something, Jeremy, or I'll b-be expelled."

I said nothing would please me more. But outside the door the full implication of my cousin's remarks hit me. I nearly went back and hit *him*. How could anyone be sure of returning the things? They might be eaten by birds. They might die of cold—they were tropical butterflies! They might. . . .

The young master was waiting for me, and he asked if Nigel seemed repentant. I said not noticeably. Then I gabbled a bit and said he didn't show it but was probably filled with shame and sorrow.

"Well, he can stay there until after school," said the master, "and we'll see what Mr. Ridd makes of him then. We mustn't take it all too seriously, Westray, you know, so stop frowning. Don't look so desperate. Campbell's fond of you, in his way."

I said I was utterly unfond of him. He said I was overharsh, though he did admit that Nigel had behaved very badly.

"It wasn't a real case of theft, though," said he. "Just normal wickedness. It'll all blow over when you bring the wretched things back. And the Head will handle Master Campbell."

I said good luck to him, and the master went off laughing. But I felt a pang of sympathy for Mr. Ridd. He would get little change from my cousin, I feared. I went dismally to the long and wretched afternoon that lay ahead, trying

to concentrate on lessons, while worrying myself into suppressed hysteria. The Apple Stone lay in my pocket, in its silk bag on the broken gold chain which must have been too fragile for the weight of the Stone. I wondered if Jo would discover she'd lost it and go mad.

Halfway through the afternoon, I heard a distant, muffled uproar somewhere in the school. Later on another note found its way to me by devious channels. It said:

Dear Westray, your cousin Macdonald has been sent to join Campbell for deliberately pouring two pints of ink on the storeroom floor. What funny relations you have. Yours, Arthur Roper.

I didn't know Roper very well, but thought we had ideas in common.

What with one thing and another, it was an hour later than usual when my cousins and I got off the bus at our village stop. We were all subdued—I from nerves and writer's cramp, and the others because I wouldn't speak to them.

Douglas said, as we went toward the house, "One of those butterflies came past the window—about seven inches across and bright yellow—"

"W-was it all right?" said Nigel.

"There was a magpie on its tail, so I don't—"

He caught my eye and shut up.

After tea, we held a court-martial. But nothing would make Nigel say he was sorry. After being nagged for a while, he turned extremely sulky and marched out of the room, taking Ragnar with him, and shut his bedroom door and wouldn't open it, even to Douglas who shared it with him. I was furious still. And Jo was miserable, as he'd

blamed her for the whole affair, saying she'd been careless with the Stone. Missie was red with rage because of what he'd said to Jo. And Douglas had so confused himself by the number of times he'd changed sides that he was now utterly silent. I looked around at them, and said, "We ought to let the Stone go. We're just not the right people to have it."

This roused them.

"Oh, Jeremy," said Missie, "don't be beastly. I hate it when you get cross. You don't often get cross—only worried."

I said this time I was cross *and* worried. Jo said, would I feel better if I kept the Apple Stone myself? I said I certainly didn't intend to let anyone else keep it, after today's performances. She looked tearful, and said, was I blaming her, too? I said it was a bit silly to put the Stone on such a feeble chain. She said it had seemed strong enough. The Stone must be heavier than we'd thought. Then she went to a big hamper that stood in the corner of the largest attic, and she opened it and started to rummage inside, saying she knew where to find something stronger. We kept all sorts of things in that hamper—costumes for when we acted, stuff that Mum and Dad had given us or made for us, and things that we had made or found for ourselves. Missie ran to help.

After a minute or two, my sisters forgot to be angry or depressed. They kept finding things that reminded them of funny happenings. I watched, sitting moodily at the table, with my chin on my fists. Douglas kept out of it as long as he could, then he gave a piercing yell and dived straight into the hamper. It fell over, and everything poured out on the floor, including Douglas who fell on Missie.

"You horrible boy," she shrieked, struggling with yards

of bunting that had wound itself around her. "Oh, look!" she added. "Here're the flags we put up for Jeremy's birthday."

I softened slightly. Douglas had climbed onto the roof to attach one end of the string there. It had been a nice gesture, even though he had managed to do something to the television aerial that had never been remedied.

"And here's what I was looking for!" exclaimed Jo.

She dropped to her knees, and began to sort out a great cluster of oddments—beads and necklaces, and buckles and brooches, some of painted wood, and some made of cardboard. Some were tin and glass, the sort of thing you buy in the Woolworth's. They were all tangled together in a bundle.

"I know there was quite a nice gilt chain . . ." my sister said.

Missie had draped herself in a black woolen shawl, and she now put a cardboard crown on her head. It was far too big, and only her nose stopped it from becoming a collar. Then she stooped and drew from the jumbled costumes a long, gray, draggled feather boa. It went twice around her neck, and trailed on the floor on either side. She looked ghastly. Douglas had found a sword in a sling, which he hung across his shoulder, and a trumpet that only gave a hoarse wheeze, however hard he blew. And Jo managed to disentangle the gilt chain. She held it up for me to see.

"Throw over the Stone, and I'll attach it," she called.

Afterward, she said she hadn't meant this literally. But I was tired. And she was never very good at catching things. The Apple Stone fell, and the bag opened, and out it rolled.

Missie screamed at the top of her lungs. She dragged off the feather boa and hurled it away from her. One end

landed on the floor, but the rest stayed in the air, rearing a horrible head to stare at us with red and unblinking eyes.

It was about nine feet long, and as thick as a bolster. The feathers were spikier, and shinier, and pure white. It writhed slowly all the time, and the head swayed from side to side, like . . . like. . . .

Like the snake it had become. The giant, feathered snake.

Douglas stayed quite still, with the trumpet in his mouth. Jo stayed quite still with both hands over hers. I stayed quite still with my heart in mine. And Missie began to cry.

"Sssssh . . ." whispered the snake, softly and hissingly.

"Ooooh!" wailed Missie.

She took a step toward Jo, and its hideous head flashed up and hung over her.

"Sssssstop," it said.

She stopped, with a startled sob. No one moved. The creature went on swaying, with its tail on the floor, and its head weaving slowly from side to side. Then it said, "You sssummoned me. I have come—as once I came up out of the deep waters to bring knowledge and life and death to the Aztec people. Give me thankssss. Give me praisssse."

I tried a few times, and finally managed to say, "What are you?"

It said, "I am Quetzalcoatl."

I said, wouldn't you know? And Jo said feebly perhaps it would like to go to sleep or something. It said, "Sssacrifice . . ."

High above Missie the ghastly head was hovering, while she stood rigid with terror, the crown low over her ears, the awful black shawl slipping off her, and the tears drying on her face because she was now too frightened to cry. And

suddenly Jo managed to get to her in one movement and put her arms around her; they stared at the serpent in equal terror. I was struggling to remember what I'd ever heard or read about the ancient civilization of the Aztecs. Nothing much came to me, but that little was far from comforting. The altars to the Sun . . . the endless sacrifices. . . .

The snake lowered its head a little, and started to glide around the room. I wondered if we could get to the door? No—not all of us. It moved so quickly. It thrust its blunt head into corners, and under tables and chairs, and it sounded like dry leaves blowing about the floor. My mouth was so dry that I couldn't speak until I'd swallowed desperately a few times. Then I croaked, "What—what sort of—sacrifice do you want?"

It was close to me. It reared up, and then lowered its head to stare into my face. I tried to recoil, but found I could hardly move a muscle.

"Why assk?" it whispered. "You know well. And ssspeak my name. Ssspeak my sssacred name."

"Er—" I couldn't remember.

"Quetzalcoatl," said Jo, thinly.

Even in my stupor, I admired her. The snake seemed delighted, and spun around and around in a sort of whirling, gyrating dance. It looked so gruesome that I tried to avert my eyes, and couldn't. And through the rippling and rattling of the stiff white plumes, I saw the faces of my sisters. I saw Douglas. And I tried to yell at him to keep still —but my mouth wasn't working properly, and no sound came. He had drawn his sword.

It was a real one. A nineteenth-century cavalry saber. It was far too big for Douglas, but he didn't care. He had

gone wild with rage quite suddenly, as he can. He lifted the sword and leaped forward with a yell. And the snake swirled around and over him. I gave a strangled grunt. It meant farewell to my cousin, and that I wished I hadn't said some of the things to him this afternoon that I had said.

Then the serpent was back in the center of the room, dancing its circling patterns around the floor. Its eyes gleamed more redly, and its stiff feathers stood out all over it. And Douglas was standing with one foot lifted, the sword above his head, and staring at the snake without expression at all, and without blinking.

"What have you done to him?" gasped Jo.

The snake went on circling, but its forked tongue flickered in its open mouth; a few drops of saliva fell, and the wooden planks of the attic floor turned white as though some frightful acid had soaked them.

"Ssssssacrifice . . ." whispered the serpent.

It was at the far end of the room, and suddenly it stayed still there, gaping fixedly into the open door of the toy cupboard, its red eyes level with the top shelf. It gave a long hiss. And something hissed back.

"Oh, no!" said Jo. "Not Mrs. Blossom!"

And, to my surprise, I found myself moving.

Between the cupboard and the snake, I said, "Leave the cats alone."

And I hauled handfuls of toys from the lower shelves, and threw them on the floor at the serpent's feet—if you see what I mean.

It ignored the broken railway engine, and the building sets; it drew back slightly from the jumping rope, until it decided this wasn't a rival; it didn't even glance at the assorted ducks, rabbits, teddy bears and golliwogs, and me-

chanical devices; but it gave a high scream of triumph when it saw the doll. This was a large, pink creature that someone had once given to Missie. She loathed it, and the only time it ever came in for any attention was when it got cast as a crowd, or a prince in the Tower. . . .

"Yesss," snickered the serpent. "Yesss—the child. Sslay me the child—"

And Missie rushed and snatched up the doll. She glared furiously at Quetzalcoatl.

"No!" she shrieked. "You can't have Wodge! She's mine!"

Into the silence, the doll gave a thin squeak of "Mama."

"That thing is not living," hissed the snake.

"No, but you shan't kill it," said Missie.

"I'll have a living child," whispered Quetzalcoatl.

Then Jo caught hold of our little sister and tried to pull her away. The serpent turned its gaze on her, and she stood as rigid as Douglas, with eyes as blank and staring.

"Come now, child," said the snake. "Come here to me."

To my horror, Missie took a stiff pace toward it.

"Don't—" I croaked.

The creature went all around the floor in a wide swift circle, and then stayed still, head high, quivering. Its mouth was wide open, showing huge teeth, and the tongue flicking in and out. Missie took another step. I couldn't move at all. I seemed to be wound in a tangle of invisible threads . . . my hands and feet were held fast. I couldn't speak. Through my mind ran visions of the great altars of the Aztecs . . . the hearts laid bare by the stone knives . . . the children tied there before the God of the Sun . . . God of the Waters . . . the Plumed Serpent . . . Quetzalcoatl. . . .

Missie took another jerky pace toward it.

I saw no more. Stillness and silence and darkness came down on me.

It might have been a century later that I stirred and groaned and found myself in the attic—the old, familiar attic. I saw the furious face of Mrs. Blossom staring from the top shelf of the cupboard, the jumbled pile of costumes, the heap of toys, the overturned hamper. And there were my sisters, white and shaking, and holding each other's hands. There was Douglas, and the crash as he dropped his sword. Then all our eyes went to the serpent —the feather boa, lying gray and dirty and crumpled on the floor.

No one went to pick it up.

As I shut the door firmly behind us, Jo said under her breath, "But—our eyes were all wide open."

"Their senses were shut," I said, remembering Lady Macbeth.

"Does that count as the same thing?"

"The Apple Stone must have arranged that it did."

"What about Nigel?" said Douglas. "He wasn't even there."

We found him on his bed, fully dressed and fast asleep, and Ragnar sitting uneasily by his side. We all surveyed him rather thoughtfully.

"We're going to have a job, explaining," said Douglas. "He won't like it."

"We'll have to let up a bit, nagging him for what *he* did," said Jo.

"Why?" I asked. "Ours was an accident. He did what he did on purpose."

"He still won't like it," pursued Douglas. "He'll manage to make us all feel guilty and treacherous for using the Stone behind his back."

"After his performance?" I said. "How could he?"

He not only could, he did.

Next day all the butterflies were back unharmed in their glass case. It was *some* consolation.

7

DETECTIVES

I was bogged down in homework. Since the arrival of the Stone, we'd all rushed to get through the stuff each day, in order to have plenty of time left during the evening. But now I couldn't concentrate. And the others hung about, tapping their fingers on the table and sighing, which was no help at all.

"Shall I do it for you?" said Douglas.

"Do you know anything about differential calculus?" I said, coldly.

"About as much as you do."

I thought he probably did, but I didn't say so. I just said stop breathing down my neck.

"But you're taking so long," wailed Missie.

"Let me do it," said Jo.

I said it would be cheating, as she was good at math. She said this was no time for excessive virtue. And she took my books, and began to work things out on a rough bit of paper.

"Copy them as I go," said she, "and don't worry, Jeremy, you won't get too high grades because I'm doing them all

wrong. Otherwise," she added, sweetly, "they'd smell a rat."

"Thanks," I said.

While copying my sister's efforts into my exercise book, I tried to explain that my brain had slowed down owing to the shocks of the previous day.

"If you mean the boa," said Missie, "it was just as horrible for me, and I've just learned two verses of 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat.' "

"You've known that forever," said Jo.

"Well, I'm going to do my first lesson on the way to school," put in Douglas, "and the rest inside my desk during classes."

"You always do," I said.

At last, I shut my books. And Jo rubbed some ink from her fingers with her handkerchief.

"Now I've something important to say to you all," said she.

Douglas applauded, and Missie groaned, but my elder sister swept on, "This is serious. Think about yesterday—"

"If you're r-ready to apologize—" started Nigel.

"I've been thinking," said Jo, raising her voice, "that we ought to limit the things we do with the Stone. We've had far too much going on at the same time. It's nerve-racking."

"Yes," I said. "Mine are stretched so tight that they'd twang like harp strings if anyone touched them."

"Ugh!" said Douglas. "Who'd want to?"

"And *I've* been thinking, too," I continued, "and if you applaud once more, Douglas, I may let you have it! And I thought exactly like Jo. We must swear a solemn oath not to use the Apple Stone more than once a day."

From inside the silk bag that was now hanging on a

stout cord around my neck, I heard a small voice say, "Hear, hear!"

I extracted the Stone, and held it in my hands. It gave a self-conscious sort of little wobble, and then said, "It's not that I'm lazy. But it tells, you know, all this drainage of power. It makes me tired and heavy."

I'd noticed it seemed heavier, but put this down to my own tiredness. The Stone mumbled something, and then said, "Oh, for the quiet—the dark of the earth—"

"You're not going to leave us?" cried Jo.

Missie ran across to me and touched the Stone with one finger very gently.

"Dear Apple Stone," said she, winningly. "Don't go."

"Surely, if we only use you once a day—" I began.

"Better not at all," it said.

And it drowned our protests by telling us to consider our activities of yesterday.

"I nearly split myself helping to break that Quetzalcoatl business," it said. "It took a bit of doing, and I don't intend to do such a thing again—not ever."

"Oh, we're truly grateful to you," cried Jo, "and we don't want you to get tired, so we certainly won't work you so hard in the future. But do stay with us a little longer."

"Just once a day and that's the lot," said Douglas.

"Can I trust you?" said the Stone.

"You may well ask," said Nigel. "They sw-swore not to do anything unless we were all th-there. And look at yesterday!"

"Yes," I said. "Just look at it, will you!"

The others turned on him as well, and he shut up. I said, "If you don't all make a proper vow, and *keep* it"—I glared at the Clans—"I'm going to give the Stone to Dad and ask

him to lock it away, and not give it back if we all go crawling around the floor on our knees pleading for it."

"He'd probably lock us up, too, if we did," said Jo, "and suppose he used the Stone, not knowing . . ."

I hadn't thought of involving Dad, in any case. Luckily, my three younger relatives were so appalled by the idea of the Stone's leaving them that they were keen to make some vow that would content it. They argued what would be most binding. Douglas wanted us all to prick our hands with a knife and sign an agreement with our blood. Jo said she didn't care what he did with his, but hers was staying where it belonged. And Missie said, why not vow on blue? When we asked what she meant, she quoted,

"Green is forsaken,
Yellow's forlorn,
Blue is the luckiest
Color that's worn."

"Lovely," I said, "but what we need is something that brings *bad* luck if we default."

"I know," said Nigel.

"Know what?" said I.

"We'll make the vow, and then say 'if I break my word, then . . .' "

And he also quoted,

"Growth l-like the fern to me,
Wasting like the rushes to me,
And unlasting as the m-mist of the hill."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

He explained that it was part of a curse laid by an Elf

woman on a man called Kennedy of Lochabar. Jo said, what happened to him? Nigel said he didn't know, but bet he'd managed to bring the lot on his head somehow.

"All right," I said, "we'll use that."

I thought it might hold Douglas and Nigel. No Highlander likes getting on the wrong side of a curse, even in this day and age. Missie said she didn't like the thought of being unlasting. So we took the vow. We solemnly swore not to use the Apple Stone more than once a day.

"Loud cheers!" said the Apple Stone.

"Right," I said. "That's that. Now, if we're going to do anything this evening—"

"What do you mean *if?*" said Douglas.

"May I finish?" I said.

"If you insist."

"Thank you. I was going to say, let's do something very simple. Something that can't possibly go wrong and lead to trouble. Something *nice,*" I said.

"Hear, hear," said Jo.

"Hear, hear," said the Apple Stone.

"What, for instance?" demanded Nigel.

