

Diana Wynne Jones

Witch's Business



Reader's
Guide
•INSIDE•

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Witch's Business



GREENWILLOW BOOKS
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DEDICATION



FOR JESSICA FRANCES

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ONE

Frank and Jess thought Own Back Ltd. was an excellent idea when they first invented it. Three days later, they were not so sure. The trouble was that they were desperate for money. They had broken a new chair and all pocket money was stopped until the summer. They had to face four penniless months and, somehow, as soon as they knew this, they found all sorts of things they could not possibly do without.

"I can't go *anywhere*," said Jess. "The other girls expect you to pay your share. It isn't fair. Just because it was such a badly made chair. The other chairs turn upside down without breaking. I don't see why this one had to go and fall to pieces."

"Nor do I," said Frank, who was worse off than Jess. "I owe Buster Knell ten pence."

"Why?" said Jess.

"A bet," Frank answered. Jess was sorry for him, because Buster Knell was not the boy you owe anything if you could help it. He had a gang. Frank, in fact, was desperate enough to go down to the newsagent and ask Mr. Prodger if he wanted another boy for the paper route. But Mr. Prodger said Vernon Wilkins was all he needed and, besides, Vernon needed the money.

So Frank came dismally home and, after some thought, he and Jess put up a notice on the front gate saying ERRANDS RUN. It had been up half an hour when their father came home and took it down. "As you two haven't done enough already," he said, "without decorating the gate with this. When I said no money, I meant no money. Don't think I'm going to let you get away with immoral earnings, because I'm not."

It was the talk of immoral earnings that gave them the idea.

"I say," said Jess. "Do people pay you to do bad things for them?"

"If they want them done enough, I suppose," Frank answered. "If it's something they don't dare do themselves, like pull Buster Knell's nose for him."

"Would they pay us?" said Jess. "If we were to offer to do things they didn't dare do?"

"Like what?" said Frank. "I don't dare pull Buster Knell's nose, either."

"No. More cunning than that," said Jess. "Suppose someone came and said to us: 'I want something dreadful to happen to Buster Knell because of what he did to me yesterday,' then we could say, 'Yes. Pay us five pence, and we'll arrange for him to fall down a manhole.' Would that work?"

"If it did," said Frank, "it would be worth more than five pence."

"Let's try," said Jess.

So they spent the rest of the evening making a notice. When it was finished, it read:

OWN BACK LTD.
REVENGE ARRANGED
PRICE ACCORDING TO TASK

The last two lines were put in by Frank, because he said that if they were going to arrange things like booby traps for Buster Knell, then they might as well agree to *any* dangerous task. Jess put in the Ltd. to make it look official.

“Though it shouldn’t be, really,” she said, “because we’re not a proper company.”

“Yes,” said Frank, “but if anyone asks us something too difficult, we can always say it means Limited Own Back, and we don’t touch things too big for us.”

The next morning, they pinned the notice to the back of the potting shed, where it could be seen by anyone who went along the path beside the allotments, and sat in the shed with the back window open to wait for orders.

All that happened, that entire day, was that two ladies exercising their dogs saw it and shrieked with laughter.

“Oh, look, Edith! How sweet!”

“Limited, too! The idea!”

Frank and Jess could hear them laughing about it all down the path.

“Take no notice,” said Jess. “Just think of when the shekels start to pour in.”

That was all very well, but Frank began to wonder if they were going to spend the entire East holiday sitting in the potting shed being laughed at. It was a dismal place at the best of times, and the view over the allotments always depressed him. They were dank and low. Beyond them, there was the marshy, tangled waste strip beside the river where everyone threw rubbish, and under the trees, the house where old Bidy Iremonger lived. The only real house in sight was as damp looking and dreary as the rest—a big square place, the color of old cheese. The trees had been slow to put out leaves this year, so it was all as blank and bleak as winter.

The next day was, if anything, worse still. To start with, it was raining on and off, with a cold wind steadily blowing showers up and away again. Drafts whined through the potting shed and fluttered at the cobwebs. Jess and Frank sat in their coats and began to think their idea was a failure.

“And we can’t even buy sweets to console ourselves with,” Jess was saying when somebody rapped on the window.

They looked up to see old Mr. Carter, who had the nearest allotment, leaning on the sill of the potting shed window.

“This your notice?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Frank, feeling foolish and rather defiant about it. “Why?”

Mr. Carter bent down and read the notice, out loud, so that Frank felt even more foolish by the time he finished, and Jess went very pink. “My, my!” said Mr. Carter. “Just wait till the prime minister hears of this. He’ll have you in his cabinet. Got any customers yet?”

“Not yet,” Frank admitted.

“We’ve not been in business long,” Jess said.

“Well,” said Mr. Carter, “I can’t help with the revenge part, but I know where you’ll find some treasure.”

“Do you? Where?” they said. Jess reached for her notebook to take down the details.

“Yes,” said Mr. Carter. “Rainbow, this morning. Ended right beside Bidy Iremonger’s place. Saw it with my own eyes. You dig there, and there’ll be a crock of gold for you.” And before either of them could answer, he went away laughing.

“Beast!” said Jess.

Frank was too angry even to say what he thought. Instead he suggested taking the notice down. Jess said that would be giving in too easily.

“Let’s keep it the rest of today and tomorrow,” she said. “Maybe the news will get round.”

“Then we’ll have the whole town knocking on the window to laugh at us,” said Frank, and he went indoors to cadge some biscuits to cheer them up with.

They were eating the biscuits when they heard quite a crowd of people coming along the path. There was a noise of wheels turning and sticks being trailed along the allotment railings and the fences of the gardens. There were also loud, crude voices, swearing. Frank wished most heartily that Jess had agreed to take the notice down. He did not even need to hear the voices to know that it was Buster Knell and his gang—and, to judge from the language, Buster Knell and his gang in a very bad mood indeed. They all stopped outside the potting shed, and Jess said afterward that she saw the air turn blue.

“Cor! Take a slimeballing look at this!” said someone. “Look Buster.”

“Degutted Own Back!” said someone else.

Frank and Jess sat and looked at each other, while yet another boy read the notice out in a jeering, squeaky voice. “Whose slimy idea is this?” he said.

“Eyeballs-in-salsa Pirie kids,” they heard Buster say. They knew it was Buster, because his voice was louder and his language nastier than any of the others. “Always got some puke-crusted idea other.”

“Fwank and Jessie,” squeaked someone. “Come on, let’s tear it down.”

