

# The Quest for the Books

By Mr Sproulle and Mrs Sproulle

## 1) The Plans Are Laid

The three households on the south side of the lane were on very friendly terms. Their younger children and their teenagers socialised regularly.

The Wagley family lived between the Mastertons and the Berringtons. The former had most recently arrived while the Wagleys had been there “forever”, as their twin daughters often said. Meldy, their youngest, was friendly with Daniel Masterton and Nicky Berrington while the twins, Kick and Popster, were friendly with Misia Masterton and Eustace Berrington.

One day the teenagers played badminton, afterwards they lounged around and chatted. Their conversation slid seamlessly from one topic to another until it settled onto the unexplained.

“Talking about the unexplained, what about that witch we had here a few months ago, before Misia moved in,” said Eustace.

“Meldy told me about her,” said Misia, “but she turned out not to be a witch in the end, didn’t she?”

“We’re not talking about one of Meldy’s fantasies. This was a real witch!”

Misia looked directly at Eustace. Was this some sort of gullibility test or something? He didn’t flinch. She couldn’t detect a twinkle in his eye.

“We saw her as well,” said Popster. “She seemed to be phased by us. Someone said that identical twins can have magical abilities and maybe that frightened her off.”

“I’ve never noticed any such powers,” laughed Kick. “It was Nicky that said it, he must have read it in his monster magic book!”

Misia was still sceptical. “So what happened with this witch? How do you know she was a witch?”

“Meldy found a magic book in a skip outside Mrs Plockford’s house. It was in some sort of code,” said Eustace. “Amazingly she managed to break the code and try out some of the spells.”

“Did you see any evidence of this?” asked Misia.

“We did,” said Kick. “She used one to clean our rooms!”

“But that doesn’t sound very convincing.”

“You should have seen them. Our mother never did such a good job. Meldy could never have cleaned them like that by herself,” said Popster. “Whatever it was even sorted our clothes alphabetically in our closets!”

“I agree,” said Kick. “It was all done so quickly. And then there was Dad’s cooking.”

“What happened?”

Kick looked round to make sure no parent could hear. “He can’t cook. Period. Suddenly it was fantastic! Even he was surprised. It didn’t last though.”

“What happened then?”

“Apparently, the book left.”

“It left? How?”

“On its own,” said Popster. “Meldy should have cast an ownership spell or something to keep it but she didn’t. It wasn’t long before they got the book back though. They kept it in a locked steel trunk. They cast a few more spells then the witch tracked them down. We think she took both of the books.”

“There were two books?” asked a confused Misia.

“Somehow they got a second book from her. Don’t ask me how.”

“The most amazing part of it all was the way the books went off,” mused Eustace. “We all saw it. I still find it difficult to believe. Somehow they burnt their way out through the side of the steel trunk and flew away!”

“That must have been the work of the witch!” stated Kick.

Misia just sat there. Were they all in this together? She didn’t know what to think. They were all so serious about it. She wanted to ask, “Are you absolutely sure that this woman was a witch?” but she thought she’d better leave. She had things to do.

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Later, she thought about what she had heard that day. “I don’t think they were trying to trick me. They’re not the sort to do that and they were all so convinced. What else could explain how neatly the twin’s rooms were cleaned? My mother would not have

made such a good job of it either. But a witch? On our lane? That's just too bizarre!"

Next time she saw Eustace and the twins she couldn't resist returning to the subject of the witch.

"I must admit, I still find your story difficult to believe!"

"Do you think we made it all up?" asked Eustace.

"What about the steel trunk. Can I see it?" asked Misia

"Of course!" said Eustace. He took Misia and the twins to the ladder that led to Nicky's tree house and called up to his brother.

"Nicky, can we come up?"

Nicky looked out of the trap door. "Alright, I'm not doing anything!" he replied.

Once inside, Misia looked around. "What a wonderful tree house! It's so big, isn't it! Who made it?" she asked.

"My dad," said Nicky as he glowed with pride.

"The way he's fitted it around parts of the tree, he did a really good job!" she said.

Nicky was asked to show them the hole in the steel trunk. He slid it out and turned it round so its front, which had been hidden at the back, became visible.

Misia went closer and examined the large hole. She also opened the lid and looked inside. She thought for a moment then turned back to the others who were waiting expectantly.

"This wasn't cut by a blow torch. It's too neatly done. It looks like it was cut by a laser beam. But I'd really like to know how it was done."

"How do you know about lasers and things like that?" asked Kick.

"I have an uncle who taught me to weld. I made a steel sculpture for an art project at my last school so it came in useful. I wasn't very good at it but I know good metal cutting when I see it!"

She walked over to the window and looked out across the garden. She could see the boy's mother weeding one of her flower beds. The others waited for her to speak. Would she now accept that something strange and unexplained had happened here?

“Well, I’d say that whatever cut that hole did it from the inside of the trunk. No one could do that with a laser cutter - they’re too big and there just isn’t any space in there. I have to accept your explanation. I can’t see any other way this could have been done.”

“No one round here has the skill to do that anyway,” said Eustace. “The question is, what do we do now?”

Misia wanted to hear Nicky’s side of the story. He probably wouldn’t tell lies. If he did, she’d spot it.

“Nicky, how did the witch, assuming she was a witch, know you had these books?”

Nicky shifted uncomfortably. “Well, we used magic to steal it from her.”

“How did you know she had it?”