"Well . . ."

I found my brain was still in slow motion. And Missie chipped in saying, what about doing her clockwork mouse? Douglas said, why? It would only turn into a real mouse.

"And you know what it was like when Mrs. Blossom brought one up here," said he.

"Yes," said Nigel, "you g-girls yelling your heads off—!"

"I know who yelled the loudest," said Jo, with spirit.

"I was only e-egging her on," said Nigel.

"On a very long hook," said Douglas.

"No mice," I said.

There was a goodish pause, while we all thought deeply.

Then Jo said, "Well—look here. I found this on my way home. It's been lost, and someone will be missing it. I've just remembered about it."

And she went to her briefcase, and took out a glove—a leather glove, very soft and well-worn.

"We could ask it who it belongs to," said my elder sister, "and then take it back to them."

"Lots of fun," said Douglas, sarcastically.

"It would make a change to do something useful," snapped Jo.

"But so d-dull," said Nigel, plaintively.

"Better than homicidal serpents," I said.

"Which I d-didn't see, owing to your ch-cheating," said Nigel. "I wish I had. I bet I w-wouldn't have got myself hyptonized."

"Hypnotized," I corrected him, "and I bet you wouldn't, too. You'd have got yourself sacrificed—with any luck."

"Oh, do let's do the glove," pleaded Josephine, "I'm sure its owner is sad about it. I hate losing a glove. Think how pleased they'll be to have it back."

"Put it on the table," I said.

And none of the others said any more in objection.

It was funny to see it come to life. It wiggled its fingers up and down for a moment or two, and then sat up, in a sort of way, and said, "Where am I? Where's my hand?"

"What?" said Missie.

The glove slumped sideways on the table.

"I know. I'm lost!" it said, dejectedly. "The worst has happened. The doom of gloves has fallen on me. Lost!"

A tear rolled out of its buttonhole.

"Don't cry," said Missie. "You aren't lost, not properly. We're going to take you home. You're found."

"We seldom or never get home," moaned the glove.

"But this time," said Jo, soothingly, "you can tell us just where you live. It'll be easy."

Against their wills, because they thought we'd chosen a dull subject, the Clans had become interested. And now Nigel said to the glove, quite affably, "Now be a b-brave glove. What's your owner's name?"

It sniffed, and then straightened up a little.

"I can't believe I'll have the luck," it said. "But—oh, if you can return me, I'll be so happy. I'll be one of the few gloves in the whole history of glovedom. . . ." And here it broke down again. "No, no!" it sobbed. "I'm just tormenting myself with hope. I'm lost! Lost!"

"Come off it!" snapped Douglas. "Who owns you?"

"Right hand," sniveled the glove.

"I beg your pardon?" said Jo.

"I belong to right hand."

There was a pause.

"Whose right hand?" I said.

"Mine. Right hand belongs to me. And I belong to right hand."

I coughed.

"Apart from all that," I said, "would you be kind enough to tell us the name of the person to whom the right hand is attached?"

"I," it said. "I'm deeply attached to it. I love it."

There was another silence.

"Listen to me," said Jo. "What happens above this right hand? I mean, surely there's a wrist."

"Certainly," said the glove, "I know it almost as well as I do the hand. A magnificent wrist."

"And above the wrist there must be an arm," pursued Josephine.

"I suppose so," the glove sounded doubtful.

"Don't be silly!" said Douglas. "It must have an arm. Unless you belong to a dismembered body," he added, ghoulishly.

"And if you do," put in Missie, "I'm not going to look for it."

"There may be more to it than I know," said the glove, "but I really have little knowledge of anything above the wrist. I mean, my territory stops there, doesn't it?"

"Who p-pulls you onto your hand?" said Nigel, rather cleverly.

"Another hand," said the glove, "but only a left one. A far inferior thing to my own dear right hand. Oh, right hand—my friend—my host—my guest—!"

"Don't overdo it," I said. "You've made your point. You want to get back to the hand that wears you. Just try to help us get you there, will you?"

"All right," it said, "I'll do my best."

"You don't know the name of your owner—I mean, the owner of your hand," I amended, quickly. "So could you describe the hand itself? Is it a man's hand?"

"It's lovely," said the glove. "Warm and alive."

"It's certainly a man's glove," put in Jo.

"Well, that narrows things by half," I said, and then to the glove again, "Is this hand old or young, can you tell?"

"It moves," it told us. "Its heart beats just inside my cuff."

Douglas had stooped over the table, and was examining it carefully. Now he said, "Its got very long fingers—"

"Artistic," said Nigel. "The owner, I m-mean."

"And careless," said Jo. "Look, the button's torn off."

"Yes, he probably *is* an artist," said Douglas, excitedly. "Look at that streak of red paint on the back, and a splash of green on the inside of the little finger."

"We're getting on," I said. "How many artists live in the village?"

"Several," said Jo, "but I found the glove by the bus stop, so he must live on this side of the church. That narrows the field again. In fact, it comes down to Mr. Stratton, and poor old Doctor Smart."

"The doctor isn't an artist," I said.

"Oh, he dabbles. You know he does, Jeremy. He's always painting flowers, and they all come out looking like wilting dandelions."

"Well, he's a possibility," I admitted. "What else does the look of the glove suggest?"

"It belongs to someone kind," said Missie. "There's a little tuft of cat fur caught in the seam, where he's been stroking a pussycat."

"And he hasn't got a wife," said Jo. "Look how that tear on the first finger has been mended, all dragged together any which way. He did it himself with a darning needle."

"And he's poor," added Jemima, in tones of sympathy, "because it's old. It's very, very old, so he couldn't afford to buy new ones. He just had to wear this forever, and now he's lost it. He'll be cold," she said, sadly.

The glove took her up on this.

"Cold," it wailed. "My hand will be cold without me. Frozen—frostbitten—covered with snow—!"

"It's not snowing," I said. "Now then, what have we got? An artist, kind and careless and poor. Living on our side of the village—"

"Probably in a little cottage," suggested Jo.

"With a cat," said Missie.

"Mr. Titheridge," said Douglas, decidedly.

"Of course," said the rest of us together.

We took the glove to its owner. It jumped about excit-

edly in Jo's pocket all the way, and kept muttering to itself about the cruelty of fate, and the unlikeliness that it would ever see its home again. We said it was going there now. It said it doubted it. It was right.

We knocked on the door of the little old cottage, and the door was opened by a little old man. He had curly gray hair, and spectacles, and he wore an apron all speckled with drips of paint. He had a big patch on his sleeve, and the flattest slippers I've ever seen. There were two cats with him. He was obviously the owner of the glove.

"No, no," said he. "I've never seen it before."

"You must have," protested Jo.

"I'm sorry, my dear—"

And then he gave a cry, and said the fish was boiling over, and fled into the house.

As we went back along the lane, the glove kept saying it had told us so.

"I bet it *was* his," said Douglas, irritably. "He just didn't want it back, and I don't blame him!"

"Ssh," said Jo.

"And anyway, it couldn't have been his," I said. "It's a big glove, and he had very small hands."

"You're p-perfectly right," said Nigel.

"Yes, yes," said the glove, "right I am. Oh, my lost right hand!"

"Keep quiet," I said, "and we'll find it for you."

We held a conference by the village green.

"Recap," I said. "A large artist—"

"Kind," said Missie.

"A bachelor," said Jo.

"Careless," said Douglas, "like all clever people."

"Like all *careless* people," corrected Jo.

"Hard up," said Douglas.

"Hold it there," I interrupted. "I don't think he is so hard up. The glove is lined with fur, and it's made of good leather. It's an expensive glove. And some people like to wear old gloves till they fall apart. Let's have another look at it."

We did so. Ignoring its moaning, we examined it like detectives looking for important evidence.

"There's a worn place right across the palm," said Douglas.

"Oh, he's got a car!" I said. "Here, glove, do you hold a steering wheel?"

"Yes, yes, I hold things. Smooth things, rough things, furry things—"

"Look," said Nigel, pointing, "there's a b-burn on the first f-finger. That's from a cigarette."

We congratulated him. Douglas called him "Old Sherlock."

"Right," I said, "then the owner of this glove drives a car, and smokes. He isn't so very poor, and he's careless, and kind, and paints. Now?"

"Doctor Smart," said Jo.

"That's about it," I said.

But it wasn't.

The long, thin, retired doctor met us on his drive, where he was transplanting some tiny shrubs. He looked like an enormous scarecrow, in ragged trousers and shirt, with his hair standing on end. He told us that he never wore gloves.

"Bad for the circulation," said he. "What you must do for cold hands is to wave them about freely. So."

And he waved his long arms wildly in the air like a windmill.

I thought how odd it would look in the streets with ev-

eryone walking about whirling their arms all around them in cold weather. Especially if their arms were as thin and lanky as his. What about on buses? There wouldn't be much room in rush hours. . . .

I heard Jo saying we hadn't meant to disturb the doctor, but had thought we'd just inquire. . . .

"Glad to see you. Drop in again," said he. "Come in the spring, and I'll give you some daffodils—or a little painting—"

"We'd rather have real ones," said Missie. "We don't like dead dandelions."

"Ssh," said Jo.

We held another conference, beside the drinking trough on the hill that had been put there for thirsty horses. It was half full of water. After a minute, it was more than half full, because of the addition of Douglas's left leg. He'd been sitting on the side and said he slipped.

"That mended tear in the glove," said Jo. "It's triangular, as if it was torn by a bird's beak. Suppose the owner has a parrot. And suppose the owner is a lady," she went on, eagerly, "and someone gave her a pair of old gloves for painting. I don't mean artist painting, I mean house painting. Decorating."

"You're thinking of Mrs. Snowden," I said. "She loves her house. She's always at it. If she could, she'd do murals on the back wall."

"It's her, for sure," said Douglas.

"It won't be," said the glove, sniffing.

It wasn't.

The bright and sparkling door of the white cottage opened a bare half-inch. A kindly eye looked out at us, and near the ground another eye looked, too, slanting and suspicious.

"I can't ask you in," said Mrs. Snowden, apologetically, "because if I open the door any farther, Pyewacket will rush out, and he's carrying on a feud with the vicar's cat. They've both got torn ears already."

Somewhere in the house behind her, a raucous voice told her to boil her head and drink a pinta. She called across her shoulder the same to it. The parrot gave another screech. The cat yowled in its throat. Mrs. Snowden assured us that the glove was not hers.

"It was clever of you to remember that my brother sends me his old ones to paint in," said she, "but not with a fur lining. It would be so clumsy for holding brushes."

Pyewacket slithered through the door slit, and vanished over the wall. The vicar's cat must have been waiting, for a blood-chilling uproar broke out, and Mrs. Snowden emerged like a bullet and took off in the direction of the fray. As she scrambled over the wall, she called to us, "Take it to the bus station, why don't you? The Lost Property Office."

We held a conference by the bronze war memorial.

"Recap," I said. "The owner may have dropped the glove on a bus, and it happened to fall off at our stop. He may have lost it anywhere. He may live anywhere in the whole countryside. We'd better take it to the office."

But the glove set up such a wailing that we had to hurry down a deserted lane, for fear of attracting attention.

"The doom is on me!" it cried, flinging itself about despairingly. "The fatal words are spoken—'Lost Property Office'!"

"Lots of people find their things there," said Missie.

"I know! Oh, I know that!" it wailed. "But it's the thought! Those are the awful words that haunt us all our

lives—those terrible, fearful words—'Lost Property Office'! Of course there are worse places, far worse. Places like gutters, garbage pails, municipal rubbish heaps, bonfires. But alas, alas, that we should ever come to such things. Why can't our beloved hands keep us safely? Why don't they guard us and cherish us—as we guard and cherish them?"

"You'll have a better chance of finding them," I told it, "at the Lost—"

"Don't say it!" begged the glove, brokenly. "Take me there, if that is my last and only chance—but don't say the dreadful name."

"Jeremy," said Missie. "I think it's Daddy's glove."

And it was.

It seemed he'd torn it on the cucumber frame that Ragnar broke. He smoked. He drove a car. And Mum was never good at mending.

He was glad to see his glove again. He was just going out, and he put it in his pocket. As he got to the gate, he dropped the other one.

"Oh, no!" I said.

I rushed with it after him.

"Do look after them, Dad," I implored him. "They hate getting lost."

He gave me a funny look. Then he said he'd noticed how sad and huddled an abandoned glove appeared. He stuffed his pair carefully into his pockets. The right-hand one gave a sigh of content and a little wriggle, but he didn't notice. It then lay perfectly still and quiet. I could only hope it would stay that way.

"I'm glad you found it," said Dad, getting into the car. "I'm quite attached to these old gloves."

"They return your feelings," I told him.

He gave me another funny look, and drove off.

I went back to the house. A mad hunt was going on for a glove that Douglas had lost some months ago.

8

THE MUDDLED IMAGE

Wednesday afternoon was technically a holiday, but unfortunately we were compelled to play school games. Everyone insisted it was good for us. I never could see why. None of us enjoyed them, with the possible exception of Douglas who tended to regard them as pitched battles, and usually emerged looking as if he'd been in one. I always managed to collect at least three reprimands for thinking of something else at moments of crisis. And Nigel played by fits and starts, and was generally sent off for arguing. I don't know how Jo and Missie got on at their school, but they didn't seem to take it all quite so seriously.

We came back to an early tea, feeling exhausted with rushing about for the good of our health. Jo said a brisk walk would have been just as much use, and less trying. Douglas, with a rapidly blackening eye, said it wouldn't have encouraged the team spirit in us. I wondered how he'd displayed this virtue by throwing his own center forward flat on his face and stepping on him. Anyway, we all agreed that it had been a bad waste of Apple Stone time. And I suggested we should go out to the old stable.

It was behind the house, and was used to store the lawn-

mower, the big rotary grass cutter, and various other implements of a like nature, together with all their fuel and oil. Before we found the Stone, we had started making a guy in there, to be ready for the Fifth of November. I know we'd begun a bit early, but we enjoyed the task, and we kept making alterations and improvements. We'd got some straw, and made it into the shape (more or less) of a human being by lashing it around with lengths of old binder twine, donated by Mr. Dobbs in a fit of generosity.

Mum had just given us a sweater of Douglas's which was too battered to be worn by anyone—even him. And we put it on the guy, with some difficulty, but ultimate success. Nigel sat on an upturned bucket, and went on with the stiff paper mask he was making. He'd got some combings from the cart horse's mane, and was shaping these into a beard and moustache, and sticking them in place. Douglas suddenly announced that he wished the guy to be named after him.

"My sweater makes up a good half of it," he insisted, "and you wouldn't have got it if I hadn't stretched that last hole till it ripped the whole side."

Jo said he shouldn't have.

"Why do you want to be burned?" said Missie.

"It would be fun."

I told him he had a strange sense of humor. And Nigel said he couldn't make the mask hideous enough to represent Douglas. Jo said firmly that the guy was meant to be Guy Fawkes, not Douglas Macdonald, so he could just keep out of it.

"Apart from all that," I said, "I suggest that we bring the guy to life."

And I explained that I wanted to know some things

about the Gunpowder Plot. Why they made such a mess of it, for instance.

"A child of three could have done a better job," I said.

"It would be interesting to know," said Jo, thoughtfully, "and I agree to the idea."

"Well, I *don't!*" said Missie. "Not unless it has a face."

I saw what she meant.

"Hurry with that mask, Nigel," I told him.

He said it was not a thing to be knocked off in a rush. He then put a bit of its beard in the center of its forehead. He said now look what I'd made him do. He tore off the horsehair, and dabbed some bright green paint on the smear it left behind. He then said I'd muddled him. And he flicked on some bright yellow, to prove his point.

"You're supposed to be doing a portrait of Guy Fawkes," said Jo, "not a monster from Mars."

"Well, s-stop hurrying me!" he growled. "It's getting monstrous because of D-Douglas saying it was to be like him."

"Oh, come on," said Jo, "hand it over. It's all right as it is. No one expects a mask to be a great work of art."

He said it *was* a great work of art. And Jo hooked it neatly out of his hand, and tied it around the blob of straw that was the head with some ribbons that were glued to the paper. The general effect began to look a bit sinister, and I had a sudden qualm.

"All masks are sinister," said my sister, when I said so. "It's the empty eyes. But it won't be like this when it comes alive."

"I hope not!"

I took the Apple Stone from its bag.

"Are you quite sure you know what you're doing?" it remarked.

But I was thinking of something else, wondering about the ease with which the Gunpowder Plot had been discovered, and whether the official version was really the true one. And I ignored the Apple Stone's doubts, and touched it against the stiff gloved hand of the guy.

"Ah," said Douglas, in a gloating voice, "let's have a fire. A great big burning hot fire. Is there any explosive?"

"Are you crazy?" said Jo.

I came back to reality, saw that Douglas had gone very white, and was staring at the guy in horror.

"I—didn't speak!" said he.

Missie squeaked loudly, and then said, "It—it—talks like Douglas!"

And the mouth of the mask opened again, and from it came the voice of our cousin.

"Come, why do you wait? It's a chilly wind, and a fire would warm our bones. *Your* bones, I should say, for I seem to have none."

And it gave a wild laugh that chilled my spine, for it sounded like Douglas at his very worst. Yet the talking mask was just paper, with cut-out eyes. The guy was still an effigy of straw and string. Only the mouth was moving, and one rigid hand that rose and fell as if moved by clockwork. Now, as we stood staring in dismay, the thing began to change, very slowly, and bit by bit.

The mask blurred and became a human face, a man's face, with the dapplings of bright paint on the forehead paling until they looked more like a bruise. It was not unlike the portraits of Guy Fawkes—except for the frighteningly familiar blue eyes and short black hair.