The whole gang agreed, at the tops of their voices and the full width of their language. Frank and Jess had resigned themselves to losing their notice when Buster shouted:

“No! I got a much better degutted brains-in-gravy idea than that. Wait a slimeballing minute, can you!” Then, before Frank and Jess had time to escape from the shed, he was pounding on the window yelling, “Anyone in? You too degutted scared to answer? Open disemboweled up, can’t you!”

There was nothing else for it. Frank got up and opened the window. Buster put his arms on the sill and pushed his face inside. It was not a nice face at the best of times—all thick and narrow-eyed. At that moment, it was mud down one side, and thicker than usual down the other. There was even blood, just a little, on Buster’s stumpy chin.

“What do you want?” asked Frank.

“My zombie-burger Own Back,” said Buster. “Like it says. And you slimy-puke owe me ten pence anyway.”

“So?” said Frank, as bravely as he could. Beyond Buster was all the gang, glowering and muddied, carrying sticks and air guns, and towing their usual number of homemade go-carts. They never moved without all this equipment if they could help it, and they knew how to use it, too.

Buster stuck his face sneeringly into Frank’s. Jess began gently collecting flowerpots for ammunition. It looked as if they were going to need all they could get.

“I’ll let you off that disemboweled ten pence,” said Buster, “if you can get me my oozing Own Back on that slimy stomach-maggot scum. Only I bet you’re too oozing scared.”

“No, I’m not,” said Frank. “Who do you mean?”

“Disemboweled scum,” said Buster. “Vernon Wilkins. Just look what he done to me. Here, take a look.” He pushed his hand toward Frank’s face and held it open, palm upward. On it was something small, dirty, and red at one end. “See that?” said Buster. “That’s a tooth, that is. That curried-tons scum knocked it out for me. What do you say to that?”

The only thing Frank could think of to say was that it was rather clever of Vernon Wilkins, but he did not dare say that.

Buster pushed his hand farther into the shed. "And you," he said to Jess. "You take a deguttied look too. A good long, stomach-juicing look."

So Jess was forced to come and inspect the tooth, too. She brought a flowerpot with her, just in case. It was a double tooth, worn down to a flat disk shape. "Yes," she said. "What do you want us to do about it?"

"Get one of his," said Buster. "You're arranging disemboweled revenge, aren't you? Well, you go and knock me out one of Wilkins's pineapple-puking teeth and bring it back here so I can see you've done it. Then I'll let you off that ten pence."

"It's worth more than ten pence," said Jess.

"Is it?" said Buster. "What's the zombie-toenail matter? Do you want to lose a tooth, too?"

"Shut up," said Frank. "When do you want it?"

"It'll take at *least* an hour," said Jess.

"All right," said Buster. "Meet you back here in an hour. And you'd better bring that slimy poisoned-unwinding-bowel tooth with you, or it won't be only ten pence you owe me." Then he took his hand, and his tooth, and finally his face, away from the window and led his gang clattering and wheeling and swearing away up the path.

Jess and Frank stared at each other and felt that everything had gone wrong. The idea seemed to have turned back to front. Instead of other people asking them to get their Own Back on Buster Knell here was Buster Knell sending them for other people's teeth. The nasty thought was that Vernon Wilkins was a good two years older than Frank and if he could actually knock a tooth out of Buster's head, then there was no knowing what he could do to Frank.

"And it was only a baby tooth, too," said Jess. "I bet it was ready to come out, anyway. What shall we do, Frank?"

"Go and see Vernon, I suppose," said Frank.

So Jess wrote out another notice, which read:

AWAY ON BUSINESS

Signed OWN BACK LTD.

and this they propped in the window of the potting shed, before getting out their bicycles and pedaling off to find Vernon.

Vernon lived just outside the town, because his mother and father worked for the people in the big house on the London Road. Luckily, this was the same side as the allotments and the Piries' house, but it was still some way. It came on to rain again while Frank and Jess were cycling there.

"All for nothing, too," Frank said miserably, bending his head to keep the rain off his face. "If you get a tooth, it'll only be for ten pence I owed him, anyway. Oh, I hate Buster Knell."

"It's quite horrid," Jess agreed. "Just like the Bible. You know—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—or whatever it is."

"Is that Bible?" said Frank. "I thought it was: If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out. Buster's eye offends me. Both his eyes. And I bet mine are going to offend Vernon."

"If his eye offends thee, black it," said Jess. "Only Vernon's West Indian, so it won't show."

The shower blew over. By the time they reached the London Road, the sun was shining brightly and

bleakly. Frank and Jess propped their bicycles outside the tall iron gates of the big house and walked rather slowly inside the grounds. It could not have been more awkward. The Lodge, where Vernon lived, was just round the corner from the gates. Vernon was sitting on the doorstep. As Frank and Jess came up, they heard his mother saying something inside the Lodge, so they knew that whatever they did or said to Vernon his mother would hear. To make things even more awkward, Vernon was minding his tiny sisters, who were all three playing happily round him in the mud, and the youngest as soon as she saw Jess, came toddling up, smiling in the most friendly way imaginable. It could not have been less like a tooth-hunting expedition.

Vernon looked up and saw them. "What do you want?" he said, not unpleasantly, but a little guardedly.

Jess just could not think what to say. She did not know Vernon at all well, but his littlest sister had plainly decided Jess was a great friend. She took Jess's hand and beamed up at her.

"Er," said Frank. "One of your teeth, I'm afraid."

"I got none loose," said Vernon. "The last one came out a year ago. You have to go without."

"You don't happen to have kept one, do you?" Frank asked, rather desperately.

"No," said Vernon. "What for?"

Frank looked at Jess for help. Jess held the little sister's hand tightly, for encouragement, and said "Buster Knell wants it, Vernon. He says you knocked one of his out just now."

Vernon's face became what Jess thought they meant when they said "a study." Anyhow, she could tell he was surprised, pleased, indignant, and suspicious, all at once. "So I did," he said. "What's it got to do with you? You in his gang now?" Then he stood up.

"No," said Frank fervently. Jess backed away, towing the little sister with her. Vernon was quite frighteningly tall.

"Then why do you want a tooth off me?" asked Vernon.

It was a natural enough question. Frank felt very stupid having to answer it. He tried to explain about Own Back Ltd., and the more he explained, the more stupid the whole idea seemed. Vernon did not help at all. At first he was puzzled; then, as he saw the idea, he seemed more and more amused. Then, when Frank had finished, Vernon suddenly stopped grinning and said, "It was evens, anyway. He'd no call to send you for teeth. His lot set on me with sticks while I was doing the papers, and I got this. Look."

Vernon held out his arm, and Frank and Jess were once more forced to make an inspection, this time of a very nasty-looking scratch all down the inside of Vernon's arm.

"Have you put something on it?" Jess asked. "I wouldn't put it past them to tip their weapons with poison. Then it's not fair, Frank, wanting a tooth, too, is it?"

