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Opening extract from
The Wee Free Men

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CHAPTER 1

A Clang Well Done

Some things start before other things. It was a summer shower but didn't appear to know it, and it was pouring rain as fast as a winter storm.

Miss Perspicacia Tick sat in what little shelter a raggedy hedge could give her and explored the universe. She didn't notice the rain. Witches dried out quickly.

The exploring of the universe was being done with a couple of twigs tied together with string, a stone with a hole in it, an egg, one of Miss Tick's stockings which also had a hole in it, a pin, a piece of paper and a tiny stub of pencil. Unlike wizards, witches learn to make do with a little.

The items had been tied and twisted together to make a . . . device. It moved oddly when she prodded it. One of the sticks seemed to pass right through the

egg, for example, and came out the other side without leaving a mark.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly, as rain poured off the rim of her hat. ‘There it is. A definite ripple in the walls of the world. Very worrying. There’s probably another world making contact. That’s never good. I ought to go there. But . . . according to my left elbow, there’s a witch there already . . .’

‘She’ll sort it out, then,’ said a small and, for now, mysterious voice from somewhere near her feet.

‘No, it can’t be right. That’s chalk country over that way,’ said Miss Tick. ‘You can’t grow a good witch on chalk. The stuff’s barely harder than clay. You need good hard rock to grow a witch, believe me.’ Miss Tick shook her head, sending raindrops flying. ‘But my elbows are generally very reliable.’*

‘Why talk about it? Let’s go and see,’ said the voice. ‘We’re not doing very well around here, are we?’

That was true. The lowlands weren’t good to witches. Miss Tick was making pennies by doing bits of medicine and misfortune-telling,[†] and slept in barns most nights. She’d twice been thrown in ponds.

‘I can’t barge in,’ she said. ‘Not on another witch’s territory. That never, ever works. But . . .’ she paused, ‘witches don’t just turn up out of nowhere. Let’s have a look . . .’

* People say things like ‘listen to your heart’, but witches learn to listen to other things too. It’s amazing what your kidneys can tell you.

† Ordinary fortune-tellers tell you what you *want* to happen; witches tell you what’s going to happen whether you want it to or not. Strangely enough, witches tend to be more accurate but less popular.

She pulled a cracked saucer out of her pocket, and tipped into it the rainwater that had collected on her hat. Then she took a bottle of ink out of another pocket and poured in just enough to turn the water black.

She cupped it in her hands to keep the raindrops out, and listened to her eyes.

Tiffany Aching was lying on her stomach by the river, tickling trout. She liked to hear them laugh. It came up in bubbles.

A little way away, where the river bank became a sort of pebble beach, her brother Wentworth was messing around with a stick, and almost certainly making himself sticky.

Anything could make Wentworth sticky. Washed and dried and left in the middle of a clean floor for five minutes, Wentworth would be sticky. It didn't seem to come from anywhere. He just got sticky. But he was an easy child to mind, provided you stopped him eating frogs.

There was a small part of Tiffany's brain that wasn't too certain about the name Tiffany. She was nine years old and felt that Tiffany was going to be a hard name to live up to. Besides, she'd decided only last week that she wanted to be a witch when she grew up, and she was certain Tiffany just wouldn't work. People would laugh.

Another and larger part of Tiffany's brain was thinking of the word 'susurrus'. It was a word that not many people have thought about, ever. As her fingers

rubbed the trout under its chin she rolled the word round and round in her head.

Susurrus . . . according to her grandmother's dictionary, it meant 'a low soft sound, as of whispering or muttering'. Tiffany liked the taste of the word. It made her think of mysterious people in long cloaks whispering important secrets behind a door: *susurrusussurruss* . . .

She'd read the dictionary all the way through. No one told her you weren't supposed to.

As she thought this, she realized that the happy trout had swum away. But something else was in the water, only a few inches from her face.

It was a round basket, no bigger than half a coconut shell, coated with something to block up the holes and make it float. A little man, only six inches high, was standing up in it. He had a mass of untidy red hair, into which a few feathers, beads and bits of cloth had been woven. He had a red beard, which was pretty much as bad as the hair. The rest of him that wasn't covered with blue tattoos was covered with a tiny kilt. And he was waving a fist at her, and shouting:

'Crivens! Gang awa' oot o' here, ye daft wee hinny! 'Ware the green *heid!*'

And with that he pulled at a piece of string that was hanging over the side of his boat and a second red-headed man surfaced, gulping air.

'Nae time for fishin'!' said the first man, hauling him aboard. 'The green heid's coming!'

'Crivens!' said the swimmer, water pouring off him. 'Let's offski!'

And with that he grabbed one very small oar and, with rapid back and forth movements, made the basket speed away.

‘Excuse me!’ Tiffany shouted. ‘Are you fairies?’

But there was no answer. The little round boat had disappeared in the reeds.

Probably not, Tiffany decided.

Then, to her dark delight, there was a susurrus. There was no wind, but the leaves on the alder bushes by the river bank began to shake and rustle. So did the reeds. They didn’t bend, they just blurred. *Everything* blurred, as if something had picked up the world and was shaking it. The air fizzed. People whispered behind closed doors . . .

The water began to bubble, just under the bank. It wasn’t very deep here – it would only have reached Tiffany’s knees if she’d paddled – but it was suddenly darker and greener and, somehow, much deeper . . .

She took a couple of steps backwards just before long skinny arms fountained out of the water and clawed madly at the bank where she had been. For a moment she saw a thin face with long sharp teeth, *huge* round eyes and dripping green hair like waterweed, and then the thing plunged back into the depths.

By the time the water closed over it Tiffany was already running along the bank to the little beach where Wentworth was making frog pies. She snatched up the child just as a stream of bubbles came around the curve in the bank. Once again the water boiled, the green-haired creature shot up, and the long arms

clawed at the mud. Then it screamed, and dropped back into the water.

‘I wanna go-a *toy-lut!*’ screamed Wentworth.

Tiffany ignored him. She was watching the river with a thoughtful expression.

I’m not scared at all, she thought. How strange. I ought to be scared, but I’m just angry. I mean, I can *feel* the scared, like a red-hot ball, but the angry isn’t letting it out . . .

‘Wenny wanna wanna *wanna* go-a *toy-lut!*’ Wentworth shrieked.

‘Go on, then,’ said Tiffany absent-mindedly. The ripples were still sloshing against the bank.

There was no point in telling anyone about this. Everyone would just say ‘What an imagination the child has’ if they were feeling in a good mood, or ‘Don’t tell stories!’ if they weren’t.

