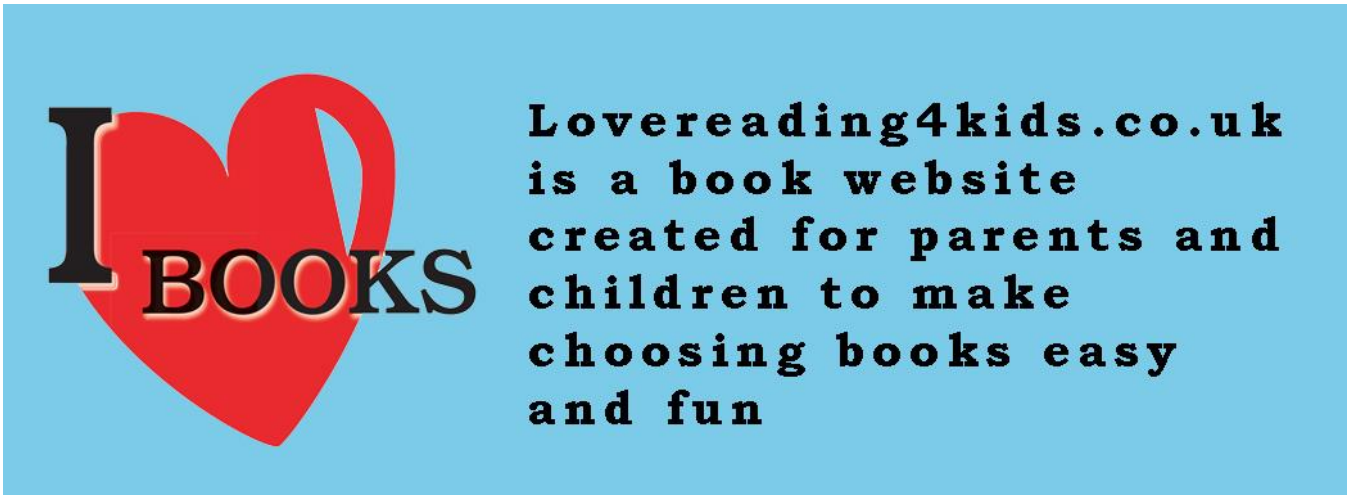

Opening extract from

I Shall Wear Midnight

Written by

Terry Pratchett

Illustrated by

Paul Kidby and Laura Ellen Andersen

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CHAPTER 1

A Fine Big Wee Laddie

Why was it, Tiffany Aching wondered, that people liked noise so much? Why was noise so important?

Something quite close sounded like a cow giving birth. It turned out to be an old hurdy-gurdy organ, hand-cranked by a raggedy man in a battered top hat. She sidled away as politely as she could, but as noise went, it was sticky; you got the feeling that if you let it, it would try to follow you home.

But that was only one sound in the great cauldron of noise around her, all of it made by people and all of it made by people trying to make noise louder than the other people making noise. Arguing at the makeshift stalls, bobbing for apples or frogs,* cheering

* This was done blindfolded.

the prize fighters and a spangled lady on the high wire, selling candyfloss at the tops of their voices and, not to put too fine a point on it, boozing quite considerably.

The air above the green downland was thick with noise. It was as if the populations of two or three towns had all come up to the top of the hills. And so here, where all you generally heard was the occasional scream of a buzzard, you heard the permanent scream of, well, everyone. It was called *having fun.* The only people not making any noise were the thieves and pickpockets, who went about their business with commendable silence, and they didn't come near Tiffany; who would pick a witch's pocket? You would be lucky to get all your fingers back. At least, that was what they feared, and a sensible witch would encourage them in this fear.

When you were a witch, you were all witches, thought Tiffany Aching as she walked through the crowds, pulling her broomstick after her on the end of a length of string. It floated a few feet above the ground. She was getting a bit bothered about that. It seemed to work quite well, but nevertheless, since all around the fair were small children dragging balloons, *also* on the end of a piece of string, she couldn't help thinking that it made her look more than a little bit silly, and something that made one witch look silly made *all* witches look silly.