"I suppose not," Frank agreed, wondering what Buster would do to them with his sticks. "How do you knock his tooth out, Vernon?"

"Didn't know I had," Vernon said cheerfully. "I just knock him down and get out. Nice to think he lost a tooth through it."

"Except it was only a baby tooth," said Jess. "Which makes it unfairer than ever."

"Was it?" said Vernon. "Sure? Then I think I got an idea to settle it. Wait a moment." He darted away round the side of the Lodge, and came back a second later dragging his younger brother by one arm. "Silas got one all ready to go," he said. "Open up, Silas."

Silas squirmed and protested. Jess felt rather sorry for him. It seemed very hard luck on Silas particularly as Vernon never thought to ask him if he minded. He simply tipped back his brother's head, wrenched his mouth open, and plucked the tooth out as easily as the eye in the Bible. Silas

roared. Frank felt rather glad it had not happened to be an eye that Buster had sent them for. Silas when he saw the tooth being passed over to Frank, roared louder than ever.

“Vernon,” called Vernon’s mother, “what you do to Silas?”

“Nothing,” called Vernon. “Pulled that tooth out for him.”

“But, Vernon,” Jess said, “it’s *his* tooth, and if you give it to us, that means he won’t get any money for it.”

“I’ll give him five pence,” Vernon said hastily. It sounded as if Silas’s roaring was going to bring Mrs. Wilkins out any second. Vernon fetched out a coin and pushed it into his brother’s hand. “There. Stop,” he said.

Silas stopped, in midroar, with a set of tears halfway down his cheeks, and closed his fist round the five pence. He looked at Frank and at Vernon so resentfully that Frank felt he ought to explain a little.

“We need your tooth,” he said. “It’s terribly important. Really. We’ve got to give it to Buster Knel because he told us to bring him one of Wilkins’s teeth.”

Silas looked more resentful than ever, but Vernon laughed. “So then you don’t need to say which Wilkins,” he said. “That’ll settle it.”

“But it’s still not *fair*,” said Jess. “Because you’ve lost five pence.”

Frank wished Jess would not always find something to argue about, particularly things which were quite true. He remembered Mr. Prodger said Vernon needed money. “I tell you what,” he said to Vernon, “when we’ve earned some money out of Own Back, we’ll pay you back. Okay?”

“Fine,” said Vernon. “Maybe I’ll send you a customer.”

“That’ll be lovely,” said Jess. She disentangled herself from the little sister, who showed an inclination to roar like Silas. Vernon had to pick her up. Then the Piries mounted their bicycles and pedaled home with the tooth, rather perplexed to find that, far from earning any money, they were now five pence in debt again.

“Well,” said Frank, trying to look on the bright side, “we’ve got it down by half. Maybe we’ll get down to two pence with the next customer.”

“Only if whoever it is pays us real three pence,” said Jess.

Nevertheless, when, a quarter of an hour later, the gang began to muster in the path by the allotments, grinning, flourishing sticks, and plainly ready to give those disemboweled Piries lawful what-for, Frank felt it was worth five pence. They waited until Buster himself hammered on the window. Then Jess shoved it open in his face and held out the tooth in a silver-paper tart dish.

“There you are,” she said triumphantly. “Wilkins’s tooth, just as you said.”

Buster glowered at it, then at Jess and Frank. “I bet it’s slime-puking not. It’s one of yours.”

“It is not, then,” said Jess. “Look.” And she bared her teeth at him. “See. No gaps.”

“Then it’s one you kept. Or one of his,” said Buster.

Frank came up and bared his teeth, too. Luckily, he had no gaps, and only one tooth loose, at the back.

“And we always burn ours,” said Jess. Then, because a horrid thought struck her, she left Frank to do the talking.

Buster looked incredulously from the tooth to Frank, and back again. “This is Wilkins’s tooth?” he said. “Honor bright and may you die?”

“Honor bright and may I die,” said Frank. “If you want it, take it. And don’t forget I don’t owe you ten pence now.”

“No. All right. I let you off,” said Buster. He was too astonished, and too respectful, even to swear. He took the tooth. Frank slammed the window on him, and on all the gang crowding round to inspect

the tooth and exclaim as if they had never seen one before.

“That’s that!” said Frank thankfully.

“Oh, I do hope so,” said Jess, “because I’ve just realized Vernon hasn’t any gaps either, and—
—”

“That’s his lookout,” said Frank. “If he’s got any sense, he’ll paint one out or something.”

Jess had not the heart to speak of her really horrid idea just then. Instead, she watched the gar moving unusually quietly away along the allotments, and tried to think on the bright side. “There one thing, Frank. If they think you can knock out Vernon’s tooth, they won’t bother you again.”

Unfortunately, she was completely wrong.



TWO

After the affair of Wilkins's tooth, both Frank and Jess had secretly had enough of Own Back, but since they owed Vernon five pence, there was nothing for it but to stay in business for another day at least. So they sat in the shed for the third day and, all the while, Jess worried about Silas Wilkins's tooth. She had lain awake at night worrying. Now, that morning, she just had to tell Frank her horrible idea.

"Frank, I wish we hadn't *given* them the tooth. I keep thinking of witch doctors. You know, when they want to hurt a person, they take a tooth or just a hair from the person, and do awful things to it. Suppose Buster does? And then it'll be poor little Silas who suffers, not Vernon at all."

"But it's not real," Frank said uneasily. "They always tell you witch doctors can't *really* do magic—only that people *think* they can. Anyway, you know what that gang's like. They're bound to lose before they decide what to do with it. Or they'll get them mixed up and magic Buster's."

"Oh," said Jess. "I do hope they *do*. And give Buster face-ache for weeks."

"Months," said Frank, who had suffered a great deal more from Buster than Jess had. He was thinking of saying that Own Back could offer to do the magicking, and get the teeth mixed on purpose when Jess noticed that someone was tapping on the window.

She jumped up to open it. Frank followed her, and found two pale little girls outside, hand in hand, their hair flapping in the wind, looking up anxiously at the window. He knew them a little by sight. They were the funny, old-fashioned girls who lived at the one house you could see from the pottin shed—the cheese-colored one. He knew the elder one was called Frances Adams, because people shouted "Sweet Fanny Adams!" after them sometimes, because they were so odd and because the younger one walked with a limp.

"Do you mean this notice?" asked the elder one.

"Yes," said Jess. "Of course. You don't think we put it up for fun, do you?" She was being rather haughty with them, partly because they were so peculiar, and partly because she was afraid they were going to make fun of Own Back like everyone else.