She was still very angry. How dare a monster turn up in the river? Especially one so . . . so . . . ridiculous! Who did it think she was?

This is Tiffany, walking back home. Start with the boots. They are big and heavy boots, much repaired by her father and they’d belonged to various sisters before her; she wore several pairs of socks to keep them on. They are *big*. Tiffany sometimes feels she is nothing more than a way of moving boots around.

Then there is the dress. It has been owned by many sisters before her and has been taken up, taken out, taken down and taken in by her mother so many times that it really ought to have been taken away. But

Tiffany rather likes it. It comes down to her ankles and, whatever colour it had been to start with, is now a milky blue which is, incidentally, exactly the same colour as the butterflies skittering beside the path.

Then there is Tiffany's face. Light pink, with brown eyes, and brown hair. Nothing special. Her head might strike anyone watching – in a saucer of black water, for example – as being just slightly too big for the rest of her, but perhaps she'd grow into it.

And then go further up, and further, until the track becomes a ribbon and Tiffany and her brother two little dots, and there is her country . . .

They call it the Chalk. Green downlands roll under the hot midsummer sun. From up here, the flocks of sheep, moving slowly, drift over the short turf like clouds on a green sky. Here and there sheepdogs speed over the turf like comets.

And then, as the eyes pull back, it is a long green mound, lying like a great whale on the world . . .

. . . surrounded by the inky rainwater in the saucer.

Miss Tick looked up.

'That little creature in the boat was a Nac Mac Feegle!' she said. 'The most feared of all the fairy races! Even trolls run away from the Wee Free Men! And one of them warned her!'

'She's the witch, then, is she?' said the voice.

'At that age? Impossible!' said Miss Tick. 'There's been no one to teach her! There're no witches on the Chalk! It's too *soft*. And yet . . . she wasn't scared . . .'

The rain had stopped. Miss Tick looked up at the

Chalk, rising above the low, wrung-out clouds. It was about five miles away.

‘This child needs watching,’ she said. ‘But chalk’s too soft to grow a witch on . . .’

Only the mountains were higher than the Chalk. They stood sharp and purple and grey, streaming long trails of snow from their tops even in summer. ‘Brides o’ the sky’, Granny Aching had called them once, and it was so rare that she ever said anything at all, let alone anything that wasn’t to do with sheep, that Tiffany had remembered it. Besides, it was exactly right. That’s what the mountains looked like in the winter, when they were all in white and the snow streams blew like veils.

Granny used old words, and came out with odd, old sayings. She didn’t call the downland the Chalk, she called it ‘the wold’. Up on the wold the wind blows cold, Tiffany had thought, and the word had stuck that way.

She arrived at the farm.

People tended to leave Tiffany alone. There was nothing particularly cruel or unpleasant about this, but the farm was big and everyone had their jobs to do, and she did hers very well and so she became, in a way, invisible. She was the dairymaid, and good at it. She made better butter than her mother did, and people commented about how good she was with cheese. It was a talent. Sometimes, when the wandering teachers came to the village, she went and got a bit of education. But mostly she worked in the

dairy, which was dark and cool. She enjoyed it. It meant she was doing something for the farm.

It was actually *called* the Home Farm. Her father rented it from the Baron, who owned the land, but there had been Achings farming it for hundreds of years and so, her father said (quietly, sometimes, after he'd had a beer in the evenings), as far as the *land* knew, it was owned by the Achings. Tiffany's mother used to tell him not to speak like that, although the Baron was always very respectful to Mr Aching since Granny had died two years ago, calling him the finest shepherd in these hills, and was generally held by the people in the village to be not too bad these days. It paid to be respectful, said Tiffany's mother, and the poor man had sorrows of his own.

But sometimes her father insisted that there had been Achings (or Akins, or Archens, or Akens, or Akenns – spelling had been optional) mentioned in old documents about the area for hundreds and hundreds of years. They had these hills in their bones, he said, and they'd always been shepherds.

Tiffany felt quite proud of this, in an odd way, because it might also be nice to be proud of the fact that your ancestors moved around a bit too, or occasionally tried new things. But you've got to be proud of *something*. And for as long as she could remember she'd heard her father, an otherwise quiet, slow man, make the Joke, the one that must have been handed down from Aching to Aching for hundreds of years.

He'd say, 'Another day of work and I'm still Aching',

or ‘I get up Aching and I go to bed Aching’, or even ‘I’m Aching all over’. They weren’t particularly funny after about the third time, but she’d miss it if he didn’t say at least one of them every week. They didn’t have to be funny, they were *father* jokes. Anyway, however they were spelled, all her ancestors had been Aching to stay, not Aching to leave.

There was no one around in the kitchen. Her mother had probably gone up to the shearing pens with a bite of lunch for the men, who were shearing this week. Her sisters Hannah and Fastidia were up there too, rolling fleeces and paying attention to some of the younger men. They were always quite keen to work during shearing.

Near the big black stove was the shelf that was still called Granny Aching’s Library by her mother, who liked the idea of having a library. Everyone else called it Granny’s Shelf.

It was a small shelf, since the books were wedged between a jar of crystallized ginger and the china shepherdess that Tiffany had won at a fair when she was six.

There were only five books if you didn’t include the big farm diary, which in Tiffany’s view didn’t count as a real book because you had to write it yourself. There was the dictionary. There was the Almanack, which got changed every year. And next to that was *Diseases of the Sheep*, which was fat with the bookmarks that her grandmother had put there.

Granny Aching had been an expert on sheep, even though she called them ‘just bags of bones, eyeballs

and teeth, lookin' for new ways to die'. Other shepherds would walk miles to get her to come and cure their beasts of ailments. *They* said she had the Touch, although she just said that the best medicine for sheep or man was a dose of turpentine, a good cussin' and a kick. Bits of paper with Granny's own recipes for sheep cures stuck out all over the book. Mostly they involved turpentine, but some included cussin'.

Next to the book on sheep was a thin little volume called *Flowers of the Chalk*. The turf of the downs was full of tiny, intricate flowers, like cowslips and harebells, and even smaller ones that somehow survived the grazing. On the Chalk, flowers had to be tough and cunning to survive the sheep and the winter blizzards.

Someone had coloured in the pictures of the flowers, a long time ago. On the flyleaf of the book was written in neat handwriting 'Sarah Grizzel', which had been Granny's name before she was married. She probably thought that Aching was at least better than Grizzel.

And finally there was *The Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales*, so old that it belonged to an age when there were far more 'e's around.