“Meldy saw her on the television. She’d got millions of birds in her garden.”

“Millions? Are you sure?”

“Well, hundreds anyway!”

“We saw her, too!” said Popster. “But we didn’t realise what was going on. There must have been magic involved.”

“We need to speak to Meldy about this,” said Misia. “Where is she?”

“Back at our house I think,” said Kick, “I’ll go and get her.”

Fifteen minutes later Meldy appeared with Kick and they climbed up the ladder.

“Meldy,” said Eustace, “tell us all about the woman who we all think turned out to be a witch.”

“Our magic book said there was another book as well, didn’t it, Nicky? When I saw the bird lady from the town on television I thought she must have used some magic from the other book to attract them!”

“When we saw her she was trying to smoke Meldy and Nicky out of here,” said Kick.

“She looked nasty to me,” said Popster.

“But if she likes birds, she can’t be,” replied Meldy. “She wanted lots of birds in her garden just like I do!”

“Wait a minute,” said Popster. “Dad said this charming woman came to the door asking about local schools. He was hoping she’d move next door when your house was for sale.”

“And you got us instead!” laughed Misia.

“What if she was the witch looking for her book? Maybe she knew there was another book as well, the one Meldy found, and wanted that too!”

“Was it her that used magic to cut a hole in the trunk or was it someone else?” asked Eustace. “She might now have Meldy’s book as well as her own.”

“Why don’t we look for her house,” suggested Misia. “If it was on the television, there could be a picture somewhere, maybe in the local paper?”

“Are you suggesting we pay her a visit? What will we do when we get there?” asked Eustace.

Misia turned to the twins. “You saw the house in that report, didn’t you. Do you remember anything unusual?”

The twins thought for a bit. “It was a nice house of red brick with bay windows on each side of the front door,” said Popster. “There was a high brick wall on the right hand side and a lot of grass around the house. The front door was a lovely shade of blue. Sorry, but that’s all I can remember.”

“That’s amazing! It’s like you have a photographic memory!” exclaimed Eustace.

“The front door had two vertical rectangular windows of stained glass,” said Kick. “I remember the leaded panes.”

“Let’s go and see her and get our book back!” cried Meldy.

“Hold on, Meldy. One thing at a time. First we need to find the place,” said Misia. “What if she doesn’t have it? What do we do then?”

“But she must have it! Where else could it be?” asked Nicky.

“Let’s have a look on Google Earth,” suggested Eustace. “We know the town and from the description it sounds as if the house is on the west side. Maybe the large brick wall is the side of a chapel or something?”

“Yes! That must be it!” cried Popster. “There were two very tall, narrow windows. I’d forgotten about them! Oh, and the sun was shining on the front of the house! Maybe it faces south?”

“That should make it a bit easier to find,” said Eustace.

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The teenagers did some research on Google Earth. Two days later Kick got in touch with the others to say she had found a house that fitted the description. The building next door wasn’t a chapel. It looked like a very large garage. The windows in the side were not visible from above.

“We’ll have to take a look,” they all agreed. By now they had decided to pay her house a visit, but had not decided what to do when they got there. If they actually met her, what would they say?

On Saturday morning the six met up in Nicky’s tree house.

“Good thing Dad did such a good job,” laughed Eustace. “He never thought it would be so full of teenagers!”

A voice down below called up to them. “Misia! Can I come up?” It was Daniel.

“What do you want?” asked his sister.

“Why are you all hiding from me?”

“Let him come up, he’ll find out soon enough anyway,” said Kick.

He came up through the trap door and looked round at the six people already there.

“Daniel,” said Misia, “you will have to keep this a secret. You must never tell anyone ever!”

“You must promise!” chorused the twins.

“Promise, or we’ll never ever speak to you again!” said Meldy and Nicky.

“It’s that important, Daniel,” said Eustace. “You must never tell a soul.”

Daniel promised. He’d just made some new friends and he didn’t want to lose them so soon.

Daniel sat there open-mouthed as the others discussed the plan to visit the witch's house. He could barely contain his excitement.

"We should take at least two of the younger members of our group," suggested Eustace. "We can't take the twins because she'll recognise them."

"Hold on a minute!" exclaimed Kick. "What if one of us goes, she won't recognise us on our own."

"That's true," said Eustace, "but with the kids we can ..."

"You're kids as well!" cried Meldy.

"But we're bigger kids than you are!" replied Popster.

"I think Misia should say who goes," said Nicky. "She's really clever and she'll know, won't you, Misia?"

"Thank you, Nicky. What does everybody else think?"

They all agreed that Misia should be the chairperson of the group. She decided they should meet again on Wednesday evening.

By that time Misia had worked out a plan. "There's a Roman exhibit at the museum so we'll take the three kids to that. We need two older members to go with them. Eustace, do you have sunglasses you can wear? Maybe a hat as well? She might not recognise you if you have some sort of disguise. That just leaves which one of the twins, or myself, should go as well."

"Our parents will be suspicious if we split up. They trust Eustace, why I don't know!" laughed Popster. "So you go, Misia."

"We'll go to the museum afterwards. First, we'll walk over to the house," said Misia. "We'll film it so you can see what's going on. If nothing else, we'll know where she is."

"But what are we going to do if we see the bird lady?" asked a perplexed Meldy.

"I don't know, Meldy," sighed Misia. "If you're right about her, she might like children. You three need to smile disarmingly at her and burble away so she doesn't see us as a threat."