On the other hand, if you tied it to a hedge somewhere, there was bound to be some kid who would untie the string and get on the stick for a dare, in

which case most likely he would go straight up all the way to the top of the atmosphere where the air froze, and while she could in theory call the stick back, mothers got very touchy about having to thaw out their children on a bright late-summer day. That would not look good. People would talk. People always talked about witches.

She resigned herself to dragging it again. With luck, people would think she was joining in with the spirit of the thing in a humorous way.

There was a lot of etiquette involved, even at something so deceptively cheerful as a fair. She was the witch; who knows what would happen if she forgot someone's name or, worse still, got it wrong? What would happen if you forgot all the little feuds and factions, the people who weren't talking to their neighbours and so on and so on and a lot more so and even further on? Tiffany had no understanding at all of the word 'minefield', but if she had, it would have seemed kind of familiar.

She was the witch. For all the villages along the Chalk she was the witch. Not just her own village any more, but for all the other ones as far away as Ham-on-Rye, which was a pretty good day's walk from here. The area that a witch thought of as her own, and for whose people she did what was needful, was called a steading, and as steadings went, this one was pretty good. Not many witches got a whole geological outcrop to themselves, even if this one was mostly covered in grass, and the grass was mostly covered in

sheep. And today the sheep on the downs were left by themselves to do whatever it was that they did when they were by themselves, which would presumably be pretty much the same as they did if you were watching them. And the sheep, usually fussed and herded and generally watched over, were now of no interest whatsoever, because right here the most wonderful attraction in the world was taking place.

Admittedly, the scouring fair was only one of the world's most wonderful attractions if you didn't usually ever travel more than about four miles from home. If you lived around the Chalk you were bound to meet everyone that you knew* at the fair. It was quite often where you met the person you were likely to marry. The girls certainly all wore their best dresses, while the boys wore expressions of hopefulness and their hair smoothed down with cheap hair pomade or, more usually, spit. Those who had opted for spit generally came off better since the cheap pomade was very cheap indeed and would often melt and run in the hot weather, causing the young men not to be of interest to the young women, as they had fervently hoped, but to the flies, who would make their lunch off their scalps.

However, since the event could hardly be called 'the fair where you went in the hope of getting a kiss and, if your luck held, the promise of another one', the fair was called the scouring.

* Speaking as a witch, she knew them very well.

The scouring was held over three days at the end of summer. For most people on the Chalk, it was their holiday. This was the third day, and most people said that if you hadn't had a kiss by now you might as well go home. Tiffany hadn't had a kiss, but after all, she was *the witch*. Who knew what they might get turned into?

If the late-summer weather was clement, it wasn't unusual for some people to sleep out under the stars, and under the bushes as well. And that was why if you wanted to take a stroll at night it paid to be careful so as not to trip over someone's feet. Not to put too fine a point to it, there was a certain amount of what Nanny Ogg – a witch who had been married to three husbands – called *making your own entertainment*. It was a shame that Nanny lived right up in the mountains, because she would have loved the scouring and Tiffany would have loved to see her face when she saw the giant.*

He – and he was quite definitely a he, there was no possible doubt about that – had been carved out of the turf thousands of years before. A white outline against the green, he belonged to the days when people had to think about survival and fertility in a dangerous world.

Oh, and he had also been carved, or so it would

* Later on, Tiffany realized that all the witches had probably flown across the giant, especially since you could hardly miss him if you were flying from the mountains to the big city. He kind of stood out, in any case. But in Nanny Ogg's case, she would probably turn round to look at him again.

appear, before anyone had invented trousers. In fact, to say that he had no trousers on just didn't do the job. His lack of trousers filled the world. You simply could not stroll down the little road that passed along the bottom of the hills without noticing that there was an enormous, as it were, lack of something – e.g. trousers – and what was there instead. It was definitely a figure of a man without trousers, and certainly not a woman.

Everyone who came to the scouring was expected to bring a small shovel, or even a knife, and work their way down the steep slope to grub up all the weeds that had grown there over the previous year, making the chalk underneath glow with freshness and the giant stand out boldly, as if he wasn't already.

There was always a lot of giggling when the girls worked on the giant.