Tiffany stood on a chair and took it down. She turned the pages until she found the one she was looking for, and stared at it for a while. Then she put the book back, replaced the chair, and opened the crockery cupboard.

She found a soup plate, went over to a drawer, took

out the tape measure her mother used for dressmaking, and measured the plate.

‘Hmm,’ she said. ‘Eight inches. Why didn’t they just *say*?’

She unhooked the largest frying pan, the one that could cook breakfast for half a dozen people all at once, and took some sweets from the jar on the dresser and put them in an old paper bag. Then, to Wentworth’s sullen bewilderment, she took him by a sticky hand and headed back down towards the stream.

Things still looked very normal down there, but she was not going to let *that* fool her. All the trout had fled and the birds weren’t singing.

She found a place on the river bank with the right-sized bush. Then she hammered a piece of wood into the ground as hard as she could, close to the edge of the water, and tied the bag of sweets to it.

‘Sweeties, Wentworth,’ she shouted.

She gripped the frying pan and stepped smartly behind the bush.

Wentworth trotted over to the sweets and tried to pick up the bag. It wouldn’t move.

‘I wanna go-a *toy-lut!*’ he yelled, because it was a threat that usually worked. His fat fingers scrabbled at the knots.

Tiffany watched the water carefully. Was it getting darker? Was it getting greener? Was that just waterweed down there? Were those bubbles just a trout, laughing?

No.

She ran out of her hiding place with the frying pan swinging like a bat. The screaming monster, leaping out of the water, met the frying pan coming the other way with a clang.

It was a good clang, with the *oiyoioioioioioioi-nnnnnngggggggg* that is the mark of a clang well done.

The creature hung there for a moment, a few teeth and bits of green weed splashing into the water, then slid down slowly and sank with some massive bubbles.

The water cleared and was once again the same old river, shallow and icy cold and floored with pebbles.

‘Wanna wanna *sweeties!*’ screamed Wentworth, who never noticed anything else in the presence of sweets.

Tiffany undid the string and gave them to him. He ate them far too quickly, as he always did with sweets. She waited until he was sick, and then went back home in a thoughtful state of mind.

In the reeds, quite low down, small voices whispered:

‘*Crivens, Wee Bobby, did yer no’ see that?*’

‘*Aye. We’d better offski an’ tell the Big Man we’ve found the hag.*’

Miss Tick was running up the dusty road. Witches don’t like to be seen running. It looks unprofessional. It’s also not done to be seen carrying things, and she had her tent on her back.

She was also trailing clouds of steam. Witches dry out from the inside.

‘It had all those teeth!’ said the mystery voice, this time from her hat.

‘I know!’ snapped Miss Tick.

‘And she just hauled off and hit it!’

‘Yes. I *know*.’

‘Just like that!’

‘Yes. Very impressive,’ said Miss Tick. She was getting out of breath. Besides, they were already on the lower slopes of the downs now, and she wasn’t good on chalk. A wandering witch likes firm ground under her, not a rock so soft you could cut it with a knife.

‘Impressive?’ said the voice. ‘She used her *brother* as *bait*!’

‘Amazing, wasn’t it?’ said Miss Tick. ‘Such quick thinking . . . oh, no . . .’ She stopped running, and leaned against a field wall as a wave of dizziness hit her.

‘What’s happening? What’s happening?’ said the voice from the hat. ‘I nearly fell off!’

‘It’s this wretched chalk! I can feel it already! I can do magic on honest soil, and rock is always fine, and I’m not too bad on clay, even . . . but chalk’s neither one thing nor the other! I’m very *sensitive* to geology, you know.’

‘What are you trying to tell me?’ said the voice.

‘Chalk . . . is a hungry soil. I don’t really have much power on chalk.’

The owner of the voice, who was hidden, said: ‘Are you going to fall over?’

‘No, no! It’s just the magic that doesn’t work . . .’

Miss Tick did not look like a witch. Most witches don't, at least the ones who wander from place to place. Looking like a witch can be dangerous when you walk among the uneducated. And for that reason she didn't wear any occult jewellery, or have a glowing magical knife or a silver goblet with a pattern of skulls all round it, or carry a broomstick with sparks coming out of it, all of which are tiny hints that there may be a witch around. Her pockets never carried anything more magical than a few twigs, maybe a piece of string, a coin or two and, of course, a lucky charm.

Everyone in the country carried lucky charms, and Miss Tick had worked out that if you didn't have one people would suspect that you *were* a witch. You had to be a bit cunning to be a witch.

Miss Tick *did* have a pointy hat, but it was a stealth hat and only pointed when she wanted it to.

The only thing in her bag that might have made anyone suspicious was a very small, grubby booklet entitled 'An Introduction to Escapology', by The Great Williamson. If one of the risks of your job is being thrown into a pond with your hands tied together, then the ability to swim thirty yards under water, fully clothed, plus the ability to lurk under the weeds breathing air through a hollow reed counts as nothing if you aren't also *amazingly* good with knots.

'You can't do magic here?' said the voice in the hat.

'No, I can't,' said Miss Tick.

She looked up at the sounds of jingling. A strange procession was coming up the white road. It was

mostly made up of donkeys pulling small carts with brightly painted covers on them. People walked alongside the carts, dusty to the waist. They were mostly men, they wore bright robes – or robes, at least, that had been bright before being trailed through mud and dust for years – and every one of them wore a strange black square hat.

Miss Tick smiled.

They looked like tinkers, but there wasn't one amongst them, she knew, who could mend a kettle. What they did was sell invisible things. And after they'd sold what they had, they still had it. They sold what everyone needed but often didn't want. They sold the key to the universe to people who didn't even know it was locked.

'I can't *do*,' said Miss Tick, straightening up. 'But I *can* teach!'

Tiffany worked for the rest of the morning in the dairy. There was cheese that needed doing.

There was bread and jam for lunch. Her mother said: 'The teachers are coming to town today. You can go, if you've done your chores.'

Tiffany agreed that, yes, there were one or two things she'd quite like to know more about.

'Then you can have half a dozen carrots and an egg. I dare say they could do with an egg, poor things,' said her mother.

Tiffany took them with her after lunch, and went to get an egg's worth of education.

Most boys in the village grew up to do the same

jobs as their fathers or, at least, some other job somewhere in the village where someone's father would teach them as they went along. The girls were expected to grow up to be somebody's wife. They were also expected to be able to read and write, those being considered soft indoor jobs that were too fiddly for the boys.

However, everyone also felt that there were a few other things that even the boys ought to know, to stop them wasting time wondering about details like 'What's on the other side of the mountains?' and 'How come rain falls out of the sky?'

