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Opening extract from

A Bad Spell for the Worst Witch

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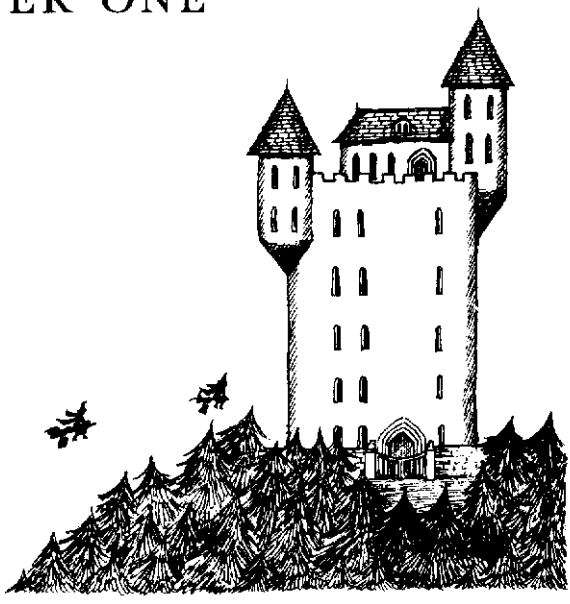
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CHAPTER ONE



It was the very first day of Mildred Hubble's second year at Miss Cackle's Academy for Witches.

The school year at the academy was divided into two long terms, the first of these commencing in September and stretching right to the end of January. This was known as the Winter Term and was followed by a month of welcome holiday. The second session began in

March and finished at the end of July, and this was called the Summer Term, though in fact it was still extremely cold and wintry when term began. Then there was another glorious month of holiday until the beginning of September, and the start of another year.

After her disastrous first year at the academy, it was something of a miracle that Mildred was returning there at all. She was one of those unfortunate people who seem to invite disaster wherever they go. Despite her efforts to be helpful and well-behaved, Mildred had an uncanny knack of appearing to be the cause of any trouble which was occurring, and it must be admitted that there *were* occasions (particularly when her rather wild imagination ran away with her) when she managed to turn some peaceful event into a scene of total chaos.

However, *this* year Mildred was older and hopefully wiser (at any rate she was



more full of good intentions than ever) and she was quite determined to lose her reputation as the worst witch in the school.

Arriving on her broomstick at the prison-like school gates, Mildred peered through the railings into the misty playground. For once she was early and there were only a handful of girls in the yard, all stamping their feet and huddling in their cloaks to keep out the bitter cold. It was always chilly at the school because the building was made of stone, rather like a castle, and was perched on the topmost peak of a mountain, surrounded by



pine trees which grew so close together that it was very damp and gloomy. In fact, the girls suffered permanently from colds and flu from all the time they were forced to spend in the freezing playground.

'Healthy fresh air!' Miss Drill, the gym mistress, would bark, herding the sneezing, coughing pupils outside. 'It'll do you all a power of good. Five hundred lines to anyone caught sneaking in before the bell!'

Mildred flew over the gates and landed expertly on the other side.

'Well, *that's* a good start!' she thought, looking around in the hope that someone had witnessed so successful a landing, but of course they hadn't. People were only ever watching when she did something dreadful, never at a moment of triumph.

Mildred took her suitcase from the back of the broomstick which was hovering politely, waiting for the next command. Then she turned her attention to the tabby cat still spreadeagled on the back of the broom with its eyes screwed tightly shut and its claws gripping on for dear life. The poor little cat had never got over its terror of flying, and Mildred always had to prise it from the broomstick whenever she arrived anywhere.



'Trust *me* to get a cat like you,' said Mildred fondly, stroking it with one hand and unclasping its claws with the other. 'Come on, silly, we're here. Look! It's all over, you can jump off now.'

The cat opened one eye cautiously, saw that it was true and sprang onto Mildred's shoulder where it rubbed its head gratefully against her hair. Mildred felt a wave of tenderness towards the scrawny creature.

'Mildred! Millie! It's *me*!' shrieked a familiar voice from above. Mildred looked up and saw Maud swooping over the gates, waving her hat in the air. This last action nearly caused her to fall off and she lurched to a rather drunken halt at Mildred's feet.

'Oh, Maud!' laughed Mildred, full of joy at the sight of her best friend after the long summer holiday. 'Gosh, you look a lot thinner, and your hair's got longer.'

'I know,' said Maud, stroking her hair



which was in two stubby plaits instead of her usual bunches. 'Mother put me on this *awful* diet. I wasn't allowed to eat *anything* except lettuce and celery and dreadful stuff like that. Still, I'm out of her clutches now, so it's back to good old school dinners. Three cheers for date-pudding and custard I say!' They both laughed.