"Well, at least we'll be making some sort of contact," said Popster, "something positive might come out of it!"

“Or something negative!” said Kick.

“Let’s hope not!” added Eustace.

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On Saturday morning the party of five set off. Kick and Popster stayed behind. They would be able to see the witch’s house on their phones.

Once out of the bus station, they set off towards the suspected location. When they arrived they sent a group picture and a picture of the house to the twins.

Popster soon replied with two words. “That’s it!”

The group hovered at the gate, uncertain how to proceed. Suddenly Meldy split away and, before they could stop her, knocked on the door. A woman appeared who Eustace, behind his dark glasses, instantly recognised. She was tall with long auburn hair and bright green eyes.

Meldy opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. The woman stood there looking from Meldy to the group of four at her gate.

## 2) Phedra meets the group

Meldy stood in front of the witch’s open door while the witch stood looking from her to the group at the gate. Meldy stared at her but was lost for words.

Nicky and Daniel surged forward leaving Misia and Eustace standing by the gate. The three younger group members then stood staring up at the witch. After a short pause they remembered what they were supposed to do and they all broke out into the broadest of grins. The witch couldn’t help smiling back.

“Meldy was right,” Eustace said to himself,” it certainly doesn’t look like she’s a nasty person.”

“Hello!” she said, “and who might you be?”

“I’m Meldy, it’s short for Esmerelda, and this is Nicky and this is Daniel!”

“Hello Meldy, and who are your minders at the gate?”

“Eustace, we call him Yoo, and Misia, her real name’s er - I’m sorry I’ve forgotten!”

“Misia must be short for Artemisia, as in Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus.”

“That’s right,” replied Misa, “not many people know that.”

“I studied classical history at university,” the witch replied. “She was quite a character by all accounts.”

“So’s Misa!” Eustace said to himself.

“Well, anyway, what can I do for you. Are you guides, scouts, brownies, cubs or all four?”

“None of the above!” replied Eustace, “We.....”

“Wait a minute! I know that voice,” She looked up and down the street. “Where are those twins? If you want your book back I don’t have it.”

“They’re at home and we didn’t think you did have it actually,” replied Eustace, “we just...”

“We can’t talk here. Go round the back to the conservatory and I’ll meet you there.”

The group of five trooped round the side of the house to the back. They whispered to each other as they went.

“What do you think?” asked Misa.

“She doesn’t look at all nasty,” replied Nicky

“Don’t eat or drink anything, witches can easily poison you!” declared Daniel.

“This one won’t! She has a lovely smile and my dad liked her!” hissed Meldy.

The witch ushered them in and they sat in a group across from her.

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Phedra Hubtrouble and I feel really guilty about what I tried to do at your tree house. I was learning how to generate smoke at the time and, well, shall we say it needed some work.”

“That’s alright,” said Eustace, “they did steal your book!”

“Where did you get it from?” asked Misa.

“From a garage sale. They didn’t know what it was. They thought it was written in a foreign language which I suppose it was in a way. Where did you find the other one?”

“I got it from a skip outside a house in our lane,” said Meldy.

“And you managed to decode it? You must be really clever!”

Meldy wished the twins were there to hear that!

“Whose house was it?” asked Phedra.

“It belonged to an old lady called Mrs Plockford but it was being sold,” replied Eustace.

“So, her relatives threw it away because they didn’t know what it was.”

“I liked it. It had a nice leather cover!” declared Meldy.

“Both books looked the same,” said Nicky.

“Could there have been any more?” asked Misia.

“I wonder. It’s possible. Also, where are they now, and who has them?”

“Judging by the way the books escaped from a locked steel trunk, I’d say there’s someone else out there with some serious magical powers,” said Misia.

“What happened?”

“Whoever it was managed to cut a neat hole in the side of the trunk in full view of six people,” said Misia. “I know a bit about metal cutting and I’ve never seen anything like the hole it left.”

Phedra was quiet for a bit. Her expression became more serious.

“Are you sure you know what you could be getting into if you look for these books?” she asked.

“Probably not, but look at these three,” said Eustace as he looked at the three younger member of the group. “Surely no one would want to hurt them?”

Phedra seemed to be staring through one of the windows. “There are people, forces and things out there that you don’t know about,” she sighed. “I’ve dabbled in witchcraft for most of my life since I realised, shall we say, that I had unusual powers. I know what I’m talking about. I’ve tried to do good but there are others that take pleasure in doing bad.”

“Were you by any chance related to the old lady that lived near us?” asked Eustace.

“I don’t know. You see, my mother was adopted. I never found out who my real family was and I’m not sure I want to start looking now.”

“Why didn’t you want to talk on your doorstep?” asked Misia.

“My neighbours think I’m strange.”

“Well you are, aren’t you!” cried Daniel.

“Daniel!” cried Misia.

Phedra laughed. “Yes, I suppose I am. Someone called a journalist when I tried out one of my spells. I managed to explain that one away though.”

“That was the birds, wasn’t it?” ventured Meldy enthusiastically.

“Yes, you must have seen it on the news. It’s the only spell I still have from my book. I emailed it to myself so when the book went, its spirit didn’t destroy that particular record.”

“When our book left I lost all my notes on spells as well,” said Meldy.

“I think we need to find out more about this Mrs Plockford,” said Misia. “I never knew her but could there be some link between you, her, and whoever has the books now?”

“I don’t see how,” mused Phedra.