But the two little girls were in deadly earnest. The elder said: "And when you say difficult task you mean that, too?"

"Yes," said Frank. "But the price goes up if it's really difficult."

They nodded. "This is," said the elder, and Frank felt rather mean. They did not look as if they had much money. They wore funny patched aprons, like Victorian children, and their faces were thin and hungry. Their two pairs of big eyes stared at Frank and Jess like a picture of famine.

"What do you want us to do?" said Frank.

"Get us our Own Back," said the elder.

"On Bidy Iremonger. She's a witch," said the younger.

"I don't think she *is*," said Jess. "Mummy says she's just a poor old creature, and a bit wrong in the

head.”

“Yes, she *is*,” said the elder. “She put the evil eye on Jenny last summer, and Jenny’s foot’s been a wrong ever since.”

“The doctor says it’s nothing,” said Jenny, “but I can’t walk and she did it.”

“And,” said Frances, “if you can do her down, we’ve got a gold sovereign that belongs to us and we’ll give it you. Promise.”

Frank and Jess were both dismayed. The little girls stared so intensely—and the idea of a whole gold sovereign was overpowering. The worst part was how much they seemed to mean what they said.

Frank asked feebly, “What do you want done to her?”

“Anything,” said Frances.

“Everything,” said Jenny.

“Suppose,” said Jess, trying to be businesslike, “we get her and make her take it off Jenny. Would that do?”

They nodded fervently. “But if she won’t,” said Frances, “do something nasty to her instead. Very nasty.”

“All right,” said Frank. “If you want.”

“Thank you,” they both said and, before Jess could think to make further arrangements, they hurried away down the path. Frances pulled Jenny, and Jenny did indeed limp badly.

“Oh, dear!” said Jess, and then, after a moment, “It’s probably only rheumatism. Mummy always says how damp that house looks.”

“Jess,” said Frank, “we can’t go and—and *do* things to Biddy Iremonger, can we? Even if she is a witch.”

“But she’s not,” said Jess. “It’s just them. Biddy’s only funny in the head. And I don’t think we can take their sovereign, anyway. It’s not money any longer, is it?”

“So what had we better do?” Frank said helplessly. “Go and talk to Biddy? It worked with Vernon.”

“I don’t know,” said Jess. “Maybe if Jenny thinks it’s Biddy, then if we can get Biddy to say she’s taken it off somehow, Jenny might feel better. Would that work?”

Someone else was reading their notice while Jess talked. Frank happened to look sideways, and saw a horse—or perhaps a pony—outside, with a boy on its back who was bending down to read the notice. “Except it wouldn’t be Own Back,” Frank said, watching to see if they had another customer. But it seemed they had not. The boy’s smart boots moved against the pony, and the pony went on past the window. Jess looked up, hearing the hooves. “Who was that?” Frank asked.

“That’s the boy from the big house,” said Jess. “Where the Wilkinsons work. I wish he’d stayed. Kate Matthews thinks he’s super. She’s always on about him.”

“He thinks he’s too super to come near us, then,” said Frank. “And that’s a pity, because I bet he’s got real money. Anyway, Jess, let’s try going to see Biddy, shall we?”

“All right. I suppose we’d better.”

Jess was just about to put up her *AWAY* notice, when they heard hooves clumping again and the back shape of the pony filled the window. Jess hurriedly put down her notice and backed away. Both she and Frank held their breath while the boy sat on the pony and did nothing. Then, when Frank was beginning to whisper that they might as well go, the boy reached out his riding crop and rapped it on the window.

“Hark at Lord Muck!” said Frank.

Jess backed right to the potting shed door, pulling Frank with her. “Oh, you go, Frank. I daren’t.”

“Then let go of me. Coming, my lord, coming!” said Frank.

“Frank! Don’t be silly!”

“Who’s silly?” said Frank, and tore himself free. He went to the window and opened it. “Yes?” he said, looking up at the boy and wondering what was so super about him. Nothing, Frank thought, but the boy’s own idea of himself. He was just a freckled boy with red hair and a haughty look.

“Are you Own Back?” asked the boy.

“Half of it,” said Frank. “The Limited half’s by the door.”

That, of course, made the boy bend down and peer into the shed, and brought Jess up beside Frank, very pink and swinging her hair angrily. “He means me,” she said, and gave Frank a sharp kick on the ankle to teach him a lesson.

“Then I’d like you two to do a job for me,” said the boy.

“What? Revenge-difficult-feat-or-treasure-anything-to-oblige,” Frank gabbled in a way that was meant to be rude. Jess kicked him again.

The boy shifted about, as if he could see Frank did not like him. “Vernon told me about you,” he said. “If you must know.”

Jess glared at Frank, and Frank realized he had better be polite if they were ever to earn that five pence. “What was it?” he asked. “Some kind of Own Back?”

“Yes,” said the boy. “Actually.” His freckly face screwed into stormy lumps. “I want you to do something about those beastly Adams kids. I can’t stand them. And I don’t know what to do about them.”

“What?” said Jess. “You mean those two funny girls who live over there?” She pointed to the cheese-colored house.

The boy looked. “I don’t know where they live,” he said. “If you’ve got them on your doorstep, pity you. Frankie and Jenny Adams, they’re called, and one limps. And they drive me mad. They’re always round our house, calling names and saying it’s really their house. As if I could help living there! No matter what I’m doing, one of them bobs up and says it should be hers. And I’m not supposed to hit girls, for some reason, so I can’t stop them.”

“You want us to try to stop them?” asked Jess.

“At least go and call *them* names,” said the boy. “Show them what it feels like.”

Both Frank and Jess rather thought the Adams girls knew what it felt like, but they did not like to say so. Frank said, “Or something to teach them a lesson?” and the boy nodded. “And I think we can charge ten pence,” said Frank, because that seemed reasonable.

The boy shifted again, until his pony stamped irritably. “I was afraid you might,” he said. “I’ll try and get it, but I’m a bit short, actually. I broke a greenhouse last week, and they stopped my pocket money. Couldn’t I give you something else instead? Exchange and barter? I’ve got a watch or a camera you could have.”

The Piries’ hearts sank. No money again. Not even a fellow feeling for someone else without pocket money prevented Jess from feeling a little cross with the boy.

“You should really have brought some money,” she said severely. “We don’t do it for goods. And we’ve both got watches.”

“I’ll try,” said the boy. “Maybe I’ll wangle some money. But I’d got desperate, actually, and when Vernon told me about you, I thought I’d see. Honestly, you don’t know what it’s like. They’re *always* there.” He did, to do him justice, look desperate, in a fretful sort of way.

“All right,” said Frank. “We’ll do it. On condition that you get us some money if you possibly can.”