And the reason for the giggling, and the circumstances of the giggling, couldn't help but put Tiffany in mind of Nanny Ogg, who you normally saw somewhere behind Granny Weatherwax with a big grin on her face. She was generally thought of as a jolly old soul, but there was a lot more to the old woman. She had never been Tiffany's teacher *officially*, but Tiffany couldn't help learning things from Nanny Ogg. She smiled to herself when she thought that. Nanny knew all the old, dark stuff – old magic, magic that didn't need witches, magic that was built into people and the landscape. It concerned things like death, and marriage, and betrothals. And promises that were

promises even if there was no one to hear them. And all those things that make people touch wood and never, ever walk under a black cat.

You didn't need to be a witch to understand it. The world around you became more – well, more real and fluid, at those special times. Nanny Ogg called it *numinous* – an uncharacteristically solemn word from a woman who was much more likely to be saying, 'I would like a brandy, thank you very much, and could you make it a double while you are about it.' And she had told Tiffany about the old days, when it seemed that witches had a bit more fun. The things that you did around the changing of the seasons, for example; all the customs that were now dead except in folk memory which, Nanny Ogg said, is deep and dark and breathing and never fades. Little rituals.

Tiffany especially liked the one about the fire. Tiffany liked fire. It was her favourite element. It was considered so powerful, and so scary to the powers of darkness, that people would even get married by jumping over a fire together.* Apparently it helped if you said a little chant, according to Nanny Ogg, who lost no time in telling Tiffany the words, which immediately stuck in Tiffany's mind; a lot of what Nanny Ogg told you tended to be sticky.

But those were times gone by. Everybody was more

* Obviously, Tiffany thought, when jumping over a fire together, one ought to be concerned about wearing protective clothing and having people with a bucket of water to hand, just in case. Witches may be a lot of things, but first and foremost, they are practical.

respectable now, apart from Nanny Ogg and the giant.

There were other carvings on the Chalk lands too. One of them was a white horse that Tiffany thought had once broken its way out of the ground and galloped to her rescue. Now she wondered what would happen if the giant did the same thing, because it would be very hard to find a pair of pants sixty feet long in a hurry. And on the whole, you'd *want* to hurry.

She'd only ever giggled about the giant once, and that had been a very long time ago. There were really only four types of people in the world: men and women and wizards and witches. Wizards mostly lived in universities down in the big cities and weren't allowed to get married, although the reason why not totally escaped Tiffany. Anyway, you hardly ever saw them around here.

Witches were definitely women, but most of the older ones Tiffany knew hadn't got married either, mostly because Nanny Ogg had already used up all the eligible husbands, but also probably because they didn't have time. Of course, every now and then, a witch might marry a grand husband, like Magrat Garlick, as was, of Lancre had done, although by all accounts she only did herbs these days. But the only young witch Tiffany knew who had even had time for courting was her best friend up in the mountains: Petulia – a witch who was now specializing in pig magic, and was soon going to marry a nice young man

who was shortly going to inherit his father's pig farm,* which meant he was practically an aristocrat.

But witches were not only very busy, they were also *apart*; Tiffany had learned that early on. You were among people, but not the *same* as them. There was always a kind of distance or separation. You didn't have to work at it, it happened anyway. Girls she had known when they were all so young they used to run about and play with only their vests on would make a tiny little curtsy to her when she passed them in the lane, and even elderly men would touch their forelock, or probably what they thought was their forelock, as she passed.

This wasn't just because of respect, but because of a kind of fear as well. Witches had secrets; they were there to help when babies were being born. When you got married, it was a good idea to have a witch standing by (even if you weren't sure if it was for good luck or to prevent bad luck), and when you died there would be a witch there too, to show you the way. Witches had secrets they never told . . . well, to people

* Possibly Petulia's romantic ambitions had been helped by the mysterious way the young man's pigs were forever getting sick and required treating for the scours, the blind heaves, brass neck, floating teeth, scribbling eyeball, grunge, the smarts, the twisting screws, swivelling and gone knees. This was a terrible misfortune, since more than half of those ailments are normally never found in pigs, and one of them is a disease known only in freshwater fish. But the neighbours were impressed at the amount of work Petulia put in to relieve their stress. Her broomstick was coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Being a witch, after all, was about dedication.

who weren't witches. Among themselves, when they could get together on some hillside for a drink or two (or in the case of Mrs Ogg, a drink or nine), they gossiped like geese.