'I don't know why they bother to *have* gates at this school,' remarked Mildred, as another three pupils soared over the wall on their brooms.



'Perhaps it's in case we have some ordinary visitors,' said Maud. 'You know, people who don't have brooms. Miss Cackle couldn't expect ordinary guests to bring ladders with them, could she? Who else has arrived, by the way? Anyone *we* know?'

'Only Ethel,' replied Mildred. 'She pretended not to see me though, not that I *care* of course.'

Ethel Hallow was the form sneak and goody-goody, and it was hardly surprising that Mildred felt unfriendly towards her after all the mean tricks Ethel had played during their first two terms, including almost getting Mildred expelled on two occasions.

'Oh look Maud!' said Mildred, indicating two small girls in brand-new hats and huge cloaks which nearly touched their brand-new shining boots. 'They must be first-years, look at them. Don't they look *little*?'



'To think *we* were like that,' said Maud in a motherly way. 'It makes me feel quite old.'

The two first-years were standing close together, looking lost and shy. One of them was glancing nervously around, and the other was trying unsuccessfully to stop crying. They were a sorry-looking pair. Both were thin; the weeping one had a pinched, pale face and wispy mouse-coloured hair, and the other one had brilliant orange frizzy bunches. For some

reason, the weeping one reminded Mildred very strongly of someone else, though she couldn't think who it was.

'Let's go and cheer them up, shall we?' suggested Mildred. 'They can't help being new, poor things. Remember how awful *we* felt?'

Feeling very grown-up and wise, Maud and Mildred sauntered casually over to the two pathetic little girls.

'Hello,' said Mildred, 'you must be new.'

'Yes,' chorused the girls.

Mildred patted the snivelling one awkwardly on the shoulder. 'Don't cry,' she said stiffly. 'It isn't *that* bad you know.' Unfortunately, Mildred's kindly gesture only served to make matters worse, instead of better, for the girl burst into deafening sobs and flung her arms round Mildred's waist.

Mildred was appalled. Everyone in the playground was staring at her, and any



minute now Miss Hardbroom (Mildred's terrifying form-mistress from the previous year) was bound to appear and accuse her of upsetting a poor new girl.

Maud detached the girl rather roughly and gave her a shake. 'Stop that silly noise at once!' she said crossly. 'You'll get Mildred into trouble before the first bell's even rung.'

Mildred smoothed her cloak. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'Sybil,' snuffled the girl.

'Mine's Clarice,' volunteered the other one.

'Are the teachers strict here?' asked Sybil, wiping her eyes with a corner of her voluminous cloak.

'Not really,' replied Maud.

'Well, Miss Hardbroom is,' said Mildred. 'In fact she's the worst of the lot, and she'll be *your* form-mistress. We're lucky this year because we'll get Miss Gimlett, and she's quite nice. But Miss



Hardbroom's horrendous. She just *appears* out of thin air –' At this point Mildred broke off and looked around in case she had done just that, but she hadn't.

'– *And* she says dreadful things to you in front of the whole class and makes you feel really stupid,' continued Maud.

'That's right,' said Mildred, 'and *I* heard tell that she changed *one* girl into a frog because she was two seconds late for a lesson. I don't know if it's true, but there *is* a frog sometimes seen near the pond in the backyard, and I've heard that it's *really* a poor first-year who –'

'I've never heard that before!' gasped Maud. '*Is* it true?'

'I *think* so,' answered Mildred, though in fact she had made up the tale on the spur of the moment and it had somehow got rather out of hand. To be honest, Mildred's stories often got rather out of hand, when she would find, to her dismay, that the whole class was listening and believing every word. She just *couldn't* say then that she'd made it all up.

Poor Sybil believed every word of Mildred's story about the frog and she burst into renewed and even noisier sobs, so deafening that Maud and Mildred thought it best to scurry away, leaving Clarice to offer comfort.

'Mildred! Maudie! Yoo hoo! It's *me*!'

Enid Nightshade, the new girl who arrived last term and was now their friend, came zooming over the treetops and screeched to a halt so forcefully that her cat and suitcase shot off the back, and



Maud and Mildred had to leap out of the way to avoid being run over.

At that moment the bell rang and the three witches picked up all their belongings and struggled inside with them.

'Thank goodness we haven't got H.B. any more,' whispered Enid. (H.B. was their nickname for Miss Hardbroom.)

'Yes,' agreed Mildred, 'this year should be as easy as pie without *her* breathing down our necks.'



CHAPTER TWO



The first announcement made by Miss Cackle at assembly was the ghastly news that Miss Hardbroom had changed places with Miss Gimlett, and would now be accompanying her old form into their second year. An audible groan rippled through the new Form Two, quelled at once by one of Miss Hardbroom's piercing glances which always made each pupil feel that they had been noticed personally.