“I’ll try,” said the boy. “Honestly. Shall I come back tomorrow, or do you need longer?”

“No. Tomorrow will do,” said Frank.

“Thanks,” said the boy, and he seemed genuinely grateful.

~~They watched him ride away down the path, scattering loose cinders with the pony’s feet, and the~~
felt more than ever perplexed at the difficulties of Own Back.

“And it ought to have been so *profitable!*” said Jess. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” said Frank, “but I know this lets us off Bidy Iremonger. We can just go and tell those kids that we won’t do it because they shout after Lord Muck. What’s his real name?”

“Martin Taylor,” said Jess. “No, Frank, that’s not *fair*. They asked us first, and she does limp terribly. We’ll have to see them about him afterward.”

“I can’t think,” said Frank, “why he doesn’t hit them secretly, even if he’s not supposed to. I would. And what’s she got to go and be called Frankie for? It’s so *muddling*.”

“Come on,” said Jess. “Let’s get it done before lunch. Then I vote we close.”

So they put up the *AWAY* notice once more and let themselves out of the back gate onto the allotment path. There was a strong wind. The sun shone bleak and bright, but not at all warm. Frank shivered. He told himself it was the wind and the old-cabbage smell the wind blew out of the allotments which made him shiver. But it was not. He was dreading Bidy Iremonger. And, to make matters worse, Mr. Carter was digging on his allotment and called out to know if they had found the treasure yet.

“Take no notice,” said Jess, and with her nose stuck haughtily in the air, she pushed open the gate to the path that ran beside the allotments to the river.

The path took them down to the tangled, rusty fence on the river side of the allotments. It was the kind of fence nobody cared for. The parts of it that were not old, old barbed wire were made of bits of iron bedsteads, and it was held in place just by being overgrown with whitish wintry grass and brambles. The path dwindled to a muddy rut where the fence met the wall, and squeezed its way under and round a loose piece of old bed. Frank and Jess squeezed with it, into the waste, white grass beside the river.

It was hot there—airless and smelly—because the big willow trees seemed to keep the wind off, and because it was low lying. The river spread out secretly under all the white grass. If you walked off the path, you were in squelching, oily marsh. And it was full of rubbish—some of it buried under the grass, some of it thrown on top. There was a heap of tins beside the fence. A few steps farther on, there was all that was left of an old bicycle sticking out from under the grass. The path went carefully round its front wheel. When Frank had been younger, he had thought this the most exciting place in the whole world. You never knew what you might find—motor tires, mousetraps, buckets, and bedspring. But he was now too old to find it interesting. It depressed him instead. He particularly hated the muggy, sweetish smell in the place.

“Pooh!” said Jess. She marched on ahead, sending up musty smells from under her feet straight to Frank’s nose.

Bidy Iremonger’s hut was under a big hollow tree beyond a clump of brambles. It looked as if it might have been a boathouse once. It was wooden and settled slopingly down the riverbank. In front of it was a patch of bare earth, and heaped carefully round that were petrol drums and paint tins, to make a sort of wall. The path, as if it were scared at the sight, took a wide bend away from the hut and hurried, twisting, on to the footbridge over the river just beyond. There was a sort of track leading to the hut, however, and Frank and Jess cautiously took it.

Bidy Iremonger’s black cockerel flew up to the roof of the hut when it saw them coming. The four black hens ran for shelter in a petrol drum. As soon as Jess set foot in the bare patch, Bidy’s cockerel leaped up, almost under her feet, and spat. It was a scrawny patchwork cat—ginger, tabby, black, and

white, all at once—and it seemed scared of everyone except Biddy. It ran away from Frank and Jess crouching and cringing, to the doorway of the hut. There it turned and spat again before it ran inside.

Frank and Jess, their nerve rather shaken by the cat, stood side by side in the bare patch, near overwhelmed by the hot, musty smell, which seemed worse than ever near the hut. Before they could think of what to do, Biddy Iremonger herself came slowly shambling out of the door of the hut and stood nodding at them cheerfully.

She was wearing at least three dirty sweaters and a skirt from a jumble sale, with sort of sacking trousers showing under the skirt. She had a sack round her shoulders, too, like a shawl. Her hair, as usual, was put into at least six skinny plaits, which were looped up anyhow and held fast by curlers and paperclips. You could not see easily what her face was like—apart from its being very dirty—because she wore such enormously thick glasses. Her feet were in odd plimsolls, and her legs, below the sacking trousers, were bare and purple and swollen, so that her ankles drooped over her plimsolls. Jess was chiefly struck with how cold Biddy must be, living in a hut in all weathers. Frank just wished they could go away.

“Good morning,” said Biddy. “It’s nice to have some warmer weather, isn’t it?” She looked up at the branches of the willow tree, where powdery bright green buds were just beginning to show. “Yes,” she said. “We can allow it to be spring before long, don’t you agree, my dears?”

Neither Frank nor Jess knew what to reply. The oddest thing about Biddy Iremonger was that she was educated. She had a sharp, learned voice, rather like Jess’s schoolteacher, which, when she spoke, made it very difficult to imagine her putting the evil eye on people—or, indeed, doing anything that was not just harmless and a little odd. So Jess and Frank nodded, and mumbled things about “nice day” and “no rain,” and Jess went on bravely to add, “There’s a bit of a wind, though.”

“Not down here,” said Biddy. “This little nook is beautifully sheltered.”

Then they all stood there without talking. The cockerel stalked to the edge of the roof and peered down at the Piries. The cat came slinking to the door and stared up. Biddy just waited, nodding, with a cheerful smile, as if she was sure they had just called to pass the time of day and would be going away any minute now.

Frank and Jess very nearly did go. It seemed such a shame to bother this poor, silly old lady because the Adams girls had got it into their heads that she was a witch. It was only Jess’s strong sense of fairness that kept them there. Jess took hold of Frank’s sleeve, took a deep breath of the muggy air and said, “We’re sorry to bother you, Miss Iremonger, but we wanted to speak to you about—about Jenny Adams.”

“Oh, yes? What about her?” said Biddy, cheerfully and sharply.

“Well,” said Jess, feeling very silly, “she—er—she can’t walk, you know.”

Biddy shook her head at Jess and answered, quite kindly, “Now, my dear, that’s not really accurate, is it? She can walk quite well. I’ve seen her limping about rather nimbly, considering.”

Jess felt so foolish that she hung her head down and could not say a word. Frank had to clear his throat and reply. “Yes, we know,” he said. “But her foot’s bad all the same, and she says you put the evil eye on her.” He felt this was such a monstrous thing to say to Biddy that his face and his eyes—even his hands—became all hot and fat as he said it.