“We need to do some research,” said Eustace, “then we’ll get back in touch.”

“Alright, but be careful,” said Phedra as she looked across at Meldy and her young friends.

The group got up to leave.

Phedra gave Misia a card with a phone number then she had an unusual request. “Would you mind going out through the house? If the neighbours are watching they might think I’m not so strange. After all, you’re leaving in one piece!”

They laughed. When they got to the gate they turned and waved.

Meldy called out “Thank you, Ms Hubtrouble!” This was echoed by Nicky and Daniel.

A neighbour over the road saw them leave. He told his wife she must be mistaken about the nice woman with the strange habits. "Look, she's giving lessons to children!"

Another man was also watching. When they left he followed them at a discreet distance. He was still behind them when they reached the museum. He also got a ticket for the Roman exhibition.

"We need to have a look around," said Misia. "Our parents will probably ask us about it."

"We learnt about the Romans at school," said Meldy, "It was really interesting."

They spent some time in the exhibit. Meldy saw a display representing a Roman kitchen and there, peeping out of an earthenware jar on the floor, was a stuffed dormouse.

"They used to eat them!" said Meldy.

Daniel and Nicky were definitely not enthusiastic about that part of the Roman diet.

When they got home they met up with the twins at the earliest opportunity. It was very warm outside so they sat in Eustace's garden. The treehouse was left empty.

"First of all, can we trust her?" asked Misia.

"What option do we have?" asked Eustace.

"She probably wants us to lead her to the books," said Kick.

"But she may hold the key to getting them back!" pointed out Popster.

They discussed Phedra for a while then Popster had a question

"Who was the man in the background?"

"What man?" asked Misia.

"You took a group selfie on the pavement and there was a man in background."

"We didn't notice anyone, maybe he was just passing."

"He was still there when you got to the museum. We could see part of him when you took a picture of the Roman kitchen."

“Do you think we were being followed?” asked Eustace.

“It certainly looks like it!” said Kick. “Why on earth would he want to follow you?”

“Could it be anything to do with the books?” asked Misia. “What did he look like?”

“Well, he was a bit far away and we only saw him for a short time,” said Kick.

“But his hair was odd,” added Popster. “It was grey and it looked like it was tucked up into his hat. Oh, and I think there was a beard that was tied up in some strange way.”

“It must have been a coincidence, surely. How could this stranger know about us?”

“Can’t you show us the picture?” asked Nicky.

Kick produced her phone and called up the selfie in question. She did what looked like a double take then looked up. Her face was white.

“He’s gone! He was there, we both saw him!” she cried.

Popster checked. “You’re right! He’s gone!”

“But he can’t just disappear! If both Kick and Popster saw him, he was there, I know it!” exclaimed Meldy.

“But where did he go then?” asked Nicky.

“How did he do whatever he did?” asked Daniel.

“Let’s examine the evidence,” said Misia. “Popster has an excellent visual memory. Look at the way she described a house that she saw only briefly on a news report months ago. If she says there was a man there and he looked as she described, then that’s good enough for me!”

“And us!” echoed Meldy, Nicky and Daniel.

“We need to warn Phedra,” said Eustace. “Maybe she’s seen him as well.”

“She gave me her number,” said Misia. “Yes, here it is.”

“You can call her in the trees over there. No one will hear you,” said Eustace.

Phedra said she had seen someone answering that description but she thought it must be a neighbour. “Someone even stranger than me!” she laughed.

“A neighbour wouldn’t follow us to the museum,” Misia said.

“Good point. Be careful. As I said before, there are things out there that you don’t want to get involved with.”

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Faustavus Blizzscale often walked past Phedra Hubtrouble’s house. He’d also seen the report about the birds on the local news and suspected there was some sort of magic involved. He’d planned to take her book from her but Meldy and Nicky had beaten him to it.

He had wondered what to do next when he realised that Phedra was going to do the legwork for him. All he had to do was follow her. Once she had located the culprits he soon found out there was another book.

“I’ll have that one as well!” Faustavus said to himself as he planned his campaign. Unfortunately he had met with a slight accident underneath Nicky’s tree house so now he walked with a bit of a limp. He was having trouble keeping up with the gang as they walked from Phedra’s house to the museum.

Since he had been listening all along, he knew a lot about their plans. He knew they would now head home and returned to his house to listen some more.

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The group were still sitting outside.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Eustace.

“So that was the noise we heard!” laughed Kick.

Eustace smiled. “The mystery man followed us. Did he already know of our plans?”

“And if so, how did he find out about them?” asked Misia.

“Oh, I see what you’re driving at!” exclaimed Popster.

“I don’t,” said Meldy.

“That man could have been spying on us, Meldy.”

“Oh. How?”

“There’s lots of ways,” said Nicky.

“But which method, or methods, do you think he used?” asked Kick.

Misia thought for a moment. “You said that three people were sitting on the trunk when the hole started to appear. What if he could see them and cast a special spell that avoided causing injury? It gave them enough warning so they could jump off.”

“Let’s go and look.” said Daniel. He could have put a spy-cam up in one of the corners!”

“Wait,” said Eustace. “Don’t you see? If he did, we could use this to our advantage.”

“Yes! That’s it!” said Misia. “We can persuade him that we’ve given up looking for the books.”

“First, we need to check if there is a camera up there,” said Kick.

“Without letting him know we’ve found it,” said Popster.