Every family in the village bought a copy of the Almanack every year, and a sort of education came from that. It was big and thick and printed somewhere far off, and it had lots of details about things like phases of the moon and the right time to plant beans. It also contained a few prophecies about the coming year, and mentioned faraway places with names like Klatch and Hersheba. Tiffany had seen a picture of Klatch in the Almanack. It showed a camel standing in a desert. She'd only found out what both those things were because her mother had told her. And that was Klatch, a camel in a desert. She'd wondered if there wasn't a bit more to it, but it seemed that 'Klatch = camel, desert' was all anyone knew.

And that was the trouble. If you didn't find some way of stopping it, people would go *on* asking questions.

The teachers were useful there. Bands of them

wandered through the mountains, along with the tinkers, portable blacksmiths, miracle medicine men, cloth pedlars, fortune-tellers and all the other travellers who sold things people didn't need every day but occasionally found useful.

They went from village to village delivering short lessons on many subjects. They kept apart from the other travellers, and were quite mysterious in their ragged robes and strange square hats. They used long words, like 'corrugated iron'. They lived rough lives, surviving on what food they could earn from giving lessons to anyone who would listen. When no one would listen, they lived on baked hedgehog. They went to sleep under the stars, which the maths teachers would count, the astronomy teachers would measure and the literature teachers would name. The geography teachers got lost in the woods and fell into bear traps.

People were usually quite pleased to see them. They taught children enough to shut them up, which was the main thing after all. But they always had to be driven out of the villages by nightfall in case they stole chickens.

Today the brightly coloured little booths and tents were pitched in a field just outside the village. Behind them small square areas had been fenced off with high canvas walls and were patrolled by apprentice teachers looking for anyone trying to overhear Education without paying.

The first tent Tiffany saw had a sign which said:



**JOGRAFFY!
JOGRAFFY!
JOGRAFFY!**



For today only: all major land masses and oceans
PLUS everything you need to know about glassiers!
One penny or All Major Vegetables Accepted!

Tiffany had read enough to know that, while he might be a whiz at major land masses, this particular teacher could have done with some help from the man running the stall next door:

The Wonders of Punctuation and Spelling

- 1 - *Absolute Certainty about the Comma*
- 2 - *I before E Completely Sorted Out*
- 3 - *The Mystery of the Semi-Colon Revealed*
- 4 - *See the Ampersand (Small extra charge)*
- 5 - *Fun with Brackets*

**; Will accept vegetables, eggs, and clean used clothing *;*

The next stall along was decorated with scenes out of history, generally of kings cutting one another's heads off and similar interesting highlights. The teacher in front was dressed in ragged red robes, with rabbitskin trimmings, and wore an old top hat with flags stuck in it. He had a small megaphone, which he aimed at Tiffany.

'The Death of Kings Through the Ages?' he said. 'Very educational, lots of blood!'

'Not really,' said Tiffany.

'Oh, you've *got* to know where you've come from, miss,' said the teacher. 'Otherwise how will you know where you're going?'

'I come from a long line of Aching people,' said Tiffany. 'And I think I'm moving on.'

She found what she was looking for at a booth hung with pictures of animals including, she was pleased to see, a camel.

The sign said: **Useful Creatures. Today: Our Friend the Hedgehog.**

She wondered how useful the thing in the river had been, but this looked like the only place to find out. A few children were waiting on the benches inside the booth for the lesson to begin, but the teacher was still standing out in front, in the hope of filling up the empty spaces.

'Hello, little girl,' he said, which was only his first big mistake. 'I'm sure *you* want to know all about hedgehogs, eh?'

'I did this one last summer,' said Tiffany.

The man looked closer, and his grin faded. 'Oh, yes,'

he said. 'I remember. You asked all those . . . little questions.'

'I would like a question answered today,' said Tiffany.

'Provided it's not the one about how you get baby hedgehogs,' said the man.

'No,' said Tiffany patiently. 'It's about zoology.'

'Zoology, eh? That's a big word, isn't it.'

'No, actually it isn't,' said Tiffany. 'Patronizing is a big word. Zoology is really quite short.'

The teacher's eyes narrowed further. Children like Tiffany were bad news. 'I can see you're a clever one,' he said. 'But I don't know any teachers of zoology in these parts. Vetin'ry, yes, but not zoology. Any particular animal?'

'Jenny Green-Teeth. A water-dwelling monster with big teeth and claws and eyes like soup plates,' said Tiffany.

'What size of soup plates? Do you mean big soup plates, a whole full portion bowl with maybe some biscuits, possibly even a bread roll, or do you mean the little cup you might get if, for example, you just ordered soup and a salad?'

'The size of soup plates that are eight inches across,' said Tiffany, who'd never ordered soup and a salad anywhere in her life. 'I checked.'

'Hmm, that is a puzzler,' said the teacher. 'Don't think I know that one. It's certainly not useful, I know that. It sounds made-up to me.'

'Yes, that's what *I* thought,' said Tiffany. 'But I'd still like to know more about it.'

‘Well, you could try her. She’s new.’

The teacher jerked his thumb towards a little tent at the end of the row. It was black and quite shabby. There weren’t any posters, and absolutely no exclamation marks.

‘What does she teach?’ she asked.

‘Couldn’t say,’ said the teacher. ‘She *says* it’s thinking, but I don’t know how you teach *that*. That’ll be one carrot, thank you.’

When she went closer Tiffany saw a small notice pinned to the outside of the tent. It said, in letters which whispered rather than shouted:



I CAN TEACH YOU A LESSON
YOU WON'T FORGET IN A HURRY



CHAPTER 2

Miss Tick

Tiffany read the sign and smiled.

'Aha,' she said. There was nothing to knock on, so she added 'Knock, knock' in a louder voice.

A woman's voice from within said: 'Who's there?'

'Tiffany,' said Tiffany.

'Tiffany who?' said the voice.

'Tiffany who isn't trying to make a joke.'

'Ah. That sounds promising. Come in.'

She pushed aside the flap. It was dark inside the tent, as well as stuffy and hot. A skinny figure sat behind a small table. She had a very sharp, thin nose and was wearing a large black straw hat with paper flowers on it. It was completely unsuitable for a face like that.

'Are you a witch?' said Tiffany. 'I don't mind if you are.'

‘What a strange question to spring on someone,’ said the woman, looking slightly shocked. ‘Your baron bans witches in this country, you know that, and the first thing you say to me is “Are you a witch?” Why would I be a witch?’

‘Well, you’re wearing all black,’ said Tiffany.