"I s-said you'd muddled me!" said Nigel, defensively. "I got D-Douglas into it by mistake—"

"Have you veins of ice?" demanded the guy. "Does none

of you feel the cold? It's freezing. I must have fire. I must be warm."

Its voice had deepened. The straw bundle had thickened inside the old sweater, and now its legs seemed to be wearing boots and breeches. On its hands my old woolen gloves that the moths had gnawed had become leather gauntlets—but the moth holes still showed. Through a tear in the breeches, I saw wisps of straw. The Apple Stone mumbled something from its bag around my neck, ". . . should have waited till it was finished. . . ."

"I don't like it!" said Missie, loudly.

The guy had lurched to its feet, and stood peering around the stable. Now it said, "Shall we light our fire?"

"Don't keep on about it," I said. "Are you Guy Fawkes?"

"Yes, in a way. Here and there, and from time to time. But other personalities seem to be crowding in. What's in those kegs?"

"The gasoline drums?" said Jo. "Well, fuel for the mowers, and the paraffin is for the greenhouse heater—"

"Inflammable?" asked the guy, eagerly.

"Yes, very."

"Good, good! We'll need it all."

The guy stalked stiffly across to stare at the stuff with a keen and covetous eye.

"You leave it alone," said Jo, in alarm. "It's dangerous."

"Good, good!" said the guy, again, "I love danger. It's like a game to me. And a game can be like a battle. And a battle can end in disaster. Does it matter? Life is short, and might as well finish in a blaze. Eh, my friend?" he said, turning on Douglas.

Douglas looked uncertain. The guy was saying things with which he agreed, but was saying them in his voice, and

he didn't care for this. None of us did. The guy laughed, and then spoke in the tone of a child—of Missie.

"I love fireworks. All those stars pouring down the sky, and the bangs, and the wheels of light." It began to sing,

"Remember, remember, the Fifth of November—"

My little sister clutched my sleeve, and said in a terrified whisper, "It's me! It's because my old hair ribbon is holding its face on!"

The guy overheard this, for he now said indignantly, "You l-leave my f-face alone! It's a v-very f-fine f-face."

I heard Nigel gasp. I said, "Stop it! Why do you keep changing so? Who are you really?"

"I don't quite know," said the guy, looking at us with the blue eyes of Douglas. "I get a sort of glimmer but then it all fades. My mind goes wandering, and I seem to be doing nothing but woolgathering. . . ."

It waved its hands, where the moth holes of my gloves showed clearly, and it had spoken in my voice.

"If it does *me,*" said Jo, passionately, "I shall go mad!"

"No, you won't dear," said the guy, smiling at her. "You must make allowances for a creature with a mixed nature. Everyone is a mixture, you know, and I'm more so than most, owing to my haphazard composition. You must try to be understanding and polite."

He'd ended on rather a prim note, and Douglas laughed nervously.

"There," he said to Jo, "it *did* imitate you, and you *didn't* go mad."

"It wasn't me," she cried. "I don't talk in that prissy way! I don't! I know I don't!"

"Now you know better," said Douglas.

"You don't do it often," soothed Missie.

Jo looked just about ready to weep with vexation.

"And apart from all that," said the guy, and I winced, "Where shall we make the bonfire?"

"Let's get out of here, anyway," I said, feebly.

As I opened the stable door, the wind blew in and the guy shivered and said it was going to snow. I said it was only slightly chilly, being an autumn evening. The guy said the English climate was awful. Then it added, in a much deeper tone, that once he had gone abroad to get away from it.

"But it wasn't any warmer in the Netherlands," said he. "Spain was where I'd really meant to go, when I joined the Spanish Army—but the best fighting was in the Low Countries, so I was stuck there."

"Mr. Fawkes—?" I said.

"Yes, my lad?"

"Why did you ever get embroiled in that mad Plot? You were a competent soldier, weren't you? Experienced, and all that?"

"Certainly I was. I left my home in Yorkshire when I was twenty-three, to earn myself a reputation as a fighter—and that I succeeded in doing. And eleven years later came Thomas Winter with a tale of wrongs, and invited me to join a conspiracy. Mad, you call it, son? But in its madness lay its best chance of success. Most plots are, by the very nature of them, underhand affairs. Ours was to be carried out with dash and boldness, and to end in one great bang! A rush of fire and sparks—the scent of smoke and powder—"

His voice had risen excitedly. I saw the mark on his forehead turn greener, and a bit of straw appeared through the rent on his sleeve. I said sternly, "No, no. Think of be-

ing a soldier, Mr. Fawkes. Think of how you came back to England—"

"What? Oh, yes," the paper look left his face, and his voice deepened again. "Back to England, yes—where the Scots king and the Protestant Parliament were busy breaking their promises and persecuting the people of my faith—"

"What about the persecuting the Spanish were doing in Holland?" I said.

Guy Fawkes stared at me in some surprise.

"You can't go looking at other points of view in an argument," said he.

"Why not?"

"Well—think of a battle, for instance. How could it start, if you began by considering the views of the enemy?"

"Easy," said Douglas. "Consider their point of view, and then bash them."

"Waste of time," said Mr. Fawkes. "Better to bash without thinking."

And he gave Douglas's own wild laugh.

"Mr. Fawkes," I said, rapidly. "Now, Mr. Fawkes—you were an expert on mining and explosives, weren't you?"

He said Yes.

"There's nothing like the thrill of laying a charge under the walls of some unsuspecting foe," said he, "and then, when they think there's no danger—wham! Lovely."

He gave a sudden shiver, and crossed to the open door.

"Jeremy, don't be so mean," he said. "I want a fire."

It was horrible to hear the voice of Missie, with the whine in it that she used when she was trying to aggravate you into doing something she wanted. I saw the tall figure standing there, and the straw sticking out of the tops of his

leather boots. Then he gave a curious, high whicker of laughter.

"I know where to light my fire," he yelled.

He snatched up a drum of paraffin under one arm, and vanished outside.

"That laugh wasn't any of us," said Jo.

"It was the guy itself," said Nigel. "I mean, the g-guy that isn't Mr. Fawkes. The one we're m-making for the bonfire. The g-guy with a small g."

"Come on!" I said, urgently.

We raced out of the stable.

It took us some time to run the creature to earth, and even then it was only the smell of burning that gave it away.

"It's in the big barn!" cried Jo.

"Gosh! All that straw and stuff!" said Douglas.

"Stop!" I said. "Don't go in there. The whole place may go up like a—like a bomb! If he sets that paraffin off—!"

"The calves are in there," wailed Jo, "and Bob—oh, quick!"

She shot into the open door of the barn, and the rest of us followed her.

Mr. Fawkes—or the guy, one couldn't be sure which—was squatting beside a small pile of straw and chuckling to it- (or him-) self, and fumbling with a little box. As we came up, a spark flashed from it, and lit for one second the sharp-nosed face bent over it.

"Stop it, you stupid thing!" cried Jo, angrily. "If you set light to that straw, I'll never forgive you!"

"It's wet. It's hard to light."

And the creature gave its high cackle again, and struck another spark.

"You're hateful!" said Missie, fiercely. "And I wish I hadn't given you my ribbon!"

Douglas suddenly went behind the guy, and gave it a great shove that sent it toppling forward. The little box went flying, and Nigel snatched it up.

"It's a tinderbox," I said. "Where did that come from?"

"Oh, Jeremy! Where did the boots and gloves come from? They belong to Mr. Fawkes," said Jo.

"Correct, my dear," said the guy.

It sat up. My cousins moved away cautiously, and it gave an amiable grin at us all, and was Mr. Fawkes again.

"You play roughly," said he, rubbing his shoulder. "You took me by surprise. And why? Surely you don't think I'd light a fire in this place? With all this hay and straw lying around? You must take me for a rare fool."

"Er—you vary," I said.

"To the extent of total insanity?" said he, amusedly. "Though I must admit, in another manner I've always enjoyed playing with fire."

"I do, too," said Douglas.

The soldier gave him a pleasant look. He said if Douglas had been his assistant, the Plot might have been a success. I thought he was probably right—or else a young Macdonald would have come to a sticky end along with the rest of the conspirators.

"They were such amateurs!" said Mr. Fawkes.

He got to his feet, and began to pace rather restlessly about the floor of the great barn. One of the calves lowed, and he lowed back at it. Then he said in a feeling way, "Never get embroiled with amateurs. Their enthusiasm is only equaled by their incompetence. If they'd left it all to me—" He suddenly sniffed. "I smell burning!"

"No, you don't," Jo assured him. "It's just a bit of charred tinder in your box. Please go on about your Plot."

"The smell of smoke," said the guy in a whisper, "the rage and heat of a blaze—it makes everything worthwhile. Can't we light just a small—?"

He rustled as he moved, as though he was stuffed with straw. Well, he was.

"Mr. Fawkes!" I said, loudly. "Mr. Fawkes—your leader hired a house next to the Parliament buildings—"

"What? Oh, yes—yes, he did—"

"And you tunneled from a cellar there."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you finish the tunnel?"

"It leaked," said the soldier. "One day we found ourselves knee-deep in water, either seeping in from the Thames itself, or from some tributary stream, I don't know which. We were cold—cold—it was very cold—"

"Yes, yes," I said, "and so because of this leak, you had to put your kegs of powder in another cellar. And everything started to go wrong."

"You were betrayed," said Douglas, indignantly, "by one of your own men. Tresham, the rat!"

"No, he wasn't," said Mr. Fawkes. "He certainly sent a message warning his brother-in-law not to attend the Opening, but he didn't mean to betray anything. He was stupid, but brave, and he went to his death in prison for it."

Then he grinned, under his rakish moustache, and gave a bright glance around at us all.

"Do you care that our plan failed?" said he. "Are you of our party?"

"We're not on any side, particularly," I told him. "Things have changed in England. People don't go blowing up anyone who annoys them."

"It wasn't very nice of you," put in Jo. "Didn't you mind about the Queen and the young prince? You knew they'd be there, too."

The soldier murmured something about not making omelets without breaking eggs.

"I'm glad your Plot failed," said Jo, "but I'm sorry you were caught. I wish you'd been able to escape."

"So do I," said he, and took his tinderbox from Nigel.

We all made a move toward him.

" 'Tes all right, m'dears," he said, in a thickening Devon accent. "I won't have me fire here in the barn, since you'm afraid."

And he went out of the door in a stiff whirl of movement and a rustle of straw. We were struck motionless for a moment, and Missie said, "That was the string talking! Mr. Dobbs's bits of string!"

"Oh, come on!" cried Jo. "We've got to find him again, or he may—!"

It was dark by now, and there was no sign of our guy anywhere. We searched the barnyard, and our own garden, and then the orchard, with no sound or scent to guide us. We were hurrying toward the stable, when I heard a small, high singing. It came from the paddock.

When we got there, the guy was hopping around the heap of twigs and branches we'd started to pile up for the big bonfire that we always had on the Fifth. It was chanting as it hopped and skipped, in a high childish voice:

> "Remember, remember the Fifth of November—
> Gunpowder, treason, and plot—"

We came up, out of breath and apprehensive, and it stopped capering and waved its hands at us.

"All this lovely wood," it said, happily. "You've got all this lovely wood together just for me? Oh, how kind and thoughtful you are."

It jumped up and down, and clapped its clumsy hands together.

"I see no reason," it sang, "why gunpowder treason should ever be forgot."

"*Have* you forgotten?" said Jo.

"I?" it said, coming to an abrupt halt. "Forgotten what?"

"The Gunpowder Plot?"

"No—no—one doesn't quite forget. . . ."

I sighed with relief at the deepening note in his voice. I rather liked Mr. Fawkes, though he was a bit wild and ruthless.

He said, regretfully, "All that work. All that thought. The high hopes. And every moment of the time we were being watched, and didn't know it. They knew all about our plot, right from the start. But they didn't step in too soon—oh, no, they were much too crafty! They gave us the rope we needed to hang ourselves, with all the trimmings! They had their watchers to see us bring the kegs up river by barge—by all the Saints!" he cried. "We were carrying them on our shoulders across the open street! Exchanging greetings with the Watch. Watch, indeed! They were watching us each step of the way. And then, when all was ready and set—the night before the convening of Parliament—the kegs sitting snugly in the cellar under their House—and me sitting snugly on the kegs—then they made their pounce. And all was over."

"I'm so sorry," said Jo. "For you, I mean."

"Poor Mr. Fawkes," said Missie.

"It was not a pleasant ending," he said, "for any of us.

And they got us all, as they intended, by awaiting the moment when we were committed to the full. Ah, well, I should have known better than to involve myself with amateurs. Plotting is an art, and they merely muddled it with ideas."

"Art shouldn't ever be m-muddled," said Nigel, with conviction.

"You're p-perfectly right, boy," said the soldier.

He sighed, and stretched his arms as though they were cramped.

"If it's any comfort," I said, "your name is remembered with a certain amount of affection. The fires are still lit on the Fifth of November, in memory of you. They may have begun for different reasons, but there's no malice anymore. People think of you as a brave man."

"Thank you," he said, quietly. "A bright flame is a good memorial."

His voice lifted. I saw some straw over the cuff of his raised arm. He said, "There's a cold wind blowing through me. Light my fire now."

None of us said anything until Jo spoke in a sympathetic way.

"Poor creature. It can't matter if we light its fire, Jeremy. It isn't a big one."

"Oh, yes," said Douglas. "Do let's."

I thought about it. While I was thinking, Douglas took a box of matches from his pocket, and struck one; Nigel got a bit of drawing paper from *his* pocket, and held it into the flame, and it caught light. My cousins stuffed it under the shavings and straw at the bottom of the bonfire. There was a flare and a crackle. I looked at Mr. Fawkes—and he was the guy, with a small g. Its paper mask was grinning wildly, and it wagged its gloved hands with glee. Bits

of straw stuck through the holes in its green sweater. It said, shrilly, "Oh, splendid! What a p-perfect p-picture! If one could only p-paint it."

Nigel coughed self-consciously. He'd often had a try at painting fire, and failed.

"Do stand farther back, all of you, away from the sparks."

It was Jo's voice, but my sister had not spoken.

"I love playing with fire," said Douglas.

But Douglas stood tight-lipped and still.

"Apart from all that," said the guy, "it must be better to think too much than too little."

"That's what I say," I began, and bit my tongue.

Now the bonfire was well alight. The flames sprang high into the air, and the smoke of them was painted red and yellow from underneath. Sparks flew everywhere. It was as bright as day in the corner of the paddock. I saw the grave faces of my relatives, and the white, grinning mask of the guy. It gave a high yell, "Oh, my fire! Partner me —dance with me—give me the glory and the ecstasy! The stars raining down around me—the voices of children singing—"

It gave a huge leap into the air, and landed right in the center of the flames.

We all took a step forward, and stopped. And then we began to sing for the guy.

As the flames died into ashes, the scent of wood smoke blew away on the wind, and the singing stopped, Father came out of the house to see what we were doing. We said it had been a mistake, really. He said well, it was our own work that we'd destroyed, and herded us. We didn't really mind. It had gotten chilly outside.

9

STUPID AS STONE?

We were out of favor. As soon as we got back from school next day, Dad confronted us with a list of our crimes, and demanded reparation. There was the cucumber frame Ragnar had broken, and our protests that we weren't responsible were dismissed; there was the feather boa that I'd burned in the stove, and that stank the house out; and some grumbles about impudence and trespassing from Mr. Dobbs when Dad met him in the village.

"Either you've all developed the mentalities of hooligans," said Father, "or you haven't enough to do."

I said we'd had too much to do.

"Not the right sort of things, perhaps," said he, "so here's something useful for a nice change. It rained during the night, and I'd like you to have a go at rolling the side lawn. Flatten all those wormcasts. You can take turns," he added, kindly.

As he went away, we eyed one another despondently.

"That's it, then!" said Douglas. "It'll take till dark, so there won't be much time left over for the Apple Stone."

"Anyway, we'll be far too exhausted with rolling the

grass," I said. "It's an awful job with that heavy old roller—"

And Nigel suddenly announced that he had an idea.

"What is it?" we asked, suspiciously.

"If you're g-going to be like that, I won't tell," said he. "Oh, I know you're still h-holding it against me about those b-beastly butterflies," he added, crossly, "and I think you should p-prove you trust me by just giving me the Apple Stone, and letting me do this on my own. Do you agree?"

We said we all agreed—not to trust him.

"Give a dog a b-bad name!" he said.

He turned away, rather pathetically, with drooping shoulders. I was deeply skeptical of this performance, but it touched Jo's heart, of course. She asked if he was quite sure he had a good idea. He nodded, looking as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"Oh, let him have the Stone," said Josephine.

"No," said everyone else except Nigel.

"Oh, all right," said our cousin, coming off it. "I'll tell you, as you're all so b-beastly suspicious!"

He told. It did sound like quite a good idea, under the present circumstances. Not very exciting, but at least it would save us a lot of wear and tear. I handed him the Stone.

"We ought to come with you," I told him. "But you've made such a point of being trustworthy—so we're taking a chance. Just remember that you're on your honor only to do what you've said you'll do."

He grinned disarmingly, and vanished into the rhododendrons.

The others eyed me questioningly.

"One can only hope," I said.

It was a good thing our parents had gone out to see some friends. It was a good thing Mrs. Chugg was giving old Arthur his tea in the kitchen. It was a very good thing no one was passing the gate when Nigel's activities commenced. We heard the start of them.

There was a great, thumping crash from the middle distance, and a thud that shook the ground. We looked at one another. Ragnar barked. Then a slow rumbling sound, a scrunching of gravel, and a deep-toned voice talking were all coming toward us down the drive.