They decided that Kick would climb the ladder and look around on the floor as if she had lost something. She would then pretend she had something in her eye and use a small mirror to check. Careful positioning of the mirror would enable her to see into the two corners where they thought any camera must be located.

While she was in the tree house, they could hear her calling out, “I’m convinced I dropped it up here,” and “Oh well, I’ll have to get another one.” It wasn’t long before she returned.

“That sounded very convincing. You’re a natural!” said Misia. “You should be on the stage. Did you see anything?”

“Yes, it’s there alright. It’s really small so I almost missed it.”

“So, how do we proceed from here?” asked Eustace. “We’ll need to work something out.”

### **3) Who’s That Man?**

The group had been spied on in Nicky’s tree house. They had left the spy camera in place and hoped to trick the mystery man into thinking they had given up their search for the books. Next time they all met up, they went as far away from the tree house as possible. This also meant that the parents wouldn’t know what they were up to.

“Nicky,” said Eustace, “you go up to the tree house first. Then Meldy will follow. It must look as natural as possible. Don’t discuss the books or the visit to Phedra.”

“Misia,” said Kick, “you take Daniel up and play a game. Play anything. Snakes and Ladders or something like that.”

“Then Eustace and I will follow,” said Popster. “We’ll say we’re worried about any more involvement with the books. Mention Phedra’s warning ...”

“This would be a good spot for a campsite, Meldy!” interrupted Kick as she noticed someone was coming. It was Mrs Berrington who had come to ask Eustace something. After she had left they carried on.

“Yes. Phedra’s warning,” said Misia. “Emphasise it. We’re ‘scared’ and stuff like that. ‘Lots of homework to do. Exams coming up.’ Anything to throw him off the scent.”

“What do we do while you’re saying all that?” asked Meldy.

“You can say ‘it’s not fair! We found our book and we should at least have that!’” said Popster.

Later they carried out the plan. Meldy, Nicky and Daniel protested as Popster had suggested. The teenagers played the part of parents and told them how dangerous it could be.

“You saw how he burnt a hole in Nicky’s trunk. That could have been dangerous. Next time you might get hurt!” said Popster.

“You don’t know who it was,” said Meldy. “That man might have been a spy!”

“Why would he be spying on us if it wasn’t anything to do with the book?” asked Kick.

“I don’t know,” replied Meldy, “but you don’t know either!”

Eustace, concerned that the conversation was drifting away from their plan, spoke up. “Popster’s right, Meldy. None of us have magical powers. We can’t counter any spells that might be used against us. We would be helpless. I don’t want to see any of you get hurt - or worse. We should move on and forget those books ever existed.”

The older members of the group then left and only the three younger members remained. They talked about anything but magic and the books.

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Eustace and the twins walked down the road to the house where Meldy found the book. They visited the houses on each side and over the road. At first they had no luck. Nobody seemed to know the old lady who had lived there and who must have owned one of the books or maybe both. They were about to give up when Kick suggested they try one more house.

They knocked and an elderly woman answered. She brightened when she saw Eustace and the twins standing there.

“Good morning,” said Kick. “We’re sorry to bother you but we’re researching a neighbour who we understand had a very interesting life. She used to live over there.” Here she pointed diagonally through some bushes.

“Do you mean Octavia Blizzscale? She had to go into a home, you know. But poor thing, she died a month ago.”

“Oh. We thought she was called Mrs Plockford,” said Eustace. “Didn’t she have an important father?” Here he was probing as he had no idea of her ancestry.

“Oh yes, she did. That was Wenceslas Blizzscale who lived in the town. He did so much good there, you know.”

Another elderly woman appeared and looked out to see what was going on.

“Elsie! Why are you keeping these nice young people out on the doorstep! I’m sure they’d like a glass of your home-made lemonade.”

“Well Agatha, I was just this minute going to ask them!”

The three visitors sat on the sofa sampling the lemonade while the sisters fussed around them.

“It really is very good,” said Popster.

“It’s so nice to see young people taking an interest in history.”

“It’s so important,” said Kick. “These stories will soon be forgotten if we don’t write them down.”

“We went to the funeral, you know,” said Elsie. “It was sad. So few people there. None of the neighbours went except us.”

“Were there any relatives?” asked Kick.

“No, I don’t think ...”

“Agatha! Of course there was! That man with the long hair and the beard. He was a nephew, I think.”

The three on the sofa looked at each other. This sounded promising.

“Do you know his name, or where he lives?” asked Eustace. “We could possibly interview him.”

Agatha and Elsie thought for a bit. The visitors waited expectantly.

“Elsie! His name will be on the order of service, won’t it? He read a poem. Why they had him do it, I don’t know.”

“Who else was there?” asked Elsie.

“You could have done it better than him!” said Agatha. She turned to the visitors who started to worry that they wouldn’t get to see the name on the order of service. “My sister was on the stage, you know. Really good, too! She even played in front of Royalty!”

Kick and Popster were really interested to hear more but Eustace asked again about the nephew. Elsie disappeared and was gone for awhile.

Agatha told them some more about Elsie’s career. Eventually Elsie returned clutching the order of service. “Here it is! ‘When morning comes’ read by Faustavus Blizzscale.”

“You don’t know where he lives, do you?” asked Eustace.

“No, but he came in a taxi.”

“Did you notice the company by any chance?”

“Oh yes! It’s the same company that we always use. Leopard Taxis. Their cars are the ones with the spots. They’re so nice you know, they look after us so well.”