‘Anyone can wear black,’ said the woman. ‘That doesn’t mean a thing.’

‘And you’re wearing a straw hat with flowers in it,’ Tiffany went on.

‘Aha!’ said the woman. ‘That proves it, then. Witches wear tall pointy hats. Everyone knows that, foolish child.’

‘Yes, but witches are also very clever,’ said Tiffany calmly. There was something about the twinkle in the woman’s eyes that told her to carry on. ‘They sneak about. Probably they often don’t look like witches. And a witch coming here would know about the Baron and so she’d wear the kind of hat that everyone knows witches don’t wear.’

The woman stared at her. ‘That was an incredible feat of reasoning,’ she said at last. ‘You’d make a good witch-finder. You know they used to set fire to witches? Whatever kind of hat I’ve got on, you’d say it proves I’m a witch, yes?’

‘Well, the frog sitting on your hat is a bit of a clue too,’ said Tiffany.

‘I’m a toad, actually,’ said the creature, which had been peering at Tiffany from between the paper flowers.

‘You’re very yellow for a toad.’

‘I’ve been a bit ill,’ said the toad.

‘And you talk,’ said Tiffany.

‘You only have my word for it,’ said the toad, disappearing into the paper flowers. ‘You can’t prove anything.’

‘You don’t have matches on you, do you?’ said the woman to Tiffany.

‘No.’

‘Fine, fine. Just checking.’

Again, there was a pause while the woman gave Tiffany a long stare, as if making up her mind about something.

‘My name,’ she said at last, ‘is Miss Tick. And I *am* a witch. It’s a good name for a witch, of course.’

‘You mean blood-sucking parasite?’ said Tiffany, wrinkling her forehead.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Miss Tick coldly.

‘Ticks,’ said Tiffany. ‘Sheep get them. But if you use turpentine—’

‘I *meant* that it *sounds* like “mystic”,’ said Miss Tick.

‘Oh, you mean a pun^{*}, or play on words,’ said Tiffany. ‘In that case it would be even better if you were Miss *Teak*, a hard foreign wood, because that would sound like “mystique”, or you could be Miss Take, which would—’

‘I can see we’re going to get along like a house on fire,’ said Miss Tick. ‘There may be no survivors.’

‘You really *are* a witch?’

^{*} Tiffany had read lots of words in the dictionary that she’d never heard spoken, so she had to guess at how they were pronounced.

‘Oh, pur-lease,’ said Miss Tick. ‘Yes, yes, I am a witch. I have a talking animal, a tendency to correct other people’s pronunciation – it’s *pun*, by the way, not “pune” – and a fascination for poking my nose into other people’s affairs and, yes, a *pointy hat*.’

‘Can I operate the spring now?’ said the toad.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Tick, her eyes still on Tiffany. ‘You can operate the spring.’

‘I like operating the spring,’ said the toad, crawling around to the back of the hat.

There was a click, and a slow *thwap-thwap* noise, and the centre of the hat rose slowly and jerkily up out of the paper flowers, which fell away.

‘Er . . .’ said Tiffany.

‘You have a question?’ said Miss Tick.

With a last *thwop*, the top of the hat made a perfect point.

‘How do you know I won’t run away right now and tell the Baron?’ said Tiffany.

‘Because you haven’t the slightest desire to do so,’ said Miss Tick. ‘You’re absolutely fascinated. You want to *be* a witch, am I right? You probably want to fly on a broomstick, yes?’

‘Oh, yes!’ She’d often dreamed of flying. Miss Tick’s next words brought her down to earth.

‘Really? You like having to wear really, really thick pants? Believe me, if I’ve got to fly I wear two pairs of woollen ones and a canvas pair on the outside which, I may tell you, are not very feminine no matter how much lace you sew on. It can get *cold* up there. People forget that. And then there’s the bristles. Don’t ask me

about the bristles. I will not talk about the bristles.'

'But can't you use a keeping-warm spell?' said Tiffany.

'I could. But a witch doesn't do that sort of thing. Once you use magic to keep yourself warm, then you'll start using it for other things.'

'But isn't that what a witch is supposed to—' Tiffany began.

'Once you learn about magic, I mean really *learn* about magic, learn everything you can learn about magic, then you've got the most important lesson still to learn,' said Miss Tick.

'What's that?'

'Not to use it. Witches don't use magic unless they really have to. It's hard work and difficult to control. We do other things. A witch pays attention to everything that's going on. A witch uses her head. A witch is sure of herself. A witch always has a piece of string—'

'I always *do* have a piece of string!' said Tiffany. 'It's always handy!'

'Good. Although there's more to witchcraft than string. A witch delights in small details. A witch sees through things and round things. A witch sees further than most. A witch sees things from the other side. A witch knows where she is, and *when* she is. A witch would see Jenny Green-Teeth,' she added. 'What happened?'

'How did you know I saw Jenny Green-Teeth?'

'I'm a witch. Guess,' said Miss Tick.

Tiffany looked around the tent. There wasn't much

to see, even now that her eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom. The sounds of the outside world filtered through the heavy material.

‘I think—’

‘Yes?’ said the witch.

‘I think you heard me telling the teacher.’

‘Correct. I just used my ears,’ said Miss Tick, saying nothing at all about saucers of ink. ‘Tell me about this monster with eyes the size of the kind of soup plates that are eight inches across. Where do soup plates come into it?’

‘The monster is mentioned in a book of stories I’ve got,’ explained Tiffany. ‘It said Jenny Green-Teeth has eyes the size of soup plates. There’s a picture, but it’s not a good one. So I measured a soup plate, so I could be exact.’

Miss Tick put her chin on her hand and gave Tiffany an odd sort of smile.

‘That was all right, wasn’t it?’ said Tiffany.

‘What? Oh, yes. Yes. Um . . . yes. Very . . . exact. Go on.’

Tiffany told her about the fight with Jenny, although she didn’t mention Wentworth in case Miss Tick got funny about it. Miss Tick listened carefully.

‘Why the frying pan?’ she said. ‘You could’ve found a stick.’

‘A frying pan just seemed a better idea,’ said Tiffany.

‘Hah! It *was*. Jenny would’ve eaten you up if you’d used a stick. A frying pan is made of iron. Creatures of that kidney can’t stand iron.’

‘But it’s a monster out of a storybook!’ said Tiffany.

‘What’s it doing turning up in our little river?’

Miss Tick stared at Tiffany for a while, and then said: ‘Why do you want to be a witch, Tiffany?’

It had started with The Goode Childe’s Booke of Faerie Tales. Actually, it had probably started with a lot of things, but the stories most of all.