But never about the real secrets, the ones you never told, about things done and heard and seen. So many secrets that you were afraid they might leak. Seeing a giant without his trousers was hardly worth commenting on compared to some of the things that a witch might see.

No, Tiffany did not envy Petulia her romance, which surely must have taken place in big boots, unflattering rubber aprons and the rain, not to mention an awful lot of 'oink'.

She did, however, envy her for being so *sensible*. Petulia had got it all worked out. She knew what she wanted her future to be, and had rolled up her sleeves and made it happen, up to her knees in 'oink' if necessary.

Every family, even up in the mountains, kept at least one pig to act as a garbage can in the summer and as pork, bacon, ham and sausages during the rest of the year. The pig was *important*; you might dose Granny with turpentine when she was poorly, but when the pig was ill you sent immediately for a pig witch, and paid her too, and paid her well, generally in sausages.

On top of everything else, Petulia was a specialist pig borer, and indeed she was this year's champion in the noble art of boring. Tiffany thought you couldn't put it better; her friend could sit down with a pig and

talk to it gently and calmly about extremely boring things until some strange pig mechanism took over, whereupon it would give a happy little yawn and fall over, no longer a living pig and ready to become a very important contribution to the family's diet for the following year. This might not appear the best of outcomes for the pig, but given the messy and above all noisy way pigs died *before* the invention of pig boring, it was definitely, in the great scheme of things, a much better deal all round.

Alone in the crowd, Tiffany sighed. It was hard, when you wore the black, pointy hat. Because, like it or not, the witch *was* the pointy hat, and the pointy hat was the witch. It made people *careful* about you. They would be respectful, oh yes, and often a little bit nervous, as if they expected you to look inside their heads, which as a matter of fact you could probably do, using the good old witch's standbys of First Sight and Second Thoughts.* But these weren't really magic. Anyone could learn them if they had a lick of sense, but sometimes even a lick is hard to find. People are often so busy living that they never stopped to wonder *why*. Witches did, and that meant them being needed: oh yes, needed – needed practically all the time, but not, in a very polite

* First Sight means that you can see what really is there, and Second Thoughts mean thinking about what you are thinking. And in Tiffany's case, there were sometimes Third Thoughts and Fourth Thoughts, although these were quite difficult to manage and sometimes led her to walk into doors.

and definitely unspoken way, not *exactly* wanted.

This wasn't the mountains, where people were very used to witches; people on the Chalk could be friendly, but they weren't friends, not *actual* friends. The witch was different. The witch knew things that you did not. The witch was another kind of person. The witch was someone that perhaps you should not anger. The witch was not like other people.

Tiffany Aching was the witch, and she had made herself the witch because they needed one. Everybody needs a witch, but sometimes they just don't know it.

And it was working. The storybook pictures of the drooling hag were being wiped away, every time Tiffany helped a young mother with her first baby, or smoothed an old man's path to his grave. Nevertheless, old stories, old rumours and old picture books still seemed to have their own hold on the memory of the world.

What made it more difficult was that there was no tradition of witches on the Chalk – none would ever have settled there when Granny Aching had been alive. Granny Aching, as everybody knew, was a wise woman, and wise enough not to be a witch. Nothing ever happened on the Chalk that Granny Aching disapproved of, at least not for more than about ten minutes.

So Tiffany was a witch alone.

And not only was there no longer any support from the mountain witches like Nanny Ogg, Granny Weatherwax and Miss Level, but the people of the

Chalk weren't very familiar with witches. Other witches would probably come and help if she asked, *of course*, but although they wouldn't say so, this might mean that you couldn't cope with responsibility, weren't up to the task, weren't sure, *weren't good enough*.

'Excuse me, miss?' There was a nervous giggle. Tiffany looked round and there were two little girls in their best new frocks and straw hats. They were looking at her eagerly, with perhaps just a hint of mischief in their eyes. She thought quickly and smiled at them.

'Oh yes, Becky Pardon and Nancy Upright, yes? What can I do for the two of you?'

Becky Pardon shyly produced a small bouquet from behind her back and held it out. Tiffany recognized it, of course. She had made them herself for the older girls when she was younger, simply because it was what you did, it was part of the scouring: a little bunch of wild flowers picked from the downland, tied in a bunch with – and this was the important bit, the magic bit – some of the grass pulled up as the fresh chalk was exposed.