And Biddy nodded again. “Yes, my dear. She’s quite right. I did. I have it in for that family, you know.”

Jess’s head came up. Frank went suddenly from hot and fat to cold and thin with horror, that anyone could talk as calmly and cheerfully as Biddy about a thing like that. “Why?” he said.

“How unfair!” said Jess.

“Not at all,” said Bidy. “One has one’s reasons. I have to get my Own Back, you know.”

“But look here,” said Frank, “~~she’s only a little kid, and she’s had it for a year now. Couldn’t you~~ take it off her?”

“Please,” Jess added.

Bidy, smiling and shaking her head, began shuffling back into her hut. “I’m sorry, my dears. It’s none of your business.”

“You’re wrong,” said Jess. “It is our business—exactly. Please take it off.”

Bidy stopped for a moment, in the doorway of her hut. “Then, if it is your business,” she said briskly, “I suggest you give me a wide berth, my dears. It would be wisest. Because, I assure you Jenny Adams is not likely to walk freely until she has her heirloom in her hands. Which, in plain language, is *never*. So I suggest you leave the matter there.”

Bidy shut the door of her hut in their faces with a brisk snap, and left Frank and Jess staring at each other.



THREE

The first thing they did was to get themselves out of Biddy's bare patch and back to the path again. There, halfway to the footbridge, Jess stopped.

"How awful!" she said. "How terrible! Oh, Frank, Biddy Iremonger must be quite, quite mad after all. She ought to be put in a Home."

Frank did nothing but mumble. His skin was up in goose pimples all over, and he did not trust himself to speak. All he wanted to do was to go away quickly. He hurried on along the path toward the bridge.

Jess followed him, saying, "Of course, she may have been having us on. Mummy says she's got a strange sense of humor."

Frank again said nothing. It seemed plain enough to him that Biddy had meant what she said, and since Biddy believed herself to be a witch, he could hardly blame the Adams girls for thinking so, too. Mad or not, it did not seem to matter. Perhaps witches *were* mad, anyway. What did matter was what they were going to tell Frankie and Jenny, because it looked as if Own Back had let them down. He was wondering just what they would say when Jess grabbed at his arm.

"Oh, dear! Listen, Frank."

There were voices, distant, but getting nearer, loud and crude, and the sound of wheels and sticks. Buster Knell and his gang were in the field on the other side of the river somewhere. Jess and Frank bundled along to where the bridge began. The river took a bend here, which allowed you to look up along the opposite bank. There they could see the gang coming along the bank toward the bridge in a noisy group, about twenty yards above Biddy's hut. They could hear, not clearly, slimy and disemboweled language.

Frank slid quickly down the bank beside the bridge, where there was a tiny beach of gravel. He was hidden there by a bush and some newly sprouting flags, but he could see Buster and the gang. Jess hesitated, then followed him. They crouched side by side, watching the gang come nearer.

"But it's all right," said Jess. "They'll not dare lay a finger on *you*, Frank, after Wilkins's tooth."

"That's what you think," said Frank. "I'm not taking any chances."

"They'll come over the bridge, though," said Jess. "Hadn't we better go across first? Otherwise they'll be between us and the Adamses' house, and then we'll have to go back past Biddy's hut and don't think I can *bear* to."

"Shut up," said Frank. "I bet the Adams kids went past it. If they can, you can."

"Between the devil and the deep blue Buster," said Jess. "Oh, dear!"

To their intense relief, the gang turned aside when they were about ten yards off, and went calling and cursing and splashing down into the river. It seemed they were going to ford it. Maybe it was more manly or more exciting, or both, that way. Jess and Frank waited agonizingly, until the smallest boy, in the last go-cart, had been, with cursing and tremendous difficulty, lugged through the water.

and onto the bank out of sight. Then they stood up and sprinted over the bridge and out into the fire beyond. ~~Halfway to the bare, lonely Adams house, they looked back. The gang appeared not to have noticed them. They were milling about in the bushes and rubbish just above Biddy's hut, and no one was looking their way. Rather nervously, Frank and Jess followed the path over to the peeling door on the side of the cheese-colored house, and knocked.~~

The door was opened, after a lot of hollow-sounding treading about, by a thin, tall, vague-looking lady in a dangling smock. Jess at first thought the lady was covered with blood. Then she saw it was only paint. There was paint on the lady's hands, too—so much that the lady did not seem to be able to touch the cigarette she had in her mouth. She talked round it, through puffs of smoke, and the cigarette wagged.

“What do you kids want, eh? No jobs going, I'm afraid. Bohemian household and all that.”

“Could we see Frankie and Jenny, please?” asked Jess.

“Oh, yes. Sure. This way.” The lady left the door open and simply walked away inside the house. Frank and Jess, a little doubtfully, stepped inside and followed her down a cold stone passage smelling of mildew and lamp oil. They could not tell which smell was the strongest. Jess thought mildew and did not wonder that Jenny had rheumatism. Frank thought lamp oil. There seemed to be no electricity in the house.

The lady pushed open a door. “Frankie. Friends for you,” she said. Then, with her cigarette still untouched and wagging, she went off into another room. Before the door to it shut, Frank glimpsed an easel, with a painting on it.

The two little girls were in a small room that smelled, distinctly, more of mildew than of oil. There were toys about, so it must have been a playroom. But it was, Jess thought, almost as cheerless as the potting shed, and certainly as dark. The reason for the darkness was that outside the window stood a great wooden mill wheel, so old that grass grew on it in clumps, and so big that very little light got past it into the room.

Frankie bounded to meet them, looking so excited that Jess felt mean. “What happened? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing yet,” Jess said awkwardly.

Frankie just looked at her, with her great big famine eyes. Jenny, who was crouched up on the windowsill, said, “I knew you wouldn't. Nobody dares to.” She was not jeering. She just said it as a matter of fact, rather sadly. She made Frank feel terrible—even worse than Jess was feeling.

“This is—this is a sort of progress report,” he said. “We saw her, and she said she wouldn't take anything off you. That's as far as we've got.”

Frankie leaned forward, with her eyes bigger than ever. “Then go on and do something awful to her. Now you know.”

“At least you didn't let her deceive you,” said Jenny. “Lots of people won't believe she's a witch, but that's just because she looks jolly and they think she's joking.”

“But she isn't joking,” said Frankie. “She's wicked. Really.”

Somehow, now they had talked to Biddy, Jess and Frank found this easier to believe. Jess still knew somewhere in the back of her head, that Biddy must simply be mad, but she did not know it strong enough to say so. All she said was “Yes, I know. She said she's got it in for your family.”

Both little girls nodded. “Yes, she has,” Frankie said. “So now do something.”