When the visitors left the sisters suggested they should come again. “Elsie will make some orangeade next week. It’s the best I’ve ever tasted!”

They walked back to their gates and then stood and talked.

“That was really nice,” said Popster. “I’d really like to hear some more about her stage career.”

“Yes, when this is over one way or the other,” said Eustace.

“Well, we know the taxi company. We could get in touch with them and find out where he lives,” said Kick.

“They might not want to divulge such information,” said Eustace.

“We’ll put on our most charming manner and I’m sure they will!” said Popster.

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A partner in the taxi company was washing one of the cars when the twins approached.

“Excuse me,” said Kick. “We were at a funeral two weeks ago and one of the mourners left in one of your taxis. He dropped something as he got in and we were wondering whether you could check your records and tell us where he lives?”

“Can’t do that, love. Client confidentiality.”

“But we’re sure he’d like it back.”

“Tell you what, leave it with me and I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“But it’s a valuable watch and it might go missing.”

“Oh, I get it. You think I’ll nick it. Is that it?”

“No, of course not. Well, actually, you won’t tell anyone, will you? It’s to be a surprise. We’re planning a birthday delivery. We’re going to bake a cake for him. He lost his aunt, you know, and he doesn’t have any relatives and he looked so sad and ....”

“Oh well, I suppose it won’t hurt just this once.”

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Back in Eustace’s garden the gang discussed what they had found out.

“We know who he is and where he lives,” said Misia. “His grandfather was probably Wenceslas Blizzscale. What we don’t know is if there is any connection to Phedra. Is magical ability inherited? Let’s persuade Phedra to research her parentage.”

Phedra was not that keen but she thought that she might have some living relatives persuaded her. She went online and applied for a copy of her mother's birth certificate. Her grandfather turned out to be Ignatius Blizzscale. So, she was most probably related to Faustavus Blizzscale, but how?

She applied for her grandfather's marriage certificate and it appeared he had been married twice. She found out that her grandmother had died soon after her mother was born, then her grandfather, Ignatius, had married for a second time. Could this second wife have been Faustavus's mother?

Also, and this really upset her, her mother had been put up for adoption very soon after the date of the second marriage. What kind of person would put a child up for adoption just to make room for their own child?

Phedra was depressed for some time after finding this information. A phone call from Popster cheered her up a bit.

"That's awful! In fact, it's vindictive and nasty!" said Popster. "Who would do such a thing?"

"We can't know for sure but my instinct is that Faustavus's mother pushed my poor mother out of the house to make room for Faustavus. It wasn't his fault. I blame my grandfather, his father, for letting her get away with it."

"He could have been too weak and she was downright evil, if you ask me!"

Phedra was silent as Popster continued, "It's a Cinderella story. There's a wicked stepmother but no sign yet of the ugly sisters."

"My father was no prince charming but he was a decent hard-working man," said Phedra.

Talking about it helped Phedra to see things more clearly. She had a cousin. His mother must have been a nasty person but he might not be too bad. Now she was keener to meet him. If things didn't go so well, she could try using her charm.

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The group met up under the trees at the back of Meldy's garden. Her parents were busy working inside so they could talk freely.

"So we now know the connection between Phedra and this man, Faustavus," said Misia.

"His mother must have been pretty nasty," said Kick.

“Like Agrippina the Younger!” added Popster.

“Who?” chorused Eustace and Misia.

The twins were surprised that they knew something that Misia didn’t.

“She was Nero’s mother,” said Kick. “She cleared a path for him to become emperor of Rome by poisoning people such as the previous emperor Claudius.”

“He was her husband. Then she poisoned his son as well,” said Popster. “He should have succeeded his father Claudius. Once her son Nero became emperor she tried to run things. Eventually he got fed up and did her in.”

“Did her in what? You mean he sent her away?” asked Meldy.

“That means he killed her,” said Nicky.

“Did Faustavus kill his mother then?”

“Possibly, Meldy,” laughed Misia. “Maybe she’s walled up somewhere in his house or buried in his garden, if he has one.”

“He has a garden alright,” added Eustace. “I checked on Google Earth.”

“We need to have a look at his house I suppose,” said Kick. “Eustace, why don’t we cycle over?”

“Yes Eustace, you go with the twins,” agreed Misia. “I need to practise my violin.”

“What about us?” asked Nicky.

“Go back to the tree house and act normally,” said Eustace, “and don’t mention Phedra or the magic books. Oh, and don’t say where we’re going!”

#### 4) Phedra meets her Cousin

The group had planned out what to do next. On the weekend Eustace, Kick and Popster set off towards Faustavus’s house. They cycled through his village until they came to the crossroads. There, on one of the corners, was the house just as described by the taxi company. It was a shabby looking largish brick house surrounded by a wide expanse of cracked and broken paving stones. There was a line of trees and bushes on the boundary with the roads. These formed two sides of the garden.

They dismounted, stowed their bikes in the hedge then peered at the house through the bushes. It looked as if no one was there. All the curtains they could see were closed.

“It’s very gloomy, isn’t it,” said Popster.

“Maybe he’s gone out to spy on Phedra again,” said Kick.

“Look! There’s someone coming,” whispered Eustace.

While they were watching, hiding in the bushes, a man darted out of a patio door at the side of the house. First he shouted, then he screamed with what sounded like a woman’s voice. A startled sparrow flew away. The man turned and sauntered back to the house. He had long grey hair and a wispy beard which fitted Popster’s earlier description.