'If you put this under your pillow tonight, you will dream of your beau,' said Becky Pardon, her face quite serious now.

Tiffany took the slightly wilting bunch of flowers with care. 'Let me see . . .' she said. 'We have here sweet mumbles, ladies' pillows, seven-leaf clover – very lucky – a sprig of old man's trousers, jack-in-the-wall, oh – love-lies-bleeding and . . .'

She stared at the little white and red flowers.

The girls said, 'Are you all right, miss?'

'Forget-me-lots!'* said Tiffany, more sharply than she had intended. But the girls hadn't noticed, so she continued to say, brightly, 'Quite unusual to see it here. It must be a garden escapee. And, as I'm sure you both know, you have bound them all together with strips of candle rush, which once upon a time people used to make into rush lights. What a lovely surprise. Thank you both very much. I hope you have a lovely time at the fair . . .'

Becky raised her hand. 'Excuse me, miss?'

'Was there something else, Becky?'

Becky went pink, and had a hurried conversation with her friend. She turned back to Tiffany, looking slightly more pink but nevertheless determined to see things through.

'You can't get into trouble for asking a question, can you, miss? I mean, just asking a question?'

It's going to be 'How can I be a witch when I'm grown up?' Tiffany thought, because it generally was. The young girls saw her on her broomstick and thought that was what being a witch was. Out loud she said, 'Not from me, at least. Do ask your question.'

Becky Pardon looked down at her boots. 'Do you have any passionate parts, miss?'

* The forget-me-lots is a pretty red and white flower usually given by young ladies to signal to their young men that they never wanted to see them again ever, or at least until they'd learned to wash properly and got a job.

Another talent needful in a witch is the ability not to let your face show what you're thinking, and especially not allowing it, no matter what, to go as stiff as a board. Tiffany managed to say, without a single wobble in her voice and no trace of an embarrassed smirk, 'That is a very interesting question, Becky. Can I ask you why you want to know?'

The girl looked a lot happier now that the question was, as it were, out in the public domain.

'Well, miss, I asked my granny if I could be a witch when I was older, and she said I shouldn't want to, because witches have no passionate parts, miss.'

Tiffany thought quickly in the face of the two solemn owlish stares. These are farm girls, she thought, so they had certainly seen a cat have kittens and a dog have puppies. They'd have seen the birth of lambs, and probably a cow have a calf, which is always a noisy affair that you can hardly miss. They know what they are asking me about.

At this point Nancy chimed in with, 'Only, if that is so, miss, we would quite like to have the flowers back, now we've shown them to you, because perhaps it might be a bit of a waste, meaning no offence.' She stepped back quickly.

Tiffany was surprised at her own laughter. It had been a long time since she had laughed. Heads turned to see what the joke was, and she managed to grab both the girls before they fled, and spun them round.

'Well done, the pair of you,' she said. 'I like to see some sensible thinking every now and again. Never

hesitate to ask a question. And the answer to your question is that witches are the same as everybody else when it comes to passionate parts, but often they are so busy rushing around that they never have time to think about them.'

The girls looked relieved that their work had not been entirely in vain and Tiffany was ready for the next question, which came from Becky again. 'So, do you have a beau, miss?'

'Not right at the moment,' Tiffany said briskly, clamping down on her expression lest it give anything away. She held up the little bouquet. 'But who knows, if you've made this properly, then I'll get another one, and in that case you will be better witches than me, that is for certain.' They both beamed at this dreadful piece of outright flannel, and it stopped the questions.

'And now,' said Tiffany, 'the cheese rolling will be starting at any minute. I'm sure you won't want to miss that.'

'No, miss,' they said in unison. Just before they left, full of relief and self-importance, Becky patted Tiffany on her hand. 'Beaus can be very difficult, miss,' she said with the assurance of, to Tiffany's certain knowledge, eight years in the world.

'Thank you,' said Tiffany. 'I shall definitely bear that in mind.'

When it came to the entertainment offered at the fair, such as people making faces through a horse collar or fighting with pillows on the greasy pole or even the bobbing for frogs, well, Tiffany could take them or leave

them alone, and in fact much preferred to leave them alone. But she always liked to see a good cheese roll – that is to say, a good cheese roll all the way down a slope of the hill, although not across the giant because no one would want to eat the cheese afterwards.