" 'Tes a pity about that bit o' wall," said the soft, Devonian drawl. "But there, 'twas naught but brick. What chance has a few bricks against a solid lump like me? If I'd known 'twas only brick, I'd ha' tried to jump."

"What *has* he done!" said Jo.

I shrugged.

"He *said*—the garden roller."

Around the clump of shrubs came our cousin. Beside him, trundling slowly and ponderously, leaving a deep dent in the gravel drive, came one of the stone balls from the gateposts. We awaited them in grim silence, except for Ragnar's growling. As he neared us, Nigel shouted that the roller wasn't in its shed, but he could hardly be heard above the noise of the rolling ball, and he tried again.

". . . and this is just as good as a r-roller, any day," he finished.

No one replied. He stopped with the ball a few feet away, and we stared at them in cold disapproval. Nigel began to scowl.

"You n-needn't look like that!" he snapped. "I s-said I'd make a roller come alive, and I have."

"You're a total viper," I said.

Ragnar then attacked the stone ball, and we sent him back to the house. We didn't want him to break his teeth. Then we returned to Nigel.

"What happened to the wall?" I demanded.

"That was my fault entirely," said the stone ball. "I come down a mite too quick. Rolled off me pedestal onto the wall, and 'twas naught but brick. It gave way, and it crumbled under my weight. 'Twill need some repair."

"Dad *will* be pleased," I said, bitterly.

"Ah, well," it said, " 'twill be all the same in a hundred years' time."

"Very likely," I said, "but meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile, we've g-got the grass to roll," said Nigel. "The ball will do it."

"Anything you like, m'dears," the ball assured us, in its deep tones, "so long as 'tesn't *too* active. I've never been one for rushing here and yon at high speed. All the time I lay deep in the ground, I never stirred—only when them great stones above shifted, and forced me deeper into the hillside. And you could scarce describe that as dashing about."

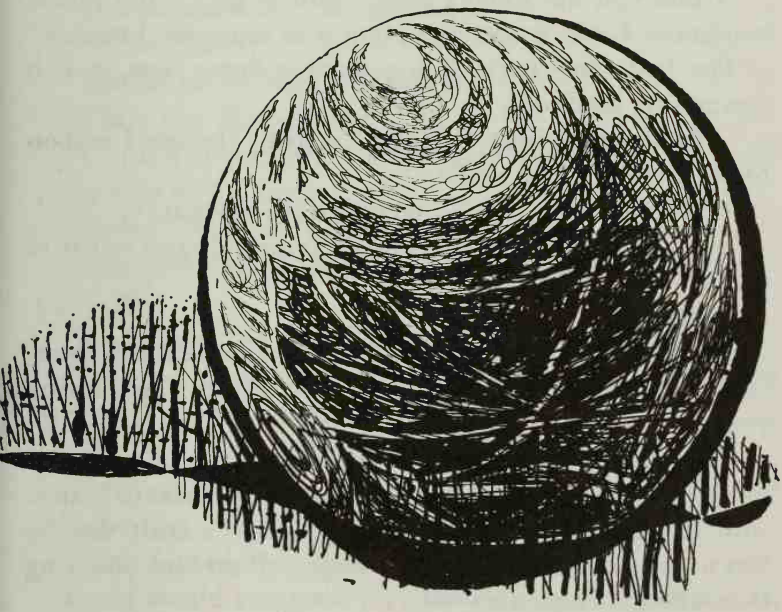
The huge thing—it stood two feet high at its highest curve and must have weighed about six hundred pounds—was sinking slightly into the soft grass at the edge of the lawn. I looked at it a bit hopelessly, and said, "*Can* you roll the grass? I mean flatten out all those hummocks and things?"

The ball chuckled, deep inside itself, and said it could flatten anything.

"C-carry on, then," said Nigel.

"If you'll be so kind," added Jo, quickly.

Then she said in a defensive voice that she wasn't being prim, but merely polite.



"Which way shall I go?" asked the ball. "Up and down, or side to side?"

"Dad usually makes the mower lines up and down," said Jo.

"Up and down it is," said the ball, cheerfully.

It trundled away from us over the grass.

"Dad won't like *those* lines," I said.

There were furrows several inches deep in the soft ground where the ball had run. We watched it moodily for a while. It came back, leaving a beautifully straight track alongside the first, and it turned and went away again, saying, "I'm enjoying meself. There's something about this movin' business—"

"We'd better go and get the roller," said Jo. "The lawn's going to look like corrugated iron—"

"I told you the roller's gone!" said Nigel. "I did *l-look*, you know. Uncle forgot he's l-lent it to someone, I expect."

The ball came back. It was moving faster now, as if it was getting used to it.

" 'Twon't take long, m'dears," it said, "before I reckon to finish the grass for you."

As it rolled away, I said I reckoned it was right.

"It must stop," said Jo, firmly. "Nigel, go and tell it to stop at once."

"Why me?"

"It's your silly fault that it ever started," said my sister, cross with him, "and we're the next silliest for trusting you."

Nigel went red. He said he was always blamed for everything that went wrong. I said he usually *was* to blame. And Douglas said it wasn't entirely Nigel's fault that he was so evil—it was his ancestry. Nigel fell on him, shouting that talking of ancestors—!

"Stop it!" ordered Jo. "You're not to say it, either of you."

They were hovering on the edge of saying the Forbidden Thing. But at that moment I didn't care if they slew each other. I looked at the five latest grooves in the lawn and the happily rolling ball. I moved toward it, to beg it at least to pause. . . .

There was a scream of fury from Missie, and I turned back to see what had happened now.

Out of the welter of general abuse, it emerged that she'd tried to interfere in the Clan war, and someone had hit her on the nose with his elbow. She stood hopping with rage and pain, clutching the said nose tenderly with one hand, and smacking at her cousins with the other. They had fallen apart, and were glaring at her.

"You punched me!" she shrieked.

"No, we didn't!"

"You shouldn't have b-butted in."

"I hate you! Both of you!"

"You did it yourself," said Nigel, hotly. "You put your s-silly nose on his elbow."

"Yours!" snapped Douglas.

"You *both* did it," moaned Missie, "and my nose is broke right off!"

Jo reassured her, and I told her not to make such a fuss.

"If you were all that injured," I said, "you'd be a lot quieter. You've just lost your temper."

"Oh, she *is* hurt," protested Jo. "Her nose is all pink."

"She's done that herself, wringing it about," said Douglas.

Missie kicked his ankle, and he yelled.

I said would everyone very kindly stop being so stupid,

and I went on, "We've trouble enough, without a lot of tiresome squabbling."

Missie marched over to an old mounting block, and sat on it with a sullen thump. Jo went to soothe her. And Douglas said he personally wouldn't make such a fuss if he were being murdered. I said, how did he know? He'd never been murdered.

"Yet," said Nigel, darkly.

During all this, the ball had continued its fell work. And the grass was beginning to show it, in a big way. I left my cousins, and ran across to the ball, and tried to tell it politely that it had now done enough.

" 'Tesn't finished yet, love," it said.

"But—we only wanted half the lawn rolled—"

"Wouldn't look tidy," said the ball, without slackening pace.

I looked hopelessly at Douglas, who had joined me. Then I said, "It shows lack of imagination to have too tidy a garden."

I'd read this somewhere. But the ball didn't accept the bait.

"That's not what you said at the start," it said, rolling busily. "You said do the grass. Your mind goes in fits and starts, don't it?"

"Half the time it don't go at all," said Douglas.

"What, is the child stupid?" said the ball.

"Yes," said my cousin, gleefully.

"As stupid as stone?"

"Y . . ." Douglas faltered and stopped.

"Ah, bless you, I'm not offended by the saying," said the ball, kindly.

It did a neat bit of cornering, and went on talking.

"I've heard 'em say it, time and again, up there on me pedestal above the roadway. I hear a lot that's not always meant for another's hearing. 'Stupid as stone,' they say, and I laughs to meself. For I'm not all that stupid, you know."

"No?" I said, feebly. "Oh no, no, of course you're not. But—couldn't you stop, now? It's getting on toward five, and the light's going."

"I've no eyes to be blinded by the dark."

"But we'll have to go in—"

"I'm not needin' your help, m'dears. I'm enjoying meself. And when I've done this little chore, I'll go and do the front lawn."

"Oh, no . . ." I moaned.

"You leave it all to me," said the ball, "for I'm very far from stupid, really."

Nigel came rushing over the grass, caught his foot in one of the long furrows, and fell with a crash. As he struggled up, he said breathlessly, "You'd better come. Missie s-snatched the Apple Stone from me, and she's rushed off in a huff."

"What!" I shouted.

We started to run.

"She did swear a solemn vow not to use the Stone more than once a day . . ." I panted. "And we've got the stone ball—for better or worse—as today's effort. . . ."

Douglas laughed scornfully. He said it would be mad to expect Missie to remember a little thing like a vow, if she'd lost her temper.

"Remember when she let those sheep into the drawing room," he panted, "because Mrs. Chugg scolded her for going in with muddy feet? And when she ate all the strawberries in the garden, because you said she'd be sick if she ate one more? You were right," he added.

I begged him to stop. He'd made my blood run cold. And then we found Jo by the gate into the little walled garden.

"She's in here," said my sister. "Come on, Jeremy. You two," she snapped at our cousins, "can stay here and stop her if she comes out. It's your fault that she's being so naughty."

They looked wronged and innocent. They've had a lot of practice with this look. My sister and I went into the square of garden, which was darkened now by its high stone walls. We could see the straight rows of raspberry canes, trimmed and pruned for next year's fruiting; peaches and special pears, spread-eagled against the walls; melon and cucumber frames, their glass tops reflecting the last of the light. But no sign at all of Missie.

"Hiding in the tool shed, silly brat," I said.

It was pitch-dark in there. I knocked over a seed drill and barked my shin, and Jo hit her head on a hanging watering can with a clang that made me jump. And then, from somewhere outside, came a crash far noisier than either of ours—a grinding sort of crash, followed by the disastrous tinkle of falling glass.

"Jemima!" cried Jo.

We raced to where Douglas and Nigel were standing by the frames watching the stone ball slowly emerge from one of them.

"Three little glass frames," said Douglas, "sitting in the sun, Ragnar smashed the other one, and now there's only one."

"Sorry," said the ball.

It rolled onto the path, mumbling that it had skidded.

"And now you'll all be saying 'as stupid as stone,' " it added, sadly.

No one answered, and it gave a great sigh.

"Slow," it said, "I'm slow—by nature, you see—but not —not truly stupid. I can recognize the seasons as they passes over—the rain, the wind, the sun, and the snow. I sits upon my pedestal by the roadside, and I know the ways of them that walk below. I've heard 'em laugh, and I've heard 'em cry. I hear the beasts, in their joy or their trouble. 'Tother night, there was a little cat wailing, that was lost, poor soul. And I heard how her cry changed when a woman came and called her home. I know when the cows go by to their milking, and the sound of all them newfangled machines. I'm *not* quite stupid."

"Of *course* you're not," said Jo, kindly.

We'd been listening, fascinated, to the stone's account of its life on the gatepost. But now we heard something else—a patter of quick footsteps. And the gate was unguarded.

"Look out! There goes Missie!" I shouted.

The little brute must have been hiding under the drooping branches of the old fig tree in the corner; now we'd let her get past us, to the gate, and she was away.

As I pelted after her across the paddock, a hanging clothesline caught me across the throat, and I sat down, choking. The others were well ahead of me, as I got up and followed. And just behind me came a soft, trundling sound, and I knew what was following *me*. The ball and I caught up with my relatives by the door of the barn—but not with all my relatives. Missie wasn't there.

"She's inside the barn," said Jo, crossly, "and she's bolted the door."

"Well, she can't shut the *big* doors," I said.

All the same, when we got around to the other side of the barn, they *were* shut. A heavy chain was drawn through two round holes in the doors and padlocked. We stood

staring irritably at the great, black-painted, sun-blistered double doors, each big enough to admit a tractor.

"They b-bang about when the wind blows," said Nigel. "One of the men told me. Old Dobbs must have f-fastened them."

He then announced that he'd climb into the hayloft window. I said, where was the ladder? He said there was a lot of ivy that would be strong enough to bear his weight. He was wrong about this. After the yell and the thump, he came back limping slightly and said he'd broken his neck.

"If you had, you'd be dead," said Douglas.

He said only his courage kept him going.

"Missie!" yelled Jo, ignoring all this. "Missie, come and open the side door! You're very naughty, and I'm angry with you!"

I was going all around inspecting the lower windows. Most were so cobwebbed and stuck that they obviously hadn't been opened for years, and they didn't now. A few others showed a narrow slit, but wouldn't go any farther, however hard I pushed and pulled. Then we all went back to the small side door and shouted at Missie. Threats and abuse and bribes brought no reply.

"Oh, let's leave her," I snarled. "She'll get bored with sulking by herself. And she can't come to any harm in the barn. She knows every inch of it."

"But she's set fire to it," said Nigel.

At this moment, Missie began to howl for help.

"Open the door then," I howled back.

"I can't get to it!" came a panic-stricken wail from the barn. "I'm up in the hayloft, and the ladder fell over, and I can't get down. It's all smoky, and I'm going to be on fire! Jo! Jeremy—!"

I shouted that it was her own fault. Jo said this was no

time for a lecture; our cousins hammered on the door, and threw themselves against it, but it didn't stir.

We rushed around the barn again. We flung ourselves in unison on the great doors, first one and then the other. They creaked and groaned, and swung a little—but the lock and chain held fast. And, through the gaps and knotholes in the planking, and from underneath, came some eddies of thin and acrid smoke. A calf bawled suddenly, and Jo gave a frantic cry, "Oh, the animals in there, and Missie—Missie—!"

She then went quite mad, hitting at the doors with her fists. Nigel joined her, Douglas said he was going to get a ladder from the stackyard. I said I was going to get Mr. Dobbs. And out of the twilight came a deep and rumbling voice. "Stand aside, the lot of you, and give me room."

We'd forgotten the ball.

It stood about twenty feet behind us, rocking backward and forward very slightly. And we—dazed with the horror of what was happening, hearing Missie's frenzied cries, and the equally terrified bawling of the calves in their box stalls, and the sudden high whicker of terror from the cart horse—we did what the ball told us. We fell back to the sides of the doors, coughing in the fumes of the burning straw, and with tears, from the same fumes, no doubt, pouring down our faces. And the ball launched itself against the great doors of the barn.

It struck like a huge stone cannon ball. There was a splintering crash, a billow of released smoke—and one door was swinging inward, half wrenched from its hinges. The lock and chain had been ripped bodily out of the second door, which now had a ragged, broken hole in its lower planks. Over the scattered shards of wood, we plunged, like maniacs.

"I'll get Missie," I croaked.

I found the fallen ladder, and propped it against the side of the loft, and went up faster than I've ever climbed a ladder, before or since. And Missie cast herself on me at the top, and nearly pitched us both down again. I could hear Nigel and Douglas dragging the great, broken doors farther open, and Jo shooing the cattle out of the box stalls. In their rush for safety, they almost mowed down our cousins, to judge from the boys' yells.

I got Missie down the ladder with some difficulty, for we were all rather shaky, including the ladder, and I ran with her into the open air. There was a great plunging and neighing from inside the barn, and I heard Jo shouting soothing remarks, like, "Steady, you old fool! It's all right, Bob—come on, you great clown!"

I tried to go and help her, but Missie was clinging to me and sobbing. The horse shrieked with terror. And then, through the billowing smoke, and the crackle and glow of fire, I saw him come out. Jo was clutching his headstall on one side of his tossing head, and Nigel on the other. He was almost lifting them both into the air, wild with fear as he was, but they brought him out. And behind them came Douglas, coughing helplessly, with the barn cat clawing at him as he ran with it to safety.

And now, from the farm across the fields, I heard men shouting.

Jo and my cousins had opened a gate, and chased all the animals into a field beyond. They closed the gate, and stood panting, as I came up with Missie. We sagged there, shaken, soot-streaked, and exhausted, and the ball rolled up in front of us.

"Shall I finish the lawn, now?" it said.

"Oh—you—you saved—you're marvelous . . ." gasped Jo, brokenly.

"We'll try to thank you later," I told it. "If—if you could just very sweetly go out of sight for a little while."

It said affably that it would wait in the garden, and went trundling off. It was just in time, as the men from the farm arrived. Mr. Dobbs was with them; he saw us by the gate, and he shouted, what did we mean by setting fire to his barn? Then they all rushed to connect a hose and start coping with the burning straw. And Douglas said let's all slip away very quietly. I said we must stay and face the farmer.

"Missie should stay," said he. "She did it, not us."

"No!" cried Missie.

Then Mr. Dobbs came over to us, breathing hard and scowling. Jo began to say we were all very sorry, and Missie said loudly and earnestly, "It wasn't me. I promise it wasn't. I did bolt the door. I was hiding from the others. But the smoke was there already—only I didn't think it would get bigger. . . ."

Mr. Dobbs was looking at her closely.

"Oh, I promise!" she said again. "I wouldn't—not ever —not with Bob and the—I've *never* made a fire, not since I burned my hand on the poker. I don't *like* fires! And the others only came in to get me, because I was hiding. . . ."

Mr. Dobbs nodded.