“That was weird,” whispered Kick.

“That’s the same man we saw in the selfie!” whispered Popster.

“Seems he doesn’t like birds,” whispered Eustace. “Meldy won’t like him!”

They retrieved their bikes from the hedge and cycled back home. Misia was keen to hear all about it.

“He’s definitely the same man. This time we could see his hair and his beard. We’ll tell Phedra what we saw, I wonder what she’ll make of it.”

“So Mr Blizzscale doesn’t like birds. But why on earth would he scream like that?”

When Meldy heard about him she quickly made up her mind. “I don’t like him. It was only a poor little sparrow. Is that why his garden is all concrete?”

“Good point, Meldy,” said Eustace. “That’s probably why he doesn’t have plants near his house. It makes it more difficult for us though. We can’t creep up unobserved.”

The group met the next day. “It’s so nice that you all get on so well!” said Mrs Wagley as Meldy went out to meet the others. They often played ball games to distract the parents who might become suspicious if they saw the whole group sitting and whispering.

Misia started the proceedings. They were pretending to play rounders. “Set up the bases and we need to organise ourselves into teams. Phedra has been in touch, we’ll all go next weekend. She’ll take myself and our three younger members in her car while the others can cycle.”

“Who’ll bat first?” asked Popster as her father appeared looking for his garden fork.

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Phedra thought about what she had been told. She had been particularly interested in the report of Faustavus’s strange sounding voice. She had a theory.

“I think I know why he’s acting like that. I will need to make some careful preparations,” she said to herself.

She went out into her herb garden and started to collect the ingredients that she would require.

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On Saturday morning all the parents thought their children were with their neighbours. Kick and Popster had hidden their bikes in the bushes near their gate so it was easy to slide out unobserved. Phedra Hubtrouble was waiting down the road in her car.

The group set off. Phedra and her passengers arrived first so they waited for Eustace to arrive with the twins. The plan was that Eustace would knock on the front door. This would distract the occupant while Phedra would creep around the side to open the patio door letting Meldy, Nicky and Daniel enter. They were small enough to hide from him if necessary but would also scout around for the books.

“What if it’s locked?” asked Eustace.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Phedra with a smile. “There are ways.”

Eustace strode up to the front door and knocked. He was nervous but was determined not to show it. He heard someone coming and sprinted back to the bushes. The twins waited at the corner of the house. When the door opened they gave a signal and Phedra quickly unlocked the side patio door. The three youngest members of the gang slid inside.

Faustavus stood on the doorstep, looked around and suddenly started to shout. Well, it started as a shout but ended as a high-pitched scream.

“Why don’t you leave me alone! I hate kids! Go away! I’ll set some demons on you!” He then turned and slammed the door behind him.

Meanwhile, Meldy and the other two were looking around the room. No sign of the books which were large and not easy to hide. They heard Faustavus’s heavy tread in

the corridor before his hand touched the door handle. They dived under a large central table as he entered the room.

“It’s so dark under here, he won’t see us,” whispered Daniel.

Then Nicky sneezed. It was very dusty.

“Who’s there?”

The three friends waited with bated breath. Would he find them? They could see his legs as he walked round the table. The legs stopped moving and he crouched down to look underneath. The room was quite dark and the space under the table was even darker so he wasn’t able to see them.

If they had stayed still, they could have remained undetected but Nicky sneezed again. Now Faustavus reached under the table so they had to make a dash for it. Meldy and Nicky got through the patio door but Daniel slipped and fell. By the time he had recovered Faustavus was blocking his exit.

Outside, Nicky and Meldy shouted to the others. “He’s got Daniel!”

Misia immediately leapt into action. “Come on, we’re going in!”

Phedra sprinted ahead to open the patio door.

Inside, Daniel had reached for his catapult. Thank goodness he had taken it when he left home. He felt in his pocket for a conker and shot it at Faustavus who screamed and ran at him. Daniel dodged round the table and fired some more conkers into the gloom. When these ran out he used some walnuts which were in a dish on the sideboard.

Daniel kept dodging as Faustavus lurched after him. Suddenly there was a crash as Faustavus went down. Daniel came closer, peered at him, then moved quickly towards the patio door. At this point Phedra appeared followed by the others.

“What happened?” she asked.

“He slipped and fell,” said Daniel. “Let’s look for the books!”

The house was searched while Phedra kept an eye on Faustavus. He lay there quietly for a while then started to moan.

Kick soon reappeared. “We’ve found them but there’s eight books! Which two are we to take?”

“Meldy and Nicky,” said Phedra, “come with me and have a look. We should be able to recognise our books. The rest of you need to keep an eye on him. When he gets back on his feet, leave by the patio door and he’s bound to follow.”

They managed to locate their books which had been neatly arranged on a shelf with the others.

“Look,” said Meldy, “I recognise that mark. That’s my book!”

“I think this is the other one,” said Nicky. “Quick, lets grab them and get out of here!”

“Look at the marks,” said Phedra. “At one point they must have been in the same skip. Octavia Blizzscale must have owned both of them.”

Kick called out to them, “Hurry up, he’s coming round!”

They dashed out of the patio door, just as Faustavus was struggling to his feet. He found his voice and screamed as he staggered after them.