Her mother had read them to her when she was little, and then she’d read them to herself. And all the stories had, somewhere, the witch. The *wicked old witch*.

And Tiffany had thought: Where’s the *evidence*?

The stories never said *why* she was wicked. It was enough to be an old woman, enough to be all alone, enough to look strange because you had no teeth. It was enough to be *called* a witch.

If it came to that, the book never gave you the *evidence* of anything. It talked about ‘a handsome prince’ . . . was he really, or was it just because he was a prince that people called him handsome? As for ‘a girl who was as beautiful as the day was long’ . . . well, which day? In midwinter it hardly ever got light! The stories didn’t want you to think, they just wanted you to believe what you were told . . .

And you were told that the old witch lived all by herself in a strange cottage made of gingerbread or which ran around on giant hen’s feet, and talked to animals, and could do magic.

Tiffany only ever knew one old woman who lived all alone in a strange cottage . . .

Well, no. That wasn’t quite true. But she had only ever known one old woman who lived in a strange

house *that moved about*, and that was Granny Aching. And she could do magic, sheep magic, and she talked to animals and there was nothing wicked about her. That *proved* you couldn't believe the stories.

And there had been the *other* old woman, the one who *everyone* said was a witch. And what had happened to her had made Tiffany very . . . thoughtful.

Anyway, she preferred the witches to the smug handsome princes and especially to the stupid smirking princesses, who didn't have the sense of a beetle. They had lovely golden hair too, and Tiffany didn't. Her hair was brown, plain brown. Her mother called it chestnut, or sometimes auburn, but Tiffany knew it was brown, brown, brown, just like her eyes. Brown as earth. And did the book have any adventures for people who had brown eyes and brown hair? No, no, no . . . it was the blond people with blue eyes and the redheads with green eyes who got the stories. If you had brown hair you were probably just a servant or a woodcutter or something. Or a dairymaid. Well, that was not going to happen, even if she *was* good at cheese. She couldn't be the prince, and she'd never be a princess, and she didn't want to be a woodcutter, so she'd be the witch and *know* things, just like Granny Aching—

'Who was Granny Aching?' said a voice.

Who was Granny Aching? People would start asking that now. And the answer was: what Granny Aching was, was there. She was always there. It seemed that the

lives of all the Achings revolved around Granny Aching. Down in the village decisions were made, things were done, life went on in the knowledge that in her old wheeled shepherding hut on the hills Granny Aching was there, watching.

And she was the silence of the hills. Perhaps that's why she liked Tiffany, in her awkward, hesitant way. Her older sisters chattered, and Granny didn't like noise. Tiffany didn't make noise when she was up at the hut. She just loved being there. She'd watch the buzzards, and listen to the noise of the silence.

It did have a noise, up there. Sounds, voices, animal noises floating up onto the downs, somehow made the silence deep and complex. And Granny Aching wrapped this silence around herself and made room inside it for Tiffany. It was always too busy on the farm. There were a lot of people with a lot to do. There wasn't enough time for silence. There wasn't time for listening. But Granny Aching was silent and listened all the time.

'What?' said Tiffany, blinking.

'You just said "Granny Aching listened to me all the time",' said Miss Tick.

Tiffany swallowed. 'I think my grandmother was slightly a witch,' she said, with a touch of pride.

'Really? How do you know?'

'Well, witches can curse people, right?' said Tiffany.

'So it is said,' said Miss Tick diplomatically.

'Well, my father said Granny Aching cussed the sky blue,' said Tiffany.

Miss Tick coughed. ‘Well, cussing, now, cussing isn’t like genuine *cursing*. Cussing’s more like dang and botheration and darned and drat, you know? Cussing is more on the lines of “I hope your nose explodes and your ears go flying away.”’

‘I think Granny’s cussing was a bit more than that,’ said Tiffany, in a very definite voice. ‘And she talked to her dogs.’

‘And what kind of things did she say to them?’ said Miss Tick.

‘Oh, things like *come by* and *away to me* and *that’ll do*,’ said Tiffany. ‘They always did what she told them.’

‘But those are just sheepdog commands,’ said Miss Tick dismissively. ‘That’s not exactly witchcraft.’

‘Well, that still makes them familiars, doesn’t it?’ Tiffany retorted, feeling annoyed. ‘Witches have animals they can talk to, called familiars. Like your toad there.’

‘I’m not familiar,’ said a voice from among the paper flowers. ‘I’m just slightly presumptuous.’

‘And she knew about all kinds of herbs,’ Tiffany persisted. Granny Aching was going to be a witch even if Tiffany had to argue all day. ‘She could cure anything. My father said she could make a shepherd’s pie stand up and baa.’ Tiffany lowered her voice. ‘She could *bring lambs back to life* . . .’

You hardly ever saw Granny Aching indoors in the spring and summer. She spent most of the year sleeping in the old wheeled hut, which could be dragged across the downs after the flocks. But the first time Tiffany

could remember seeing the old woman in the farmhouse, she was kneeling in front of the fire, putting a dead lamb in the big black oven.

Tiffany had screamed and screamed. And Granny had gently picked her up, a little awkwardly, and sat her on her lap and shushed her and called her 'my little jiggit', while on the floor her sheepdogs, Thunder and Lightning, watched her in doggish amazement. Granny wasn't particularly at home around children, because they didn't baa.

When Tiffany had stopped crying out of sheer lack of breath, Granny had put her down on the rug and opened the oven, and Tiffany had watched the lamb come alive again.

When Tiffany got a little older, she found out that 'jiggit' meant twenty in the Yan Tan Tethera, the ancient counting language of the shepherds. The older people still used it when they were counting things they thought of as special. She was Granny Aching's twentieth grandchild.

And when she was older she also understood all about the warming oven, which never got more than, well, warm. Her mother would let the bread dough rise in it, and Ratbag the cat would sleep in it, sometimes on the dough. It was just the place to revive a weak lamb that had been born on a snowy night and was near death from the cold. That was how it worked. No magic at all. But that time it had been magic. And it didn't stop being magic just because you found out how it was done.

*

‘Good, but still not *exactly* witchcraft,’ said Miss Tick, breaking the spell again. ‘Anyway, you don’t have to have a witch ancestor to be a witch. It helps, of course, because of heredity.’

‘You mean like having talents?’ said Tiffany, wrinkling her brow.

‘Partly, I suppose,’ said Miss Tick. ‘But I was thinking of pointy hats, for example. If you have a grandmother who can pass on her pointy hat to you, that saves a great deal of expense. They are incredibly hard to come by, especially ones strong enough to withstand falling farmhouses. Did Mrs Aching have anything like that?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Tiffany. ‘She hardly ever wore a hat except in the very cold weather. She wore an old grain sack as a sort of hood. Um . . . does that count?’