"Well," he said, "I believe you, love. It must have been that damp lump of straw got overhot and blazed up suddenly. It could have been smoldering for days. Now don't upset yourself," he told Missie. "I'm very glad you was playing hide-and-seek there, m'dear. I'm very grateful to all of you," and he turned to us. "I don't mind a bit of

damage—there isn't all that much, anyway, as it appears—but I tell you my heart was in my mouth for the beasts. And I saw you get 'em out. Very well done, too. I don't know how you managed to smash that great hole in the door—"

"It wasn't just us," said Jo. "It was—"

"Now, now, m'dear, no one's going to blame you! Far from it. And I guess what you used was that big lump of timber lying by the side. Jest like a battering ram, eh?" said nice Mr. Dobbs, grinning. "I wish I'd seen you do it."

"It wasn't—" began Jo.

"Well, we're sorry for everything we've done to annoy you," I said, quickly, "and we'll never go near the barn again—or trespass in your fields—"

He laughed. Over in the barn, the fire had died into steam and black ash. The men were forking a mess of wet straw outside.

"After this," said Mr. Dobbs, "you'm welcome to come and go as you please. Anywhere, anytime. I won't check you—not unless your great dog goes bothering the sheep again."

"He didn't last time," I said. "I was with him."

"So you said, lad. It must have been another of those Great Danes that are so thick on the countryside round these parts, that I saw with my own eyes. . . ."

"He'd never have hurt them," I said.

"That's as maybe," said the farmer. "However, you make sure he don't do it again, and you'll hear no more from me on the subject. In fact, you come up to the farm when you feel like it, and my wife'll give you some homemade jam and cream to your tea. And I'll have a word with your father, and tell him what you've done today."

"Oh, no!" said Douglas, in horror.

But Mr. Dobbs just nodded, and went off to see to his barn and his beasts.

We went to find the ball.

Even in the twilight, it was easy to follow its path across the rose garden. And we found it by the gate, just under its own post.

"I can't get back up there," it said. "I'm not rightly built for jumping."

"Never mind," said Jo, "you'll be back soon, safe and sound."

"I hope so," it said. "It was nice, all this action, for a change, but I love best to sit and listen to the world going by beneath me."

"Well, you just stay here awhile," I said, "and not go off anywhere—"

It said it had no intention of moving.

"I know you'll be in trouble if anyone sees me on the go," it told us. "It come to me sudden. I'm not that stupid, you see."

"No one will ever say 'as stupid as stone' when I'm around," I assured it, from my heart.

It gave one of its deep, soft chuckles.

"Slow," it said. "Yes, slow, perhaps. But not truly stupid."

We left it at last, and went back to the house, wondering how to break it to Dad about the other cucumber frame, and the roses, and the broken wall, and the corrugated grass—and a dreadful thought came to me.

"Where was Mr. Fawkes standing, when he was making sparks from that tinderbox in the barn?" I said.

We walked in silence. Then Nigel said, "Straw d-does do s-spontaneous combustion, sometimes."

We walked on.

"Could someone take the Apple Stone?" said Missie, in a very small voice. "It's so heavy."

10

BIG GAME

We stood in a row in the orchard, and looked at the elephant. It was not so very large, as elephants go, but it was large enough. As big as a dray horse, only bulkier. And it was green. It looked back at us with tiny crinkled eyes, and swished its little tail.

"Where's the other?" it said, in a voice like a snore.

"Where's the other what?" said Jo.

"The other me."

There was a pause.

"Do you know what it's talking about, Douglas?" I asked.

"No. Why should I?"

"It's your responsibility. You did it, remember."

"You agreed," said he.

This was true. He'd suddenly announced this evening that he hadn't had a fair chance at the Apple Stone. He said everyone else had had a turn, one way and another, and he should now be allowed to decide on something. We said all right, with reservations. And this was the result —the elephant.

It usually stood at one end of the attic bookshelf where I

kept a row of special books. Douglas had wanted to make it grow enormous.

"The biggest elephant anyone's ever seen," he'd said, excitedly. "Then we can ride it into the village, and charge people lots of money to look at it—"

"How could we stop them looking, if they refused to pay?" said I. "Don't be silly! If it was that big—"

"We could sell it to a zoo."

I said he had a mercenary mind. He said he was thinking of all those frames we'd got to pay for out of pocket money—and Christmas coming up soon—and then my birthday, he'd added, cunningly. I said my birthday wasn't until March, and if he thought we'd sell our bookend to a zoo, knowing that all they'd have for their pains after a few hours would be a bookend that wasn't there—

"Oh, well," our cousin had said, impatiently, "we can just charge through the village, and give everyone a terrific shock—"

"Are you *trying* to get us into more trouble?" said Jo.

In the end, we'd agreed to take the bookend down to the orchard and animate it, but only on condition that it wasn't to be any bigger than a donkey.

"Let's have something we can handle, for once," I said.

We took the soapstone elephant to the orchard, and watched while Douglas let it grow and grow and grow. . . .

By the time I had the sense to snatch the Apple Stone, the elephant was the size of a prize Shire stallion. Douglas said he'd got carried away. I still wonder when he would have stopped. And now, here the thing was, shifting its weight from one foot to the other, and complaining gently and monotonously.

"I want my other."

"Go on, Douglas. Give it its other," said Jo, unkindly.

"I haven't got its rotten other!" he snapped.

The elephant rolled its eyes at us, and said, why not?

"Can't we d-distract it?" said Nigel.

Missie rummaged in the pocket of her jeans, and offered it a battered-looking cookie that she'd saved to eat in bed. The elephant looked doubtfully at it, and then took it delicately in its trunk, and curved this up to its pointed mouth. It then mumbled at the cookie, and handed it back, saying it didn't like the taste.

"Oh, Missie!" said Jo. "It's ginger, you fool!"

"Well, they're nice. *I* like them."

"You're not an elephant," Jo reminded her.

I said she soon would be, if she kept eating cookies in bed. The elephant trumpeted.

"Oh, shut up!" said Douglas.

"Don't speak to it like that," protested Jo.

"Well, it doesn't have to shriek! Someone will hear, and come to see—"

"They might have my other," said the elephant, and trumpeted again.

"Let's go farther from the house," I suggested. "Right out on the moor, for instance."

Missie said, when were we going to have an elephant ride? I said she'd better ask the elephant. So she did. It twinkled its little eyes pleasantly at her, and said whenever she liked. It lifted its trunk in a great curl into the air. . . .

"Oh, no!" said Jo. "Please don't trumpet again, elephant dear."

"Why not? It's only to show my pleasure in your company," it said, looking surprised.

Jo said we were delighted with *its* company, but we didn't have to show it by making ear-splitting noises. It

said, how did we usually show happiness? She said by laughing and singing. It said do it then. There was a long silence. It's not so easy to laugh on the drop of a hat. But Douglas, who is rarely at a loss, began to sing. It wasn't much of a tune, as he was making it up as he went, but we all knew the words.

"He thought he saw an elephant
That practiced on a fife:
He looked again, and saw it was
A letter from his wife."

Nigel roared with laughter, and so did Douglas. Missie giggled.

"Very flattering indeed," said the elephant. "Few would think me elegant enough to be mistaken for a letter."

Jo and I joined the laughter. Then Jo said she thought the elephant was *most* elegant. And Nigel said especially its color.

"You b-blend with the apple trees," said he.

"You are all too kind," murmured the elephant.

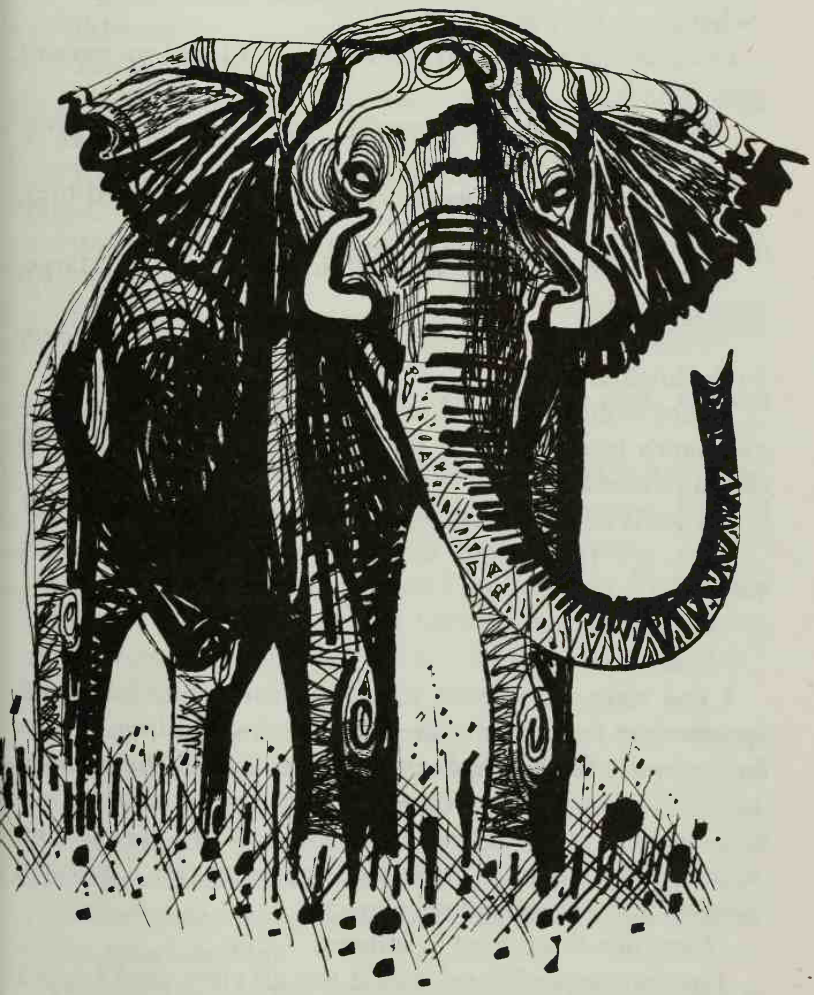
It lifted its trunk—and then changed its mind.

"No, I must laugh and sing, too, must I not?"

"Oh, do," said Missie.

It raised its trunk again, and this time produced a very curious noise—not a lot like laughter, but at least it was less rousing than the trumpeting. It said it would require practice. Then it burst into song,

"It thought it saw some human things
That made a lot of noise;
It looked again and saw they were
Some sort of girls and boys."



We thought about this for a moment, and then applauded. After all, it was clever of the elephant to copy Lewis Carroll. It now managed to produce an almost recognizable laugh, and we all joined in.

"Now that we know we're happy," said the elephant, "what about having a ride?"

Douglas said we needed an anchor, and I said we weren't going in a boat.

"Not an*chor,*" said my cousin, "an*kha*—a thing with a spike for goading elephants."

"I always knew you were raving mad," I informed him, coldly.

It would take Douglas to think of goading a large, strange elephant.

"What we need is buns," I went on. "There are plenty in the kitchen—"

Then, to my surprise, I saw a huge tear rolling down the elephant's face. Jo saw it, too, and she put both hands up to pat its cheek.

"What is it? A moment ago you were so happy," said she.

"But it's come over me that I can never be truly happy."

"What's the matter?"

"I know," I said.

I was right. It wanted its other. But before we could question it further on the subject, an appalling uproar broke loose. Ragnar had come galloping into the orchard to find us, and he yelped and fell over backward as he saw the elephant and tried to stop. The elephant gave a high squeal, and it nearly fell over as it turned to run. I grabbed Ragnar, and Jo grabbed the elephant.

"Now, now!" we cried in unison.

Then we assured them that it was all right, and begged

them not to panic. Ragnar whined idiotically, and the elephant said it didn't care for dogs, and if that one was staying, *it* was going. I said someone would take the Dane back to the house.

"You take him," said Jo.

"Why me?"

"You're the eldest."

It is funny how they all remember that whenever there is something they don't want to do. I protested.

"You can g-get some buns at the same time," suggested Nigel.

"We'll wait for you here," said Jo. "It won't take you long."

"We'll just practice riding the elephant," said Douglas.

"I bet you will!" I said.

I took Ragnar by the collar, and led him away. He was glad to go.

When I pointed out his cozy basket by the kitchen stove, he went straight in, turned around three times, flopped down, and stared at me sadly over his crossed paws.

"Well, I'm sorry," I said, "but I can't help it if elephants are afraid of dogs. It's all that barking and rushing about, and getting under their feet. They don't like mice, either," I remembered.

It didn't soothe him. He snuffled sadly as I took several buns and stuffed them in my pocket. I gave him one, and he had just managed to pouch it in his cheek when Mrs. Chugg came in. She said she'd set a cold meal on the table and we were to come and get it when we were ready.

"Make some cocoa," said she. "I'm away a bit early tonight. It's a long film."

I thanked her, hoped she'd enjoy it, and went off back to

my family. But when I was less than halfway to the orchard, I stopped in my tracks.

"Oh!" I said, aloud. "Of course! How stupid I am."

I returned to the house. Dad was in the studio, working with Mother on some new puppets. The studio had once been a conservatory, a huge Victorian one, all colored glass, and iron columns, and steps down into the garden. My parents were wearing paint-spattered shirts and jeans, and looked very concentrated on what they were doing. Mum had a puppet on her hand, and was wiggling it about to see how it looked from every angle. I could have told her. It looked revolting. But I said nothing. I don't care to hurt her feelings.

"Do you think it's like an elephant?" she said, seeing me.

I started.

"Not the one we've got," I said, without thinking.

Then I thought, and said I meant the one in the attic, on the bookshelf. Mum said her puppet wasn't meant to look like a bookend. It was meant, said she, to look like a real, jungle, circus elephant.

"Well, it's got a trunk," I said. "Not many animals have, so it would have to be an elephant. What else could it be?"

She said flattery would get me nowhere.

"What I came to ask," I said, changing the subject, "is—where's the *other* bookend?"

"What other?" mumbled Dad, through paintbrushes in his mouth.

He also had one in each hand, and seemed to be painting some scenery that looked like a lot of seaweed, but, when I looked closer, it was more like writhing green worms. I asked Dad about this, and he said coldly that it was meant to be a woodland glade.

"Darling Jeremy," said Mother, "it's not truly artistic to carry realism to extremes. One should convey, not insist. A work of art is never merely an exact copy of its subject."

"Then that's a good one," I said.

Dad grinned lopsidedly around the brushes, and mumbled something about critics.

"And what about the bookend?" I said, reverting to my own subject.

They'd forgotten what I was talking about. I reminded them.

"There must *be* two," I said. "There always are. One for each end of the books, you understand?"

They said they understood.

"Well, we've only got one in the orchard—the attic. And we'd like the other as well. The—books keep falling down. And the one we've got is missing the other."

Dad outlined a blue leaf with purple paint, and Mum wiggled her hand to make her puppet bow. They said I was getting a bit whimsical, wasn't I? I said I got my imagination from my ancestors. They both began to laugh, and Dad nearly swallowed a brush.

"About this bookend—" I pursued.

"If you mean those green things," said Mother, "those ghastly elephants that Auntie Johnnie gave us for a wedding present—"

"Probably," I said.

"Well, surely one got broken, and you have the other?"

"No," said Dad. "I don't know what happened to one of them, but the other's over there, propping the door open."

I looked. The door into the dining room was being held ajar by a green soapstone elephant.

"That's it!" I yelled.

"Don't, dear!" said Mother, flinching.

"That's it," I whispered.

"Look, if you want it, have it," said Dad. "But you must find us something else to take its place. The door bumps and bangs if it's left to itself."

I looked quickly all around the studio. I suggested the wooden box in the corner—if it was laid on its side—but they said it was the puppets' wardrobe, and mustn't be disturbed. I found a block of wood, and Dad said it was going to be some new crosspieces for the scenery. I said, couldn't it be a doorstop till it became crosspieces? He said it couldn't. Then I suppose I began to look a bit wild, for they suddenly got helpful.

"Oh, we'll find something," said Mother.

"That book," said Dad, indicating one on a side table. "If it holds the door, it'll do splendidly. And then you can take your precious bookend, since you're so struck on the thing."

The book was heavy enough to hold the door. I grabbed up the green elephant, and thanked my parents, and made for the garden steps.

"Just a moment," said Mum, suddenly. "Let me see that, dear. I'm daft, you know! I've been wondering about this puppet, and there's a model under my nose the whole time. You can have it tomorrow, Jeremy, when I've done making this creature."

"Oh, Mother," I said, reproachfully, "you don't want it to look like a bookend, and besides it's not artistic to carry realism too far."

My parents looked at me. Then Dad told me to buzz off, and Mum said take my bookend with me. I heard them laughing, as I buzzed.

Only silence was coming from the orchard when I got near it, which worried me. And I was more worried still to

get there and discover the reason. The others had gone. So had the elephant. Where? Why?

We'd meant to take it out on the moor. Had they done so? The creature had been a bit excited when I left, because of Ragnar. I had heard that elephants did run amok sometimes. Could an animated bookend go "musth"? I began to run over the field—and then a thought came to me.

I took the bag from my neck, and tipped the Apple Stone out of it into my hand. It had grown very heavy indeed during the last couple of days, and it was a relief to free my neck from its weight. I said, "I don't want to bother you, Apple Stone, but if I could just have a word . . ."

"Help yourself," it said, sleepily.

"You know we made a vow not to use you more than once a day . . . ?"

It woke up a good deal, and said snappishly that it hoped I didn't intend to break the vow.

"I'll be disappointed in you, Jeremy, if you do," it said, severely, "and you the eldest!"

Even the Apple Stone had got on to that.

"What are you like at grammar?" I said.

It said it knew eight hundred and sixty-seven languages, including their spelling, idioms, and grammar. It said it had noticed I took an interest in literature, which made a pleasing change from the crass ignorance of some of the people it had met.