Phedra stood between the house and the trees. He was now approaching her and definitely looked hostile. He screamed and wailed but she couldn’t understand what he was trying to say. Standing her ground, she raised her arms and spread them horizontally with palms facing upwards. She called out to someone or something then recited an incantation:

“Birds from far and birds from near, take to wing and fly you here.  
Swoop and circle, wheel and land, await command and watch my hand!”

There was a pause. Faustavus got closer to her while the children watched anxiously from the safety of the trees. Phedra still stood as if bolted to the ground. The sky darkened. The sound of hundreds of wings filled the air then the first birds started to arrive. Large, medium and small, from swans to wrens they came. Meldy and the others looked up in awe.

Faustavus fell to his knees as the birds swooped, swerved and settled around him.

“Get them off me! I hate birds!” he screamed. More birds appeared, then still more. The air was thick with birds.

“Faustavus!” cried Phedra. “I’m your cousin. We’re family. Take control! Banish your mother! Cast her out!”

“Your mother was bad!” screamed the voice from Faustavus, “We banished her!”

Then the group realised what was happening. The dead mother's evil spirit had control of her son. What on earth would happen next?

By now Faustavus was lying on the ground to escape the birds.

"No," replied Phedra, "my mother was just a baby when you sent her away. You were a wicked stepmother! Faustavus's father was good and so was Faustavus until you took over their lives!"

She then addressed Faustavus. "Concentrate!" she cried, "focus!" She knelt and took his hand. She put a tiny bag of herbs there. Then she held his hand between hers while she recited an incantation:

"Evil mother, leave in haste! No more must his life you waste!  
Hurry back to your base land and fester with your stinking band.  
Leave him be and leave this place, let him join the human race!"

There was one final blood-curdling scream that chilled the group in the trees to the bone. Then all went quiet. Phedra gave a signal with her hand and the birds started to depart. They left as they had arrived, swooping and swirling, then flying away in all directions.

Faustavus seemed to be asleep on his back so they all waited to see what would happen next. His right arm lay outstretched with the palm of his hand uppermost. As he woke up they all saw one last bird, a small one, perched on it pecking at some seeds that had been placed there by Phedra.

"It's a robin!" Faustavus said as he lay as still as possible. Everyone watched as the bird finished its feast. It looked at him and Phedra before flying off.

"He likes birds after all!" said Meldy as Faustavus got up and dusted himself off.

"Faustavus, I'm your cousin Phedra."

He stopped and looked at her. He smiled.

"I have a cousin? I thought all my family had passed away."

"I'm the only one left. These are my friends."

"You're lucky to have so many!"

It was decided that Phedra would take the group home, then she would come back to get to know her cousin better. She walked with them all to the gate. Before Eustace

and the twins cycled off she thanked the whole group for their help, then she gave Misia and the three youngest members of the gang a lift home.

Two days later she got in touch again. She was getting on well with Faustavus and they had discussed the magic books. They both felt that the books belonged together and should be kept in the family. It appeared that his mother's spirit had driven him to take the last two. These books contained good spells which she hadn't wanted to be used. The other books contained bad spells and counter spells. His mother had pushed him, against his will, into using some of these evil spells.

In the wrong hands, some of the books could be used to create havoc. They had to be kept secure.

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Nicky, Meldy and Daniel were in the tree house. They had been talking about their book.

"It's not fair!" said Meldy, "We should have it back."

"Yes. We found it so it's ours!" agreed Nicky.

"Finders keepers!" added Daniel.

"It was in a rubbish skip so it's rubbish," stated Meldy.

"Rubbish gets dumped or burnt so we saved it," concluded Nicky.

Eustace was at that moment entering the tree house.

"We all think the book should stay with Phedra and Faustavus," he declared, "remember what Phedra said. There's things out there that we don't want to get involved with."

Misia followed him and had something to add. "What if you made a mistake in casting a spell, Meldy? You might burn your room instead of cleaning it! What would you tell your parents then? The squirrels did it?"

"I hadn't thought of that," mused Meldy. "It could happen, couldn't it."

"What could happen?" asked Popster as she came up through the trap door.

"A spell could go wrong and burn her room," said Misia as she gave Popster a knowing look.

“Oh, yes, definitely! We were saying that as well, weren’t we Kick?”

Kick appeared behind Popster and caught the expression on her sister’s face. “Of course! Definitely.”

“Well, If you think so,” sighed Meldy, “I suppose.....”

“Phedra can always help us if we really need it,” added Nicky.

The seven gang members made themselves comfortable. The events of the day were discussed and they relived the most exciting parts. They had forgotten about the spy camera in the corner.

They were interrupted by a man’s voice. “Turn your trunk around, stand clear and I’ll repair it for you.”

They did as commanded then retreated to the other side of the tree house.

The steel section that had been removed reappeared. It was lifted as if by some unseen hand and placed back in its original position in the hole.

“Shield your eyes! Turn away!” said the voice.

“Do as he says,” cried Misia, “or your eyes could be damaged!”

They covered their eyes, then heard a buzzing and a crackling sound.

“Don’t look!” exclaimed Misia.

When they uncovered their eyes the trunk was whole again. A smell of burning hung in the air but that soon cleared. A bird sang outside and the group was silent for a minute or so.

“Misia,” asked Kick, “how do you think he did it?”

Misia went over to the trunk and touched it. By now it had cooled down and the painted surface had been restored to its original colour.

“It’s a perfect finish,” she said. ”You would never know what had happened to it!”

“Yes, but how did he do it?” asked Eustace.

“By magic of course!” said Meldy “Isn’t it obvious?”

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