“All right,” said Frank, “but”—he hesitated, and then said, in a rush, in a rather official-sounding voice, because he felt so mean—“but we've got to do it on conditions, because we can't take your sovereignty.”

The little girls stared. "Why not?" said Jenny. "It's worth much more than a pound."

Jess saw the point. She shook her head firmly. "It's not legal tender," she said. She was not quite sure what that meant, but she was sure it was the right phrase, and it sounded beautifully official. Frankie and Jenny were impressed by it and stared mournfully at her.

"So we'll do something to Biddy," Frank went on pompously, although he was out in goose pimples again at the mere idea, "if you promise us to stop calling names after—what's his name, Jess?"

"Martin Taylor," said Jess.

"Who?" said Jenny.

"Ginger," said Frank. "Up at the big house. You know."

"Oh, him!" Frankie stuck her head up.

Jenny leaned forward indignantly and nearly overbalanced from the windowsill. "We hate him. He's horrible. He lives in our house. It should be *our* house, but *he* lives there just because we haven't got any money anymore."

"We're going to drive him out," said Frankie.

"Don't be silly," said Jess. "You can't drive him out, because it's his parents, not him, the house belongs to. He can't help living there. It's not fair to go calling him names. He isn't allowed to hurt girls."

Jenny grinned. She looked like a wicked elf thing, all curled up on the windowsill. "We know he can't," she said.

"He calls *us* names, too," said Frankie. "And we're not going to stop. So there."

Jess immediately marched away to the damp door. "All right. Then we're not going to do anything to Biddy. We wouldn't touch her with a barge pole. So there."

There was a painful silence. Jess opened the door and tried to go through it slowly, without looking as if she was waiting. Frank loitered after her. Still neither of the little girls said anything. Frank and Jess had gone most of the length of the stone passage before there was any sound at all. Then suddenly, behind them, they heard rapid footsteps—light, heavy, light, heavy. Jenny, down from the windowsill, was following them as hard as she could go.

She ran up to Jess, seized her hand, and smiled up at her. When she smiled, Jess thought, Jenny looked almost as sweet as Vernon's littlest sister. "Please," Jenny said. "Please, Jessica Pirie, do something to Biddy and I'll promise anything." Then her face became all stiff and famine seeming. "Make her die, so that my foot can be better again." Great huge tears came streaming down her cheeks.

Frankie came up without a word, put her arm round Jenny, and led her back to the playroom again. Jess and Frank followed, feeling mean and big.

Jess said, "I don't think it would work, making her die. She'd not be able to take it off then. She said—" Jess looked at Frank. It had been nasty, the way Biddy had said *never*.

Frank shivered. "Jenny," he asked. "What's your heirloom? Or don't you know?"

Frankie answered, because Jenny had her odd apron to her face and was giving out shuddering sniffs into it. "It's an emerald necklace," she said. "Mine's diamonds. Only it went. All the things went."

"Went where?" said Jess.

Jenny shook her covered face. "Don't know. They went. Mother went, too." She gave a big muffled yell, and the whole of her shook.

Frank fidgeted. Everything about these little girls seemed odder every second. He felt he could hardly bear another minute in that gloomy room with the big wheel blocking the window. "Well, the best thing would be to get it back," he said, "but if you can't, we'll have to think of something else."

do to her.”

“Make her break her leg,” said Frankie.

“Or something,” Jess said, as cheerfully as she could. “We’ll do something, provided you stop calling after Martin Taylor.”

“All right,” Frankie agreed. “We’ll stop, then. It’s worth it, isn’t it, Jenny?”

Jenny, with her face still covered, nodded violently.

Jess and Frank escaped from the damp house and went home by the road, in the hurling wind. They were so relieved to be outside again that Jess sang and whirled her arms as they went.

“At least we’ve fixed Martin,” she said.

“For no money,” Frank said. “Isn’t that paint lady their mother, then?”

“No. She’s their aunt,” said Jess. “But Daddy knows Mr. Adams. He’s a bit strange, too. Frank, let’s put Bidy off and stay closed for today. I’ve had enough of Own Back for now.”

“I’ve had so much enough,” said Frank, “that I wouldn’t mind closing down for good.”

“We’ll do that,” said Jess. “We’ll just polish off this bit of business, and then we’ll close down.”



FOUR

The next morning, Frank and Jess were in the potting shed discussing what to do about Bidy. While they talked, Jess carefully wrote out a very elaborate curly notice, which was to read CLOSED FOR GOOD. She had so far only got to FOR, and neither of them could think what to do to Bidy.

“An eye for an eye,” said Frank. “What about a foot for a foot? Suppose I went and stamped on her toe?”

“She might turn you purple,” said Jess. “She might even *be* a witch. What did they use to do to witches in the olden days?”

“Duck them in a pond,” said Frank. “Could we push her in the river?”

“Flop,” said Jess. “Squelch. She’d lose her glasses. And she’d be *mad*, Frank.”

“I thought you said she was, anyway,” Frank was saying, when there was a hurried dull thumping on the path outside and the window of the shed was darkened.

“Martin Taylor!” Jess sprang up eagerly and hastened to the window. “At least we can tell him *he*’s all right,” she said as she pushed it open.

But Martin, it seemed, had not come for his Own Back. He leaned down from his pony to look in the window, and they could tell by his face that something or other was wrong. “Can you two come to the Lodge?” he said. “Vernon’s waiting there. He’ll explain. But we thought you ought to see Silas.”

“See *Silas!*” said Jess. “Whatever for?”

“Oh, I can’t explain,” Martin said. “Just come and see.” And before they could ask him more, he was gone again, with a further swift thumping and a scatter of cinders.

Frank and Jess looked at each other, mystified, but rather appalled, too. If they had known Martin better, they might have thought he was having them on; but he was nearly a perfect stranger, and the way he had talked was as if he were too upset about whatever it was to tell them about it. So, after a second, Frank muttered that he supposed they had better go and see. Jess simply put up the *AWAY* notice instead of the *CLOSED* notice and they went to get their bikes.

When they came within sight of the big iron gates, Martin was standing outside with Vernon. The way they both stood was dejected and anxious, and the way Vernon dashed up and seized Jess by the handlebars was almost angry, too.

“What did you do with that tooth?” he said. “Give it to Buster?”

“Yes,” said Jess, and Frank added, “And you needn’t eat us.”

“Then Buster *was* telling the truth,” Martin said to Vernon. It was clear they were both too worried to bother to quarrel with the Piries.