For the first time, Miss Tick looked a little less flinty. ‘Possibly, possibly,’ she said. ‘Do you have any brothers and sisters, Tiffany?’

‘I have six sisters,’ said Tiffany. ‘I’m the youngest. Most of them don’t live with us now.’

‘And then you weren’t the baby any more because you had a dear little brother,’ said Miss Tick. ‘The only boy too. That must have been a nice surprise.’

Suddenly, Tiffany found Miss Tick’s faint smile slightly annoying.

‘How do you know about my brother?’ she said.

The smile faded. Miss Tick thought: This child is *sharp*. ‘Just a guess,’ she said. No one likes admitting to spying.

‘Are you using persykology on me?’ said Tiffany hotly.

‘I think you mean psychology,’ said Miss Tick.

‘Whatever,’ said Tiffany. ‘You think I don’t like him because my parents make a fuss of him and spoil him, yes?’

‘Well, it did cross my mind,’ said Miss Tick, and gave up worrying about the spying. She was a witch, and that was all there was to it. ‘I think it was the bit when you used him as bait for a slathering monster that gave me a hint,’ she added.

‘He’s just a nuisance!’ said Tiffany. ‘He takes up my time and I’m always having to look after him and he always wants sweets. Anyway,’ she continued, ‘I had to think fast.’

‘Quite so,’ said Miss Tick.

‘Granny Aching would have done something about monsters in our river,’ said Tiffany, ignoring that. ‘Even if they are out of books.’ And she’d have done something about what happened to old Mrs Snapperly, she added to herself. She’d have spoken up, and people would have listened . . . They always listened when Granny spoke up. *Speak up for those who don’t have voices*, she always said.

‘Good,’ said Miss Tick. ‘So she should. Witches deal with things. You said the river was very shallow where Jenny leaped up? And the world looked blurred and shaky? Was there a susurrus?’

Tiffany beamed. ‘Yes, there certainly was!’

‘Ah. Something bad is happening.’

Tiffany looked worried.

‘Can I stop it?’

‘And now I’m slightly impressed,’ said Miss Tick. ‘You said, “Can I stop it?,” not “Can anyone stop it?” or “Can we stop it?” That’s good. You accept responsibility. That’s a good start. And you keep a cool head. But, no, you can’t stop it.’

‘I walloped Jenny Green-Teeth!’

‘Lucky hit,’ said Miss Tick. ‘There may be worse than her on the way, believe me. I believe an incursion of major proportions is going to start here and, clever though you are, my girl, you have as much chance as one of your lambs on a snowy night. You keep clear. I’ll try to fetch help.’

‘What, from the Baron?’

‘Good gracious, no. He’d be no use at all.’

‘But he protects us,’ said Tiffany. ‘That’s what my mother says.’

‘Does he?’ said Miss Tick. ‘Who from? I mean, from whom?’

‘Well, from, you know . . . attack, I suppose. From other barons, my father says.’

‘Has he got a big army?’

‘Well, er, he’s got Sergeant Roberts, and Kevin and Neville and Trevor,’ said Tiffany. ‘We all know them. They mostly guard the castle.’

‘Any of them got magical powers?’ said Miss Tick.

‘I saw Neville do card tricks once,’ said Tiffany.

‘A wow at parties, but probably not much use even against something like Jenny,’ said Miss Tick. ‘Are there no oth— Are there no witches here at all?’

Tiffany hesitated.

‘There was old Mrs Snapperly,’ she said. Oh, yes. She’d lived all alone in a strange cottage all right . . .

‘Good name,’ said Miss Tick. ‘Can’t say I’ve heard it before, though. Where is she?’

‘She died in the snow last winter,’ said Tiffany slowly.

‘And now tell me what you’re not telling me,’ said Miss Tick, sharp as a knife.

‘Er . . . she was begging, people think, but no one opened their doors to her and, er . . . it was a cold night, and . . . she died.’

‘And she was a witch, was she?’

‘Everyone *said* she was a witch,’ said Tiffany. She really did not want to talk about this. No one in the villages around here wanted to talk about it. No one went near the ruins of the cottage in the woods, either.

‘You don’t think so?’

‘Um . . .’ Tiffany squirmed. ‘You see . . . the Baron had a son called Roland. He was only twelve, I think. And he went riding in the woods by himself last summer and his dogs came back without him.’

‘Mrs Snapperly lived in those woods?’ said Miss Tick.

‘Yes.’

‘And people think she killed him?’ said Miss Tick. She sighed. ‘They probably think she cooked him in the oven, or something.’

‘They never actually *said*,’ said Tiffany. ‘But I think it was something like that, yes.’

‘And did his horse turn up?’ said Miss Tick.

‘No,’ said Tiffany. ‘And that was strange, because if

it'd turned up anywhere along the hills the people would have noticed it . . .'

Miss Tick folded her hands, sniffed, and smiled a smile with no humour in it at all.

'Easily explained,' she said. 'Mrs Snapperly must have had a really *big* oven, eh?'

'No, it was really quite small,' said Tiffany. 'Only ten inches deep.'

'I bet Mrs Snapperly had no teeth and talked to herself, right?' said Miss Tick.

'Yes. And she had a cat. And a squint,' said Tiffany. And it all came out in a rush: 'And so after he vanished they went to her cottage and they looked in the oven and they dug up her garden and they threw stones at her old cat until it died and they turned her out of her cottage and piled up all her old books in the middle of the room and set fire to them and burned the place to the ground and everyone said she was an old witch.'

'They burned the books,' said Miss Tick, in a flat voice.

'Because they said they had old writing in them,' said Tiffany. 'And pictures of stars.'

'And when you went to look, did they?' said Miss Tick.

Tiffany suddenly felt cold. 'How did you know?' she said.

'I'm good at listening. Well, did they?'

Tiffany sighed. 'Yes, I went to the cottage next day and some of the pages, you know, had kind of floated up in the heat. And I found a part of one, and it had

all old lettering and gold and blue edging. And I buried her cat.'

'You buried the cat?'

'Yes! Someone had to!' said Tiffany hotly.

'And you measured the oven,' said Miss Tick. 'I know you did, because you just told me what size it was.' And you measure soup plates, Miss Tick added to herself. What *have* I found here?

'Well, yes. I did. I mean . . . it was tiny! And if she could magic away a boy and a whole horse, why didn't she magic away the men who came for her? It didn't make any sense—!'