"Apart from all that," I said, politely but hurriedly, "in correct grammatical usage, the word 'pair' is a single collective noun, isn't it? I mean, you can't say a pair of things *are* doing anything. You say a pair *is*. It's like the word 'crowd.' You can't say a crowd of people *are* gathering. You say a crowd *is* gathering—"

"Where?" said the Apple Stone.

"Where what?"

"Where's this crowd gathering?"

"No, no! That was an example."

"Don't confuse me," said the Stone, "never mind examples. Come to the point."

"If a pair means two of something," I said carefully, "and the word 'pair' is single—then the two things are really one. Do you see?"

"I see just where this is leading. You want to use me on that other elephant."

"Not if it's breaking the vow. But if this is one of a pair—then it would only be using you once. And if I bring this one alive," I hurried on, "it can probably lead me to its other. They've been parted for so long. . . ."

"You bring tears to my heart," said the Apple Stone, acidly.

"But as a pair is only one—"

"Don't go on about that!" said the Stone. "If you want to use me—"

"Only if it isn't breaking my vow."

"It shall not count as breaking your vow. I absolve you," said the Stone. "And, what's more, I congratulate you. Never in all my long life have I been handed such a load of tortuous reasoning, and from one so seemingly inexperienced . . ."

"You get a lot of experience with my relatives," I said.

". . . not Ulysses in full swing—not Machiavelli—neither the serpent nor the fox—" said the Apple Stone. "You should go far, my boy—and the farther the better!"

"Then, if I have your permission—?"

"Take it."

Next moment, the little green elephant began to wrig-

gle and squeak. I put it down rather quickly, keeping the Stone against its shoulder until I judged it to be about the same size as its other. And there it stood, shifting its weight from foot to foot, rolling its eyes, and complaining gently and monotonously.

"Where is . . . I want . . ."

"Well," I said, "it's over there somewhere."

I pointed in the general direction of the moors. The elephant swung its trunk high into the air, and trumpeted.

"Ssh!" I said.

"I know—I can feel where my other waits for me!" it cried, excitedly. "I can sense—I can hear—I can smell . . . !"

I had replaced the Stone around my neck, and clambered onto the branch of a tree, and now I got down onto the creature's wide and sloping shoulder. I sat there, and balanced myself carefully.

"Find it, then," I cried.

"Yes, oh yes—yes! I'm coming, my other!" screamed the elephant.

It set off at a lumbering gallop across the meadow.

It was very exciting, if you like that sort of thing. We managed to get up a fairly rattling pace. And it wasn't so easy to hold on, but somehow I did.

Much later, my relatives told me how they'd been taking turns riding their green elephant in the orchard. All was placid. And Missie had suddenly said she was Mowgli, and ordered the elephant to run. Being good-natured and obliging, it did so. It ran all the way to the moor, with the rest racing in pursuit. It only stopped when Missie got enough breath back to yell at it to do so. Then the others said they thought I'd know where to find them, that I would be sure to think they'd come to this flat bit of moor

where the primroses grew so well in spring. I don't know why they thought I'd think they thought this. In my opinion, they'd just forgotten all about me.

". . . and then," they said, "all of a sudden, the elephant stopped in its tracks. It trumpeted. It screamed that it could feel its other waiting for it somewhere. It said it could sense—it could hear—it could smell. . . ."

And it had started off in the direction of the house at a gallop. I'm happy to say it was Douglas who fell off, as it got into top gear.

I'm happy to say that I managed to jump off just in time.

I'm happy to say that I saw the meeting of the elephants.

While they were picking themselves up, I told them that at least they'd now come together. Well and truly! They trumpeted in unison.

"Ssh!" I said.

They patted each other with their trunks, and chortled, and giggled, until my family came panting up to join us. They said they were shocked to find I'd used the Stone again, and broken my vow. I explained. Then I said I was shocked to find they'd just calmly gone off without me. They tried to explain. Then we all simmered down, mostly because the pair of elephants was so happy that we just had to join that happiness.

It was one of the nicest evenings of my life.

We rode the elephants all around the orchard, and the fields and the paddock. It was a lovely feeling, padding through the dark of the evening, with a friendly elephant chatting to you as you rode. And they did tricks for us, like waltzing together, and standing on their heads. They lifted us into the air in their trunks. They let us stand on their shoulders, and pretend to be Hannibal—though I shouldn't think he stood all the way over the Alps. It was

a wonderful evening. The big creatures were so friendly, and so gentle, and so very, very happy. And they laughed a lot, and sang curious little songs to one another.

When we had to go at last, we left them in the orchard, one on each side of the biggest apple tree, just touching it with their curled-up trunks. They said they would like to stay like this until we slept, and returned them to their being. And I promised to see that they didn't get parted again.

As we went through the gate into the garden, I looked back. The elephants stood huge and green and shining in the first of the moonlight—looking exactly like a pair of bookends.

11

SHEEP MAY SAFELY GRAZE

Saturday was a dead loss as far as magic went—big magic, I mean. But, on the other hand. . . .

As we came down to breakfast, it emerged that each of us had thought of something to do with the Apple Stone that was more original, exciting, and praiseworthy than anything else so far. We didn't argue much about our ideas, though, because the whole day lay ahead. We could discuss and decide at leisure. Or so we thought.

The trouble began when Missie went raving mad at the breakfast table. She gets like this from time to time, but not as a rule, quite so drastically. Jo says it's because she's the youngest, and wants attention, and will probably grow out of it. One can only hope.

She began by announcing suddenly that she was going to stop smoking. This didn't create the stir that she expected. Mother murmured something about what a good idea, and Dad said she should cut down gradually, rather than make too abrupt a break. After a pause Missie said she'd got fleas. She'd also got Nigel and Douglas interested in her performance, and they decided to cut in on it. Douglas said

he had mange, and Nigel said he had leprosy. Dad said he'd be happy to scrub them all down with a brush and some strong disinfectant. This shut them up for a bit, as they couldn't decide whether to take him up on his offer.

Jemima then changed her tactics. She looked at Ragnar, sitting alertly nearby, hoping someone would drop something, and she said she'd taught him a trick. She then grabbed the marmalade jar and put it on his head. He likes marmalade, and he managed to scoff about half a pound before anyone got around to stopping him. There was chaos for a few minutes. I was afraid he'd eaten some broken china, but luckily there were just the two halves of the jar, and he'd sensibly avoided these. Father then cast him out into the garden, to clean his paws on the wet grass, and Mother insisted that Missie should clean up the mess on the floor. She then had to clean up Missie. She also asked what we were going to do today.

"Oh—some things," I said, vaguely.

"Not very specific, dear," said she.

"We haven't decided on anything specific, yet," I told her.

Missie was still determined to be naughty, and she said perkily that we were going to make some apple magic. Mother said she was going to be doing some cooking herself, and Jemima could help if she liked. Then the telephone rang. Father went to it, and said it was for me.

"Hello," I said, into the earphone.

When I got it sorted out, it seemed to be Mr. Dobbs on the line.

"I thought you'd better know," said he, "that your dog was chasing the geese all over my pond."

"Has he caught any?" I said, in alarm.

He said no, because (a) the geese had chased him off,

and (b) he'd helped them to do it. I said I was very sorry, and we'd come at once. He said we'd better.

Dad had got the gist of all this, and he now said if Ragnar had got hydrophobia he would accept no responsibility. The dog had probably caught it from Missie.

The five of us got to the farm as quickly as we could. But when we reached the pond, there was no sign of Ragnar. Only some angry and ruffled geese who hissed at us, and Mr. Dobbs who said, "You'd best hurry and find him. I've never seen a dog act so daft. There's something wrong with him. If he hadn't been yours, I'd have been ringing the police, and maybe going after him myself with a gun—just in case . . ."

We split up and searched the barns and outbuildings of the farm, and all the nearby fields, and so back to our own paddock and orchard and garden. We met by the front gate.

"Oh, where *is* he!" cried Jo.

"It's your fault, Missie," said Douglas.

"Yes," said Nigel, "you got him t-ticked off at breakfast, and he's g-g-getting his own back."

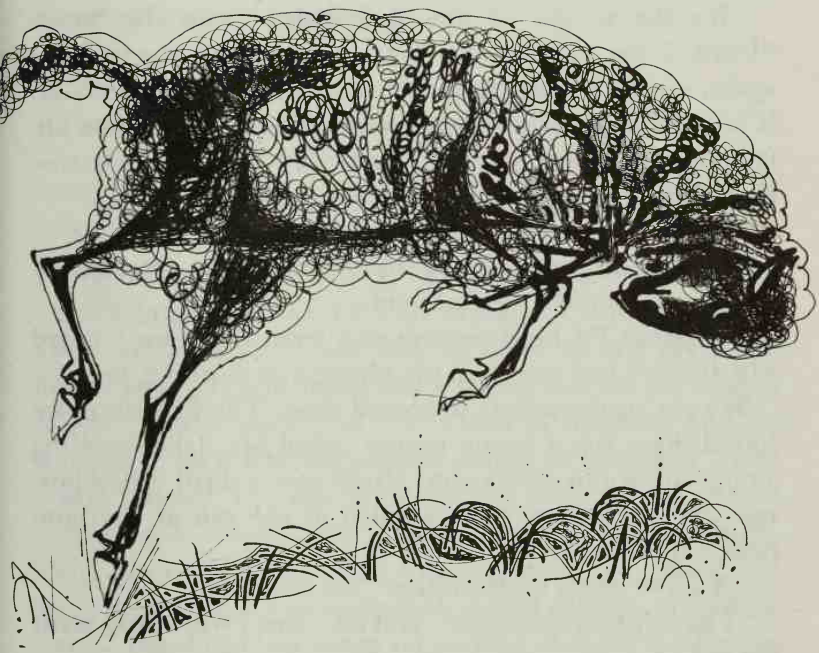
"I didn't tell him to drop the jar," she snapped. "He can balance a matchbox on his head *per*fectly."

"Maybe," I said, "but he doesn't like the taste of matches."

Suddenly I heard a muffled noise from somewhere inside my jacket. When I recovered I took the silk bag from around my neck, for I realized it was the Apple Stone speaking. Then, more clearly but no less urgently, it spoke from my hands. It said, "Your great dog must be found. His feelings are hurt. He wishes to attract attention."

"W-what did I tell you?" said Nigel.

"He's doing all right, so far," I said, dourly.



And Jo asked the Apple Stone how it knew. It said it could pick up the thoughts of those around it. And we all looked at one another, wondering if we'd ever thought anything it wouldn't like.

"Nothing to speak of," it said, startling us, "and it's not only yours I can hear—but those of the people who go by in the lane, or the musings of the creatures in the fields and burrows. How else could I learn the ways of the times through which I live? How else collect the memories that fill me? You may have noticed how heavy I'm becoming."

I said feelingly that I certainly had.

"It's the weight of new knowledge," said the Stone. "Until I am allowed the long years under the ground again, in which I may assimilate and digest that knowledge, it lies within me like a bad suet pudding—you find me uncomfortable to carry, dear Jeremy, but I feel less at ease than your poor neck does."

"About Ragnar—" said Jo, fretting.

"He is soothing his pride, up on the moors—by chasing the sheep," said the Apple Stone.

I suppose I'd been fearing this from the time I heard Mr. Dobbs's first words on the phone that morning.

We got to the moors in record time. The first thing we found there was a young farmer called Mr. Jake, strolling along with a gun on his arm. Missie gave a shrill yell of horror, and he looked a bit startled as she ran at him and clutched his sleeve.

"Are you going to shoot him?" she screamed.

"I hadn't been going to," said he. "But I will if you want me to."

She burst into a storm of tears and protests, and he said he was only joking, and was merely after pigeons. Jo said it hadn't been a very funny joke.

"I realize that," said Mr. Jake, meekly.

We hurried on, more alarmed and worried than ever. It came to us that his jest might become reality, if it turned out to be his sheep that were worried.

And still we saw no sign of the Dane.

We consulted the Apple Stone again, in sheer despair.

"You know we hate to bother you," said Jo, "but this is all so ghastly! Please do you know where he is, now? Can you pick up his thoughts?"

"Dimly," said the Stone. "He's angry and overexcited. He's started on a course that he knows is wrong, but he doesn't know how to stop."

"Is he . . . ?" I said.

"Yes, he's still at it."

"Has he caught any?" said Douglas, with slightly morbid interest.

"Not yet. But he's gathering experience."

And then the Apple Stone guided us.

We came through a little valley, and looked out across a much larger one. And on the far side, a couple of miles away, we saw our beloved dog. At least, we saw the sheep first. They were streaming this way and that on the distant hillside, like a maddened maelstrom of maggots, and we could hear their bawling coming faintly on the wind. Then I saw Ragnar. He was so nearly the color of the golden bracken that he was hard to spot, but, if one looked at the exact place the sheep were running from, one could just see a shadow that was oddly furtive and sinister. Suddenly, one of the sheep was down on its side, and the shadow on top of it. Jo screamed like a banshee, and the rest of us did the same. We howled and yelled and waved our arms, and we saw the sheep struggle to its feet and flee, while that

savage shadow hesitated, and took a step toward us—and then dashed off after the distracted flock again.

We began to run down into the great valley. Nigel stopped dead in his tracks.

"Wait!" he shouted.

"Oh, come on!" I panted.

"No. Stop, everyone! Please—listen!"

He sounded so earnest that we all did stop. We looked at him.

"I know what to do," said our cousin. "Give me the Apple Stone, Jeremy."

For some reason, I did just what he told me without arguing.

"It turned a lump of stone into the Crusader," said Nigel, "just because whoever c-carved it thought of it as the Crusader. Well—if we think hard that this is a sheep . . ."

He held in one fist a tangled wisp of black-and-white wool.

"It was caught on that b-bramble," said he.

"I don't see what use—" I began.

"We'll make it bigger than a sheep," said Nigel, "and it will speak, and understand us and do what we say. Oh, don't argue! Look at Ragnar! We can't get there in time, but this can. Do you all agree?"

There was something in his voice that made us all agree. He put the tangle of sheep's wool on the ground at his feet, and touched it with the Stone.

"Think sheep, everyone," said our cousin, between his teeth. "Think—as if you were painting or carving one—think hard of sheep."

I thought sheep until my head began to spin. I have never thought so hard of sheep. And the wool stirred, and

started to swell. Nigel held the Stone still, against the sheep that began to form. A black-and-white sheep. A large sheep. A very large sheep. A very, very, large sheep.

"Steady," I croaked.

But Nigel let it grow. It was the biggest sheep I've ever seen. It was the size of a Great Dane—it was bigger than a Great Dane—much bigger. Nigel stepped back from it, and handed me the Stone. I nearly dropped it, for it weighed more than ever.

"Now," said Nigel, "can you talk, sheep?"

"Certainly," it said, in a resonantly bleating voice. "I've always thought I'd make a great orator, if ever I had the chance. I have a lovely voice. And another ambition I've always had is to be an opera singer. I'd be remarkable. But, there, there, few sheep ever attain their ambitions in this world, my dears."

"Apart from all that," said Nigel, with a glint in my direction, "have you ever wanted to chase dogs?"

The sheep bleated excitedly and deafeningly, and said it was every sheep's dream of bliss. Nigel said its chance had come.

"You see that great dog on the horizon?" said he.

"What, that little fellow bothering the flock over there?"

"Er—yes," said our cousin. "Well, go as fast as you can —as fast as the wind—and chase him off."

"Oh, thank you! One of us at least shall attain a life's ambition."

And the sheep went off like a racehorse. She covered the ground faster than you would think possible for such a great woolly creature. We couldn't have gone at that speed if we'd been on bicycles. She reached the far side of the valley, and up the opposite hill in a matter of seconds.

"I hope she won't *hurt* Ragnar," said Jo anxiously.

We watched with bated breath.

With eyes grown accustomed to the distance, we saw exactly what took place.

The great sheep came streaking up behind the furtive shadow that was our Ragnar, and bowled him over. He scrambled to his feet, and barked wildly. The sheep put her head down and charged. Ragnar bolted. And the sheep chased him all over the hill. Some of the ordinary sheep were so surprised by this performance that they joined in. Perhaps the big sheep told them to. Anyway, there was the Dane—no sinister creature of doom, now, but a panic-stricken, yelping dog—being driven around in circles, until the black-and-white sheep cut him out of the flock, and brought him back to us. He seemed very pleased to see us.

"Oh, thank you, sheep," said Jo, shakily.

And she clutched Ragnar tightly.

"Not at all," said the sheep. "I had a lovely time, dear. It really made up for a lot of the pushing about we get normally. I must thank you all for the experience. And now I'll be off. I've a lot to do today."

"Such as what?" I said, fascinated.

"I just thought I'd give those others a few tips, dear," she said, "and put them through their paces a bit. Practice, you know. It makes perfect. I must get it into their little woolly noddles that the only fun in chasing anything is if the chasee runs away. Attack," she said, "is the best means of defense."

She sounded so smug that I told her the thought was not original. She said it was to her.

"And I'll just run along, and pass on the tidings to the rest," said she.

She ran along. I began to wonder what would happen when the farmer went to round up his flock for dipping, and things. Then my mind came back to Ragnar.

We all looked at him in silence.

He put up with it for a few minutes, trying to look nonchalant. Then he gave up and lay on his back, and waved his feet at us, and rolled his eyes.

"Bad!" said Missie.

"Listen to who's talking," said Jo.

And she dropped on her knees beside the big dog, and hugged him, and said he'd given us all a terrible time, and was never to do such a thing again. Somehow, I had the feeling that he didn't intend to.

"It's all right, we do understand," said my elder sister. "Poor Ragnar! After all, you're the youngest of us, really. And we haven't been paying you as much attention as we usually do—not lately. But you don't have to be wicked anymore."