“I knew he was,” said Vernon. He turned to Frank and Jess. “You come and take a look at Silas,” he said. “Buster said to me he give the tooth to Bidy Iremonger to give me face-ache. You come and see.” And, as soon as Frank and Jess had leaned their bikes against the gates, he led them to the Lodge. At the door, he jerked his head to Martin. “Go and talk to my mum,” he said. “If she sees them, she’ll

throw them out.” The haughty Martin, rather to Frank’s surprise, went into the Lodge without a word. As Vernon beckoned them to follow him also, they could hear Martin saying something quite near and Mrs. Wilkins answering, rather crossly, “How you think I do it today, Martin, with Silas sick in bed?”

Both Jess and Frank were quite sure they ought to go away at once. But Vernon seized them each by an arm and pulled them through a door and into a darkened room beside the front door where, as Jess said afterward, she felt like thieves in the night. Vernon went across to a window and drew one of the curtains. Frank and Jess, thoroughly alarmed and nervous, found they were in a bedroom with burrwood beds round the walls. All the beds were empty except the bottom bunk nearest the window, which had Silas lying in it.

“Now see,” Vernon whispered.

All Frank and Jess could see of Silas was his face, but that was quite enough. Jess said afterward she had never seen a face so swollen as Silas’s was, not even Frank’s when Frank had mumps. The only thing right about it was his big resentful eyes, and these stared accusingly up at the Piries. The rest of his face was tight and shiny and blown out like a balloon—so blown out that it was more purple than black.

“Oh, dear!” said Jess. She had her hands to her own face in sympathy. “Isn’t it mumps?”

Vernon shook his head. “He had them when I did last year. The doctor doesn’t know what it is. But I know. It was Biddy did it.”

Silas said nothing. He stared miserably. Frank did not wonder. Neither he nor Jess could think of anything else to say. They stood there in the middle of the bedroom feeling like trespassers, and Jess at least, wondered if she did not feel like a murderer also. And all the time Silas simply stared at them with his great black accusing eyes.

Meanwhile, Martin must have made Mrs. Wilkins really angry. Her voice suddenly came near, talking and talking, until it was clear she was right outside the bedroom door and likely to come in any minute. Frank and Jess felt more like trespassers than ever.

“Quick,” said Vernon. “Come on.” He opened the window and scrambled out, into the flower bed beneath. Jess and Frank scrambled after him, faster than they had ever climbed out of a window before. Vernon reached back inside to draw the curtain again, and Silas’s big reproachful eyes watched all three of them as he did it.

They hurried out to the road beyond the iron gates. While they waited for Martin to finish being scolded and come and join them, Vernon said, “You got to get that tooth back.”

There seemed no doubt that he was right. “All right,” said Frank. “But how can we get it?”

“Go down to her hut,” said Vernon. “They said she was a witch, but I never believed it till now. What do you think she’ll take to give it back?”

“I don’t know,” said Frank.

Jess said, “Vernon, you wait here with Frank, and I’ll go home and collect all our valuables. I think that’s fair, Frank, because we did let Buster get his hands on that tooth.”

Frank mournfully agreed. He owned a tiepin which he did not much mind losing, but he had a feeling it would take his watch as well, which he did mind losing. But it could not be helped. He could not condemn poor Silas to spend the rest of his life with his face that shape—particularly as it looked as if it must hurt rather a lot, too. So, while Jess cycled off to collect what she could which might be valuable, Frank sat on the roadside with Vernon and asked him if he had a plan of action.

“I thought,” Vernon said, not exactly hopefully, “I take Jess and go and ask Biddy for the tooth back, and keep her talking supposing she says no. Then you and Martin find some way into her hut.”

round the back and look for the tooth.”

Frank quaked. But he saw Vernon was right. Obviously Vernon should ask for the tooth, since it was supposed to be his, and Jess had to be there to represent Own Back. Which left Martin and himself to do the dirty work. And Martin did not strike him as the most encouraging companion.

“You listen, you see,” Vernon explained, “and if she says no, then you try to get in.”

“And suppose,” said Frank, “we can’t find it.”

“Try again, when she’s out,” said Vernon. “But we ought to ask first. Make it legal.”

“And if we get it?” said Frank hopelessly. “Can you take a spell off?”

“I can try,” said Vernon. “There’s ways. My mum’s heard some, and there’s books in the library that maybe tell us. Or if we just get it back, that could be enough to do it.”

“Or I suppose Biddy might even tell you, if we give her enough,” Frank suggested. “It can’t matter very much to her, surely, once she knows it’s the wrong person with a bad face.”

“Depends how much Buster give her,” Vernon said, “to make it worth her while. We reckon the gang must have clubbed together for it. They never have much money.”

“No,” said Frank. “They spend it straight off, if they do have any. We ought to be able to get enough together to buy her off.”

When Jess pedaled back, she had their two watches, Frank’s tiepin and two bracelets, one which she knew was silver—her charm one—and one which she just hoped was valuable. She put them in a heap on the bank. Vernon had fifty pence, which, from the grudging way he added it to the heap, Frank thought he must have been saving for something special. Vernon more or less admitted that he had been when he said, “It’s worth it, seeing it was my fault Silas got like that.”

“And ours,” said Jess. “Vernon, I’ve been thinking about spells. Isn’t salt supposed to take them off?”

“I heard that, too,” Vernon said.

And that, it seemed, was as much as any of them knew about witchcraft. Frank wished they had all been born in the Middle Ages, when people knew about such things. He had horrid visions of them making Silas worse while they tried to uncharm him. Jess said, most unhelpfully, that she knew how to get rid of warts. Vernon, even less helpfully, said it was not warts, it was chilblains. Both of them knew seven different ways of being unlucky, and Frank knew three more, but none of it seemed to help. Martin, when he at last came out to join them, said he knew nothing about it at all.

“Only the first thing seems to be to get the tooth back,” he said, and he took off his watch to add to the heap.

“But that’s not fair,” said Jess, trying to stop him. “You didn’t have anything to do with this wretched tooth.”

“Vernon’s my best friend,” said Martin. “So it *is* fair. He’s done all sorts of things for me.”

So Jess gave in, and took up the heap in both hands before she crammed it into her pocket. “Surely,” she said, “this ought to be enough for one little baby tooth. Weighed in the balance, I mean. Even if it was a *gold* tooth.”

“I wish it had been,” Vernon said glumly. “Then Buster would have bought them all fish and chips with it instead.”

They set off, the Piries wheeling their bicycles beside the other two, until they came to the allotment fence. Everyone was anxious and dejected. Frank almost admitted to being scared as well. He did not like the idea of breaking into Biddy’s hut—particularly now she really did seem to be a witch. Still, as he looked at Martin walking in front down the path with Vernon, Frank was more encouraged by him than he had expected. Martin was not as tall as Vernon—probably he was a little

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