Miss Tick waved her into silence. 'And then what happened?'

'Then the Baron said no one was to have anything to do with her,' said Tiffany. 'He said *any* witches found in the country would be tied up and thrown in the pond. Er, you could be in danger,' she added uncertainly.

'I can untie knots with my teeth and I have a Gold Swimming Certificate from the Quirm College for Young Ladies,' said Miss Tick. 'All that practice at jumping into the swimming pool with my clothes on was time well spent.' She leaned forward. 'Let me guess what happened to Mrs Snapperly,' she said. 'She lived from the summer until the snow, right? She stole food from barns and probably women gave her food at the back door if the men weren't around? I expect the bigger boys threw things at her if they saw her.'

'How do you *know* all this?' said Tiffany.

'It doesn't take a huge leap of imagination, believe

me,' said Miss Tick. 'And she wasn't a witch, was she?'

'I think she was just a sick old lady who was no use to anyone and smelled a bit and looked odd because she had no teeth,' said Tiffany. 'She just looked like a witch in a story. Anyone with half a mind could see that.'

Miss Tick sighed. 'Yes. But sometimes it's so hard to find half a mind when you need one.'

'Can't you teach me what I need to know to be a witch?' said Tiffany.

'Tell me why you *still* want to be a witch, bearing in mind what happened to Mrs Snapperly?'

'So that sort of thing doesn't happen again,' said Tiffany.

She even buried the old witch's cat, thought Miss Tick. What kind of child is this?

'Good answer. You might make a decent witch one day,' she said. 'But I don't teach people to *be* witches. I teach people *about* witches. Witches learn in a special school. I just show them the way, if they're any good. All witches have special interests, and I like children.'

'Why?'

'Because they're much easier to fit in the oven,' said Miss Tick.

But Tiffany wasn't frightened, just annoyed.

'That was a nasty thing to say,' she said.

'Well, witches don't have to be *nice*,' said Miss Tick, pulling a large black bag from under the table. 'I'm glad to see you pay attention.'

'There really is a school for witches?' said Tiffany.

'In a manner of speaking, yes,' said Miss Tick.

‘Where?’

‘Very close.’

‘It is magical?’

‘Very magical.’

‘A wonderful place?’

‘There’s nowhere quite like it.’

‘Can I go there by magic? Does, like, a unicorn turn up to carry me there or something?’

‘Why should it? A unicorn is nothing more than a big horse that comes to a point, anyway. Nothing to get so excited about,’ said Miss Tick. ‘And that will be one egg, please.’

‘Exactly where can I find the school?’ said Tiffany, handing over the egg.

‘Aha. A root vegetable question, I think,’ said Miss Tick. ‘Two carrots, please.’

Tiffany handed them over.

‘Thank you. Ready? To find the school for witches, go to a high place near here, climb to the top, open your eyes . . .’ Miss Tick hesitated.

‘Yes?’

‘. . . and then open your eyes again.’

‘But—’ Tiffany began.

‘Got any more eggs?’

‘No, but—’

‘No more education, then. But I have a question to ask you.’

‘Got any eggs?’ said Tiffany instantly.

‘Hah! Did you see anything *else* by the river, Tiffany?’

Silence suddenly filled the tent. The sound of bad

spelling and erratic geography filtered through from outside as Tiffany and Miss Tick stared into one another's eyes.

'No,' lied Tiffany.

'Are you sure?' said Miss Tick.

'Yes.'

They continued the staring match. But Tiffany could outstare a cat.

'I *see*,' said Miss Tick, looking away. 'Very well. In that case, please tell me . . . when you stopped outside my tent just now you said "Aha" in what I considered to be a smug tone of voice. Were you thinking, This is a strange little black tent with a mysterious little sign on the door, so going inside could be the start of an adventure, *or* were you thinking, This could be the tent of some wicked witch like they thought Mrs Snapperly was, who'll put some horrible spell on me as soon as I go in? It's all right, you can stop staring now. Your eyes are watering.'

'I thought both those things,' said Tiffany, blinking.

'But you came in anyway. Why?'

'To find out.'

'Good answer. Witches are naturally nosy,' said Miss Tick, standing up. 'Well, I must go. I hope we shall meet again. I will give you some free advice, though.'

'Will it cost me anything?'

'What? I just said it was free!' said Miss Tick.

'Yes, but my father said that free advice often turns out to be expensive,' said Tiffany.

Miss Tick sniffed. 'You could say this advice is

priceless,' she said. 'Are you listening?'

'Yes,' said Tiffany.

'Good. Now . . . if you trust in yourself . . .'

'Yes?'

' . . . and believe in your dreams . . .'

'Yes?'

' . . . and follow your star . . .' Miss Tick went on.

'Yes?'

' . . . you'll still get beaten by people who spent *their* time working hard and learning things and weren't so lazy. Goodbye.'

The tent seemed to grow darker. It was time to leave. Tiffany found herself back in the square where the other teachers were taking down their stalls.

She didn't look round. She knew enough not to look round. Either the tent would still be there, which would be a disappointment, or it would have mysteriously disappeared, and that would be worrying.

She headed home, and wondered if she should have mentioned the little red-haired men. She hadn't, for a whole lot of reasons. She wasn't sure, now, that she'd really seen them; she had a feeling that they wouldn't have wanted her to; and it was nice to have something Miss Tick didn't know. Yes. That was the best part. Miss Tick was a bit too clever, in Tiffany's opinion.

On the way home she climbed to the top of Arken Hill, which was just outside the village. It wasn't very big, not even as high as the downs above the farm and certainly nothing like as high as the mountains.

The hill was more . . . homely. There was a flat

place at the top where nothing ever grew, and Tiffany knew there was a story that a hero had once fought a dragon up there and its blood had burned the ground where it fell. There was another story that said there was a heap of treasure under the hill, *defended* by the dragon, and *another* story that said a king was buried there in armour of solid gold. There were lots of stories about the hill; it was surprising it hadn't sunk under the weight of them.

Tiffany stood on the bare soil and looked at the view.

She could see the village and the river and Home Farm, and the Baron's castle and, beyond the fields she knew, she could see grey woods and heathlands.

She closed her eyes and opened them again. And blinked, and opened them *again*.

There was no magic door, no hidden building revealed, no strange signs.

For a moment, though, the air buzzed, and smelled of snow.

When she got home she looked up 'incursion' in the dictionary. It meant 'invasion'.

An incursion of major proportions, Miss Tick had said.

And, now, little unseen eyes watched Tiffany from the top of the shelf . . .