He licked her face. He then got up and began to prance around us. He cast one glance toward the far hillside, where the flock was gathered interestedly around one enormous sheep, and he gave a shudder and shook his handsome head, and went on with his prancing.

As we went back, Douglas said gloomily that we'd thrown away the use of the Apple Stone for today. All those fine ideas we'd had . . . and this had been so short and. . . .

"Short, maybe," I said, "but exciting. And it was a matter of life and death for Ragnar. If he'd gone on like that, he would have been shot one day. That was a marvelous idea of yours, Nigel. You are clever, whatever I usually say."

He went scarlet, and said he liked sheep. It was the first

I'd heard of it. But he never likes being praised for anything he's really done.

That afternoon, Dad offered to take us to the movies. We thanked him, but we stayed with Ragnar, and taught him some simple tricks, which he refused to learn, and paid him a great deal of attention. Missie began to look a bit thoughtful. I do hope she won't take up sheep worrying.

12

THE MONSTER

Something had been preying on my mind for a goodish while. So, on Sunday morning, I collected my relatives in the orchard. But the fine weather was showing signs of breaking; it was a gray day, with a chilly wind blowing, and some clouds drifting up in a threatening sort of way. I said, "I want to ask you a question, Nigel. And you've got to tell the absolute truth."

"What a hope!" said Douglas.

"You can always ask," said Nigel.

"Do you remember what you were telling us last Sunday," I said, "about the church?"

He said, how could he possibly remember what he'd said a week ago? He said it was mean to hold things against people forever. He said having imagination was not the same as being a liar. He said he was an artist, anyway, and lived in a different world from all the ordinary, dull, boring people who. . . .

"Apart from all that," I interrupted the flow, "who told you the church is haunted?"

He stopped in mid-argument, and choked. Missie

thumped him on the back. Douglas sprang forward to help her, and Nigel reeled under their attentions. I caught him, and stared at him sternly. He said, "It w-wasn't a lie, Jeremy. Someone did tell me."

"Who?"

Nigel writhed a bit in my grasp. His eyes slid away from mine, and I saw him beginning to think sideways. I shook him.

"Now don't start inventing things," I said. "Try to be straightforward for once. This is very important, Nigel. Who told you that something is haunting the church by crying in it? You *couldn't* forget a thing like that."

"All right," said my cousin, "I remember, but I'm not going to tell you."

His mouth set in a straight line, and he began to scowl.

"If Jeremy's serious about this, Nigel," said Jo, "perhaps you'd better . . ."

"Well, I won't!" said he, crossly. "I don't care what you say. I don't care if you kill me, I won't tell. Not if you cut my head off!"

"If it wasn't for having to explain it to your parents . . ." I began, through my teeth.

Then I stopped. There had been a curious note in my cousin's voice. Even through his usual exaggerations, he seemed to mean what he was saying.

"It's a matter of honor," he now added.

I had let him go, and he stood scraping one foot against the other ankle, leaving a good deal of mud on his sock, and scowling even more hideously.

"What you mean is," said Jo, "that whoever told you all that drivel told you not to pass it on, in the first place. And you did pass it on, to us. And now you don't want it to get back, to whoever told you, that you've told."

Nigel said she was muddling him. She'd muddled me a bit.

"Oh, come on, Nigel," said Jo. "We're all very pleased with you for saving Ragnar yesterday, so don't be annoying now. Was it a friend who told you those lies about the church?"

"No," said Douglas, grinning, "it was me."

He gave us a few seconds, and then went on, "I made him promise not to say it was me, Campbell's honor. Naturally I didn't think he'd keep it. Must be a new thing in his family, inherited from his Mum," he added, nastily, "and what's more, he was only showing off—if you'd started to cut his head off, he'd have told fast enough."

I managed to grab Nigel again, just in time.

"Kill him later," I said. "Douglas, who told *you?*"

"I did," said Missie, calmly, "and Old Arthur told me, and he said it was a secret. He says it's been a secret for hundreds of years, and the vicar wouldn't like people to go talking about it. He said it was only because he'd been drinking cider that he told. . . ."

"The vicar'd been *drinking*?" said Jo.

"Old Arthur," explained Missie, "and he said he shouldn't have said it, and he'd get the sack if I told. . . ."

"Well," I said, "now that everyone has told all—except Nigel," I added, fairly, "I think we ought to do something about it."

"You mean stopping the rumors?" said Jo.

"Not exactly."

I explained what I had in mind.

When we got to the church, we left Ragnar at the gate in case there was anything going on inside, this being Sunday morning, but no one else was there. We went straight through, and up the winding stairs to the top of the tower.

"If there's any truth in the story," I said, as we climbed, "there'll be some sign up here, because of my dream."

"Oh, your poem," said Douglas, rather scoffingly.

"Tell it to us again," said Jo.

So I quoted once more the curious little jingle that had been inside my head when I woke.

"If a lie,
Pass by,
Let be.
If true,
Come you—
Help me."

With these words, I'd half dreamed a sound of tears and bells, and a jumbled image of stone, and colored glass, and a square tower.

And now we stood on that tower. My family was looking at me in a somewhat concerned silence.

"All right," I said. "I may be muddleheaded, and wander-witted, and woolgathering and all that—but if there might be, by any chance, something really crying here—"

"We're all helping you to look, Jeremy," said Jo.

A little later, I found it.

We'd been up in that tower a dozen times, and we must have seen the gargoyle a dozen times. But now I found myself staring at the two green stains that ran down its dreadful little face—stains that couldn't have been made by rain, for its head was tilted too far forward for rain to have made just those two green marks from its eyes to its chin.

"Tears?" said Missie.

"Is this it, Jeremy?" said Jo, at the same time.

"Yes," I replied to both questions.

I don't know to this day why I was so sure. But I was sure.

"You know it's a demon, don't you?" said Douglas, inspecting it with interest. "If you bring a demon to life, you have to take up sorcery—and I thought you didn't like it much, when you tried it with the broomstick."

"It *is* a demon," said Jo, worriedly. "Oh, Jeremy, you'd better leave it alone."

"Crying?" I said.

My sister chewed her knuckle, and looked extremely uncertain. And Missie craned her neck over the parapet of the tower to stare at the gargoyle.

"Poor little devil," she observed.

Jo made up her mind.

"I suppose there's no way out of it," said she.

I looked at them. Jo, having decided, was now dogged and determined. Missie was nodding her head vigorously in agreement. Nigel was watching me thoughtfully, and Douglas seemed merely excited, as if a demon could only be a source of entertainment to him. But I knew they were all ready to back me up, whatever I did, and whatever might happen, as they had always done in the past. It was a good family to have in an emergency.

I took the Apple Stone from my neck, and rubbed the groove left on my skin where the cord had dragged. The Stone was terribly heavy by now. As I let it roll into the palm of my hand, I wondered how much longer anyone could carry that weight. Yet it wouldn't be safe to leave it in a drawer or anywhere . . . however well hidden, it might be found by someone . . . Mrs. Chugg, perhaps. . . .

"Jeremy," said Jo, "if you're going to do it, for heaven's sake do it, and let's know the worst!"

"Just let me think a moment," I said. "It's a bit of a responsibility—to let loose a demon—even one that's been crying. . . ."

"It's crying now," said Missie.

And it was. There were tears running out of its open stone eyes, following the old stains down its cheeks, and dripping from its chin in big wet drops to the ground at the foot of the tower.

"It is *raining*," observed Nigel.

But it was only a thin drizzle, not nearly enough to cause those drops.

"Don't do it if you d-don't want to," my cousin went on.

"Don't do it if you can't handle it," said the Apple Stone.

It was glowing very brightly on my hand. The patterns showed more deeply marked on its surface, and suddenly it seemed strange to me. Not a toy—not a plaything—but something very powerful and dangerous. Never to be used lightly, as we'd used it, but always with caution and respect, and only by those who knew exactly what they were about.

"This gargoyle is not as simple as it seems," I said.

"It is not," said the Apple Stone, with a deep sigh. "This is real trouble."

"For us?" I asked.

"For everyone, including me. That creature has been troubled for a very long time, but if you try to help you'll be tampering with things far beyond your knowledge. You are on the fringe of the Mysteries," said the Stone, "and even I cannot see what the end may be. It would probably be best to leave it to its misery."

Missie managed, by stretching out recklessly, to touch the gargoyle, just where the stain showed wet under a new stream of water. She put her finger in her mouth.

"Salty," said she. "It's crying real tears, Jeremy."

"Go on, Jeremy," said Jo.

And I held the Apple Stone where Missie had laid her finger.

The face of the demon twitched. Its gaping mouth closed tightly. And it gave a muffled sob.

Its eyes had lost their blind white stare, and were blinking quickly. They were round and alive, and as black as coal—and each had a glimmer of fire in it. Its hands clutched the parapet of the tower, and they were less like claws than they had been. Its skin was brown and dirty, but fairly human. In fact, the thing now seemed a sort of cross between a monkey and a young child of about six. Then it spoke, and the voice was that of a child, too, though not of a very amiable child. It was a harsh, whining, ugly little voice.

"Help!" it cried. "I'm fallin'!"

Douglas and Jo got there first. I was still wondering just what I'd done, and by the time I got to the side of the tower, the gargoyle was among us. It wiped its eyes with its hands, peering slyly around.

"Me lords and ladies," it whimpered.

Then it gave a huge sniff and grinned, showing teeth that were still pointed, but not nearly as big as when they'd been made of stone.

"Some would ha' let me fall," it said, "and them makin' the Sign against the Evil Eye, to make me drop the faster. But 'tis easy to see you be sorcerers," and its wicked little face lit up. "None else would let a demon loose."

"Now look—" I began, uneasily.

"But I must tell you straight, gentles, that I can't do much of the true Black Art," said the gargoyle. "I'm not

one of the great ones. I was never aught but a very little 'un. Horrid tricks I can manage," it added, boastfully, "like makin' folks squint, or muddling their minds, or twisting their tongues so that they stammers and stutters—"

"I c-can do that without your help!" snapped Nigel, going red.

"And I'm muddleheaded enough for everyone," I said, quickly.

"No, you're not!" said Jo, fiercely. "And Nigel only stutters when he's away from his home." Then she turned on the gargoyle. "You'll do no horrid tricks, do you hear? We're not sorcerers. We brought you here to help you."

The creature was still changing during all this. It looked a bit less like a monkey now, and more like a child. But—somehow—an aged child. A thin, brown twisty-looking child, dressed in a rough tunic of what seemed to be sacking, and with bare feet. Its hair was long and black, and tangled. Its ears were still pointed, though not as huge and batlike as before. It gave us a scornful grin, and said, "Many sorcerers don't care to admit to it."

"What's your name?" said Missie.

"The witch called me 'Little Tom.' "

"What witch?" asked Douglas, eagerly.

"Her what owned me. I was her familiar demon, like now I'm yours."

"No, no," I said, "you've got it all wrong. We don't want a familiar—"

"But you've got one," grinned Little Tom.

And he started to hop from foot to foot, gleefully.

"I'm free! I'm free!" he cried. "I'm free again, to work me tricks—to stir the spells in the pot—to raise the winds

and blow off the chimneys—to put the withering cold charms on the pigs and cattle—to loose the powers of the dark again. . . ."

"Yes, well—we'll have nothing like that," I said, sternly. "You can just stop all this nonsense, and—"

The creature poked out a pointed tongue at me and ran to Douglas. It seemed to guess he was its most likely customer.

"Don't let 'em hurt me," it shrieked, clutching him. "*You* be my master! *You* command me! You're the bold one—the dark one—"

While I was wondering what to do, the others went into action. Jo disentangled Douglas and the demon; Nigel got between them, and Missie said loudly and furiously, "You nasty thing, Little Tom! Leave him alone, or I'll smack you!"

The gargoyle pointed at her sneeringly, and she smacked his hand hard.

"Ow!" yelped the demon. "You hurt me! I'll put a charm against you! I'll knot your hair till you'll never get it free—I'll give you toothache—and the gripes—!"

"You behave," said Jo, angrily.

"Or we'll sling you off the tower!" said Nigel.

Little Tom backed from them, whimpering. His wicked face looked surprised and hurt, and there were tears on his cheeks again.

"No . . ." he said, "no—don't. . . ."

And, of course, Jo instantly softened. She said no one would hurt him, if only he'd be good, and stop going on about spells and nastiness like that.

"It's me training, ma'am," he muttered. "Most of 'em wants such things."

"We don't," I said.

"Speak for yourself," said Douglas.

The coal-like eyes shot sideways to him for an instant, and then swiveled around slyly at the rest of us. The demon then decided to change the subject.

"I'm hungry," he announced, in a pathetic whimper. "I'm thirsty, me good lords and gentle ladies—and cold, bitter cold. . . ."

And, indeed, now he mentioned it, it was cold up there on the open tower. It was raining quite hard, too, and the wind was swishing in the trees of the churchyard. I saw goosepimples on the bare legs and arms of the little gargoyle. And Jo had seen them, for she now said, worriedly, "We must get you into a warm place, and some food for you. Er—just what sort do you eat, Tom?" she added, a bit uncertainly.

"Milk!" said the gargoyle, in an eager squeak, "Oh, milk, lady! Warm, if possible but—oh, just milk anyhow. It's long since I tasted good milk."

"You shall have lots," promised Jo, "if you'll just come with us, quietly and nicely, without attracting attention. And that isn't going to be so easy, dressed the way you are!"

"He can have my raincoat," said Douglas.

It was much too big for the demon, but at least it covered him from neck to ankle. Jo rolled up the sleeves a bit, so that they didn't hang too far below his hands, and he looked fairly human—except for the thin bare feet, and the tangle of hair. His face had filled out some more, so that he didn't seem quite so aged, though still an odd and wicked child.

"Put my scarf around his head," suggested Missie, "and he can pretend to be a girl."

They did this. I suppose some girls might look like that,

if they were very unlucky. And yet, he wasn't truly ugly now—just odd.

"What about his feet?" I said.

"I've got my slippers inside my boots," said Missie.

The slippers were too small, but the boots fitted him. And Missie said she liked getting her feet wet.

We turned to go down from the tower, and the demon suddenly ran all around putting his tongue out at the other gargoyles.

"Stare, stare!" he squealed. "Yah to the lot of you! You're nothing but carvings—and bad ones at that. You weren't ever real demons, like me. And I'm free! I'm free! And away to me demonry again."

"Come on, Tom, and stop being so naughty," said Jo, "or you'll get no milk."

"Yes, me lady dear," said Tom.

He came quite meekly. But the fire glow was twinkling at the back of his eyes, and I caught a look between him and Douglas that made me feel nervous.

When we reached the gate, Ragnar, patiently waiting there, took one look and bolted. On our way through the village, we met the baker crossing the pavement between his truck and a garden gate. Little Tom muttered something. The baker dropped two loaves and a box of cakes in the gutter. *He* then muttered something. Douglas giggled. It may have been just an accident—but we hurried the gargoyle along, and managed to get to our house without further trouble.

We went in through the kitchen. And Ragnar, who had returned home on his own, set up a howling that startled us all. The great dog then dived under the sideboard—at least, he tried to, but as there was only a six-inch space, he had no success with this move. He then tried to jump

out of the window, which was shut. Luckily, the panes were so small that he didn't break any, and Nigel and I grabbed him before he took the whole window frame with him. Little Tom just stood there, grinning and making clicking noises with his tongue. Jo caught him by the shoulder, and dragged him out of the room. Ragnar suddenly became very subdued, and retired under the table, with a dismal stare at me.

"Well, I thought I was doing the right thing," I said.

"We all th-thought so," said Nigel.

"All but poor little Rag-dog," said Douglas.

The Dane growled at him. And he went out after the others.

We found the girls in the hall. Jo made a despairing gesture toward the dining room.

"He's gone in there. The door was open—and he rushed off, this very moment . . ."

We found the demon in the conservatory, talking to Mum and Dad.

"Let me work them," he was saying, in a shrill voice. "Let me make 'em come alive."

"Who are you?" said Father.

"He's—she's a friend of ours," I said. "Her name's—Barbara—"

"Babs," said Douglas, grinning, "and she's a bit of a demon, really—"

"Shut up!" I said.

"Let me play with the dolls," cried the so-called Babs, dancing with excitement. "It's long since I've worked dolls."

Mum, looking rather baffled, as she so often did when we were around, handed Bet Bun to the gargoyle, and he twisted it between his hands. Suddenly the thing nodded

at him and started to talk. It was horrible. I knew he'd done something to it, and it was speaking on its own . . . and moving. . . .

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" it said, nastily. "Fetch me the foxie, then, and I'll bite through his soft old neck, and let out his life at the edges."

"Darling!" said Mother, in a general sort of way.

"Put that puppet down!" said Jo, angrily.

"Show me *Mrs.* Foxie!" shrieked the puppet, jumping about wildly in the hand of Little Tom, "and I'll chase her, and catch her, and tangle her tail, and drive her about and around, and mad and mad and mad—!"

"Leave darlin' Bet alone!" shouted Missie.

She rushed to Tom, and snatched away the puppet, and pressed it to her cheek that was scarlet with rage. I was furious, too, and yet I'd never liked the wretched toys. I just hated to see a nasty little demon meddling with them to amuse himself. And it came to me suddenly that Mum and Dad were only doing a job, and one that gave pleasure to people. Only tiny-tot people, but all the same. . . .

"What an odd little friend you have," said Father. "Where did you meet her?"

"At dancing class," said Douglas, promptly. "She's good at dancing. Counterclockwise," he added.

"One can imagine," said Dad.

"Are you *close* friends?" asked Mother.

We all mumbled different things, quite inaudibly—except for Douglas, who said he was going to marry her.

"Are you, indeed?" said Dad.

He then said it was all so sudden, and who was going to give the bride away?

"I am," I said, "if he's not out of this room in three seconds flat!"

"Want the other dolls," sulked the demon.

"Jo, dear," said Mother, "why don't you take the little —er—girl, and give her a nice glass of milk, or something?"

"Milk!" yelled Little Tom.

He shot out of the room. Jo shot after him. So did Nigel and Douglas. My parents gazed thoughtfully after them. Then Father took the puppet from Missie, and looked at it.

"I never saw one worked like that," said he. "Your little friend has a gift."

"She'd need a better script," said Mum.

Missie went and hugged her around the knees, and said Bet Bun wasn't like that at all, not really.

"She was only being horrid because of that—"

"Missie!" I said.

"Run along, darling," said Mother. "Go with Jeremy, and keep an eye on that—on little Babs."

"What a hope!" I said, bitterly.

As we closed the door, Father said, "Interesting. Maybe we'd better make the little horrors more aggressive, if that's how the very young prefer them. . . ."

We found the others, this time, in Jo's bedroom. The gargoyle was trying to persuade them that he hadn't meant any harm, and asking where was all this milk that people kept promising, and doing nothing to provide.

"I'll get it," said Nigel curtly.

He departed. The rest began to sort out clothes for our visitor.

We all ended by having lunch up in the attic. A funny sort of lunch, mostly milk and cornflakes.

At the end of it, Jo gave the demon a banana, and he took one bite and gave a yell of delight, and rushed with it

into the toy cupboard. His table manners were a bit primitive all around. It wasn't for a good ten minutes that I realized, with a sinking heart, that he'd struck up a curious friendship with Mrs. Blossom and her kitten. I happened to overhear what he was saying to them.

". . . counterclockwise around the ring, and the mouse laid in the center, and you'll know how to make the words on the windowpane . . ."

"Out of there!" I shouted.

I went across the room in a single bound, and lugged the demon off the shelf.

"Leave me be!" he screamed. "Madam Rick-rack wants to know—"

"Madam Rick-rack can go on wanting!" I gritted.

I glared at Mrs. Blossom, and she winked at me. So did the kitten. I shuddered. What had he been teaching them?

"Let's go out for a walk," I said. "Let's go out on the moors—as far away from any other living creatures as we can possibly get!"

"You're perfectly right," said Jo.

"And if we have to stay there until we all fall asleep in the open, then that's what we'll do," I went on, determinedly. "I've made a big mistake this time, and it's my responsibility—"

Jo and Missie protested. They said it was theirs, just as much. And Nigel said they had all agreed to what I'd done.

"But I'm the eldest," I told them.

We got to the moors. All the dogs howled as we passed the houses and farms. And on a gate there was a black cock that flapped his wings at us. . . .

"Knife at your throat, rooster!" shrilled Little Tom.

The cock fell backward off the gate. Jo rushed toward him, but he picked himself up, and tore away as if he had fiends on his tail. The gargoyle shrieked with laughter, and so did Douglas.

When we were all worn out with walking, we sat down on some rocks in the middle of a wet waste of moorland. Jo suddenly said in all this turmoil we'd got no nearer finding out about the demon.

"Why were you crying?" said she.

Little Tom eyed her cautiously, and said, why did she want to know?

"Only to help," said my sister.

He said that would be the day.

"No one wants to help me," said he. "All they wants is for me to help them. To use me work and me powers, and to—"

"We haven't asked for your work or your powers," I reminded him.

"It'll come," he said, morosely.

He sat kicking his boots against the rock. Jo had combed some of the tangles out of his hair, and he'd taken off the scarf now with no one to bother about the length of the black curls. He had also been made to wash his face and hands. He wasn't at all ugly anymore, only wild-looking, and with that wicked glint in his eyes, and the twist to his mouth. He now seemed to be about twelve years old—but in the body of a child of six.

"Anyone'd cry," said he, "if they was stuck up there in the cold in that old tower, with all them uglies gaping all around! Locked in the stone, I was. Lonely, and missin' the fun and the milk."

"How did you get to be there in the first place?" I asked. "If you were a real demon—"

"I was transformed," said he.

"Who by?" said Douglas.

"By a witch that didn't hit it off with my witch. She took me from her," said Little Tom, "by a nasty little charm. Did it one night, when no one were expecting such a trick. There was me one moment, curled by the fire with me bowl of milk—and next, there was me on the side of the tower, all soaked with snow, and cold and alone, and ugly in stone. And then nothing for ages, but them old horrors what had never been alive—until you gentles come, and brought me to living again. I'm grateful," he said, looking sideways at us, "and I'll do anything—"

"Good," said Douglas, getting up and stretching his arms. "I think I can manage you best. I know Jeremy rode the broomstick—"

"Did you indeed?" said the gargoyle, giving me an admiring glance.

"But he didn't really enjoy it," said Douglas, quickly.

"Look here," said Nigel, getting up to face him, "if you think you're going to be a b-black magician, you can just think again. Remember this will all end tonight," he went on with scarcely a stutter, "and you'll only be making a fool of yourself, as usual, with no future to it. So shut up, and don't be s-stupider than you really are—or I'll help Jeremy to tie you hand and foot till it's all over."

He ended with a certain amount of ferocity, and Douglas gave him a narrow look. And Little Tom jumped between them, with eyes flashing and an open-mouthed snarl that showed his sharp, white teeth. He was suddenly ugly again.

"Douglas, I'll give you power!" he yelled. "And none shall touch you. You shall twist them and turn them and make them your slaves—"

"Hold your tongue!" said Jo, fiercely. "You horrible little brute! Douglas is our cousin, and we like him, awful as he is. You shan't make him any worse. We've tried to help you, and now I wish we hadn't. I wish we'd left you to cry forever!"

"Spin her!" shrieked Little Tom. "Spin her and spin her till she giddies. Say the words, my Douglas—

"Haper-scaper, haul and rout 'em!
Round and round, and fall about 'em!"

Douglas gave a wild shout of laughter and joined in with the senseless words. And Jo began to turn, sobbing, in her tracks. Missie ran and seized her by the hands, and tried to hold her still.

"Oh, don't. Stop Jo, please—" she screamed, in horror.

Nigel gave the demon a shove that sent it sprawling, and it set up a thin wail.

In this considerable din, none of us had heard soft footsteps on the wet ground, and now someone spoke from nearby.

"Now give over, m'dears, do."

We all fell silent, and turned. Old Mrs. Webber stood there, smiling at us.

" 'Tes the change of weather got into your heads," said she, "making you act so noisy, and quarrelsome. You come to the cottage, and have some nice milk, and a scone or two that I've been bakin'."

For once, she sounded completely sensible. And, whether it was the relief of seeing someone adult, however old and weird, I don't know, but we all did exactly what she told us.

Her cottage was not far away, over a little rise of the

moor, and when we got there we found she really had made some scones, and there was a great big brown jug of fresh milk on the table.

She didn't ask any questions. She just rambled on about the weather, and the flowers in her garden, and the apple trees, and I for one found it very soothing conversation. The cottage was unexpectedly neat, with a stove glowing warm, and blue-and-white china on the shelves, and some comfortable old chairs whose covers were well washed and darned. It was a peaceful place. I thought of the way people had decided old Mrs. Webber was dotty, and wondered where dottiness began and ended. I was lulled into a sense of security—until her great cat came stalking in. He paused in the doorway, and looked at us all, and then gave a soft cry, and went across to Little Tom.

"Grimalkin," whispered the demon.

"Na, na," said old Mrs. Webber, "not now, m'dear. He'm Skipper, now. He'm a good boy, like you must be. The darkness is so lonely," she said, oddly, "and 'tes best to live in the light, Little Tom."

"But the fun and the flying—" said he.

She gave him a repressive nod.

"Na, na," she said, again.

Then she swept us all a benign and innocent look, and went on, "Them great shrieking airplanes is forever at it, so leave it to them then, is what I always says. And now you'd best be off home, my loves, while the daylight stays for you."

We got up obediently, but she put her hand on the thin shoulder of the demon.

"He can stay and help with the dishes. Won't you, dearie?"

"Yes, ma'am," said he.

"Grannie," she told him, gently. "You calls me Grannie, child."

"Grannie," said Little Tom.

The rest of us must have been gaping a bit, for the old lady gave us a reassuring nod.

"He'll be fine with me," she said. "He's been right lonely, as I have, but not anymore—not either of us anymore. We'll both be fine, the two of us together."

There was a twinkle in her eyes, but not like the gleam that lived in the eyes of the demon. Just amused and kind, and not the slightest bit dotty. My mind went off on its wanderings. . . . I wondered about witchcraft . . . how many different forms could it take? . . . did everyone have a trace hidden deep inside them? Or a memory from a past life that drifted near the surface from time to time? Was it used as a protection from loneliness, or age, or hurt pride? . . . or just a wish to be different? Perhaps dottiness happened from the same reasons. Perhaps no one ever really wanted to be wicked, but it just came over them, and they got tangled up in it and couldn't get out. After all, magic was not wicked in itself, only if it became another word for malice. Perhaps. . . .

"Wake up, Jeremy," said Missie.

We all said good-bye to Mrs. Webber and the demon, and left the cottage.

No one said much as we crossed the moor. There was a weight on all our spirits, and for the same reason. At last I said, "It will end tonight."

The others said nothing, and I went on, "Tomorrow we must go and see Mrs. Webber—at least *I* must. It's my fault."

"No, it isn't," said Jo. "It's all of us."

"And what can we tell her?" I said miserably. "It's going to upset her a lot."

"She'll break her heart," said Jo, with a sniff.

"So will Little Tom," said Missie. "He liked being there, all cozy. He'd nearly stopped looking naughty."

"It's going to be horrible, s-seeing him back on the tower," said Nigel.

Douglas didn't speak. There was a distant look about him that I misliked.

It took me a long time to get to sleep that night. Every time I shut my eyes, I saw that hideous little stone gargoyle crouching under the guttering at the top of the tower. I saw the green stains on its cheeks, where the tears had been running so long. I remembered the crying that haunted the whole church. And this time it would be forever. We couldn't free him again. I tossed and turned, and groaned, and tried to get to sleep . . . and tried not to. I thought about the look on the face of Little Tom when we'd left him with Mrs. Webber . . . and the look on her face, too. Ragnar, who was lying on my feet like a ton of old iron, gave a deep whine. I wondered if any of us would sleep that night? I wondered if I could possibly stay awake for weeks? . . . at least it would give the demon a little time of happiness. I wondered. . . .

In the morning, we were all late for school.

I couldn't keep the Apple Stone in its usual place around my neck. It had got so heavy in the night that its weight was too much to bear. I put it in my pocket, which it dragged down as if it were a pound of solid lead. I could feel it there all day, while I wondered what to do . . . and knew, only too well, that I had no choice. I tried to think of an honorable way to escape my responsibility, but I couldn't find one.

"What is it, Westray?" said old Jones.

"I've got a frightful headache, sir," I said, with absolute truth.

"So have I," said he, "from trying to attract your attention to my humble efforts at education. I think it will benefit us both if you go home."

So I went by myself to see Mrs. Webber. I would have preferred the support of my family, but thought it would spare everyone's feelings a little if they were let off this dismal expedition. I intended to take all the blame, and try to soothe the old lady as best I might. But, when I got to her cottage, I found nothing at all to say.

I called my relatives to the orchard, later.

The wind had brought down a good many apples, and they lay in wet, untidy heaps all over the place. It was drizzling slightly. There was nowhere to sit down. We stood in a sort of circle, with hunched shoulders, while I told the others what I had seen and heard.

"He was still there," I said. "He was calling her 'Grannie' as if he'd done it always. I tried to explain, and she laughed. She said I was woolgathering. She said her son came last night, and brought Little Tom, and left him there with her. . . ."

I told them how she'd explained to me gravely that her son's wife had died—and who was better fitted to bring up the child of a wandering sailor than that sailor's own mother? And Little Tom had said he loved his Grannie.

"And he's a child," I said, "a child of six. Not a demon anymore. I don't know what's happened."

We put the Apple Stone on the ground, in the center of our circle. It shone there more brightly than ever before, like a jewel in the overcast evening light.

"Why?" I said to it, now, "Why did your power fail this time?"

"Did it?" said the Stone.

"We all slept last night. Not very well, but we did sleep. Our eyes were shut, and we didn't speak, or think of you, but the gargoyle hasn't gone back to its own being."

"Hasn't he?"

"No," I said. "Little Tom's with Mrs. Webber, not on the church tower. I went and looked there, on my way home, and there isn't a gargoyle where there used to be one."

"But he wasn't ever a true gargoyle, was he?" said the Stone.

"The Crusader wasn't just a s-stone effigy," said Nigel, "but his effigy is s-still in the church."

"Please, what happened?" said Missie.

"Magic can be made, and it can be unmade—but not twice over," said the Apple Stone, slowly. "Magic made a demon into a gargoyle, and you turned him back into a demon. When the power broke, he would have become a gargoyle again—except for one thing. He was a child *before* he became a demon. He had *two* spells on him, and you could only break one. He moved one jump ahead, and the demon went, but the child remains."

"Did we do that?" said Jo, wonderingly.

"Well—I helped a little. And so did Mrs. Webber."

The Stone bobbed about, turning as though it looked at each of us, one after the other. It gave a weary sigh, and then said it had taken some doing.

"I had to provide papers," it said, rather busily. "Old Mrs. Webber will have to explain to the authorities—like the Welfare at Exeter," it added, in what I thought was a

burst of showing off, "and I had to see there were proper certificates, and a letter from her son—"

"What about when he turns up one day?" said Jo.

"He won't," said the Apple Stone, rather sadly.

Then it told us that Mrs. Webber and Little Tom really believed their new life story. It had become reality for them both. And then—it asked us to let it go.

Missie fell on her knees on the wet ground, and tried to pick it up, but she couldn't even stir it. It was too heavy.

"My time with you is over," it said. "All these exertions have left me spent. Filled with the dead weight of new experiences, and yet more memories—more knowledge. You must give me leave to go."

"Isn't there any way that you can stay with us?" asked Missie.

For a few moments, the Stone didn't reply. Then it said, very gravely, that there was just one way.

"You can hold me a little longer," it said, "if yesterday's magic is blotted out."

"But," said Jo, "that would mean—"

"It would, indeed."

"Little Tom would be a g-gargoyle again," said Nigel.

"Forever."

"And Mrs. Webber—" I said.

"Would be a dotty old woman, all alone."

There was a long silence. Then the Apple Stone spoke again.

"On those conditions, I can stay, growing heavier and heavier, and more weary. You must make your choice. And you must agree on the choice, all of you."

There was another, and longer pause. I realized suddenly that the others were waiting for me. I said, "Go then, Apple Stone."

"Yes," said Jo, "go—and let yesterday's magic last."

"Away," said Nigel, and added practically. "We won't be able to p-pick you up, anyway, if you get h-heavier."

"We don't want you to be tired," said Missie, "so you'll have to go."

We waited. We all looked at Douglas. We waited some more.

I felt very cold suddenly. Our cousin gave one of his wilder laughs and said, "I know what you want me to say —and I'm your guest, and all that. I'll oblige you, because I think I can manage on my own now. Off you go, Apple Stone, and have a nice time moling away in the ground."

"It occurs to me," said the Stone, "that you've run yourself into a dangerous position, my boy. Ah, well! You've given me release, and I'm grateful. In return I'll give you a gift."

And then it said, very slowly and carefully, as though it were thinking it out, "The Healer shall know when the moment is ready—and the friend will know the Word to speak."

It asked us to say farewell.

"The dark is coming, and welcome to the dark," it said. "The untroubled quiet of the earth and the night. The end and the beginning. Say good-bye."

What else could we do?

We stood in our damp circle in the orchard, and watched the Apple Stone begin to burrow under a tuft of grass.

"Good-bye," it said, as its golden glow started to vanish from our sight. "It is always sad to say good-bye. It saddens me, however often I've done it in the past, and must do into eternity. And so—good-bye. Remember me."

As if we could forget!

"There will be traces of me always in your lives."

The Apple Stone was just a glimmer under the tussock, and its voice was becoming muffled, yet its last words were clear.

"Good go always with you, my friends and my dears."

It was gone.

The wet orchard seemed a sad and lonely place. We moved off toward the house in somber silence. Then Jo said, in a determinedly cheerful voice, "We got the glove and the elephants to their loved ones."

"And there's our l-label on a star," said Nigel.

"It was nice meeting Sir Amias," I said, with that memory warming my mind.

"We'll go and have tea with Lambie-leopard," cried Missie.

"And Mrs. Blossom's other name is Madam Rick-rack," said Douglas.

A cold wind blew at our backs.

We stared at our cousin, and he had an odd expression. His eyes shifted away from ours, and there was a defiant and angry look in them . . . and yet helpless, too, as if he'd started on a course in sheer bravado, and would like to back out of it, but didn't know how. My heart sank to my heels. There must be something one could do or say . . . *some*one must say *some*thing . . . anything . . . to bring him back to us. . . .

And Jo said, "Get him, Nigel. Say the Word. Say it! Say it! Now!"

"If," said Nigel, "there were Macdonalds like you in Glencoe, it's no wonder they got massacred."

It was the Forbidden Word. And it wiped the dark look

from Douglas the moment it was spoken. He gave a yell of rage, and tripped Nigel into some nettles, and dived in after him.

We left them to it.

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