They were hard cheeses, sometimes specially made for the cheese-rolling circuit, and the winning maker of the cheese that reached the bottom unscathed won a belt with a silver buckle and the admiration of all.

Tiffany was an expert cheese-maker, but she had never entered. Witches couldn't enter that sort of competition because if you won – and she knew she had made a cheese or two that *could* win – everyone would say that was unfair because you were a witch; well, that's what they would think, but very few would *say* it. And if you didn't win, people would say, 'What kind of witch can't make a cheese that could be beat by simple cheeses made by simple folk like we?'

There was a gentle movement of the crowd to the start of the cheese rolling, although the frog-bobbing stall still had a big crowd, it being a very humorous and reliable source of entertainment, especially to those people who weren't actually bobbing. Regrettably, the man who put weasels down his trousers, and apparently had a personal best of nine weasels, hadn't been there this year, and people were wondering if he had lost his touch. But sooner or later everyone would drift over to the start line for the cheese rolling. It was a tradition.

The slope here was very steep indeed and there was

always a certain amount of boisterous rivalry between the cheese-owners, which led to pushing and shoving and kicking and bruises; occasionally you got a broken arm or leg. All was going as normal as the waiting men lined up their cheeses, until Tiffany saw, and seemed to be the only one to see, a dangerous cheese roll up all by itself. It was black under the dust and there was a piece of grubby blue and white cloth tied to it.

'Oh, no,' she said. 'Horace. And where you are, trouble can't be far behind.' She spun around, carefully searching for signs of what should not be there. 'Now you just listen to me,' she said under her breath. 'I know at least one of you must be somewhere near. This isn't for you, it's just about people. Understand?'

But it was too late. The Master of the Revels, in his big floppy hat with lace around the brim, blew his whistle and the cheese rolling, as he put it, *commenced* – which is a far grander word than *started*. And a man with lace around his hat was never going to use a short word where a long word would do.

Tiffany hardly dared to look. The runners didn't so much run as roll and skid behind their cheeses. But she could hear the cries that went up when the black cheese not only shot into the lead, but occasionally turned round and went back uphill again in order to bang into one of the ordinary innocent cheeses. She could just hear a faint grumbling noise coming from it as it almost shot to the top of the hill.

Cheese-runners shouted at it, tried to grab at it and flailed at it with sticks, but the piratical cheese scythed

onwards, reached the bottom again just ahead of the terrible carnage of men and cheeses as they piled up, then rolled gently back up to the top and sat there demurely while still gently vibrating.

At the bottom of the slope, fights were breaking out among the cheese-jockeys who were still capable of punching somebody, and since everyone was now watching that, Tiffany took the opportunity to snatch up Horace and shove him into her bag. After all, he was hers. Well, that was to say, she had made him, although something odd must've got into the mix since Horace was the only cheese that would eat mice and, if you didn't nail him down, other cheeses as well. No wonder he got on so well with the Nac Mac Feegles,* who had made him an honorary member of the clan. He was their kind of cheese.

Surreptitiously, hoping that no one would notice, Tiffany held the bag up to her mouth and said, 'Is this any way to behave? Aren't you ashamed?' The bag wobbled a little bit, but she knew that the word 'shame' was not in Horace's vocabulary, and neither was anything else. She lowered the bag and moved a little way from the crowd and said, 'I know you are here, Rob Anybody.'

* If you do not yet know who the Nac Mac Feegles are: 1) be grateful for your uneventful life; and 2) be prepared to beat a retreat if you hear anyone about as high as your ankles shout 'Crivens!' They are, strictly speaking, one of the faerie folk, but it is probably not a good idea to tell them this if you are looking forward to a future in which you still have your teeth.

There he was, sitting on her shoulder. She could smell him. Despite the fact that they generally had little to do with bathing, except when it rained, the Nac Mac Feegles always smelled something like slightly drunk potatoes. 'The kelda wanted me tae find out how ye were biding,' said the Feegle chieftain. 'You havenae bin tae the mound to see her these past two weeks,' he went on, 'and I think she is afeared that a harm may come tae ye, ye are working sae hard an' all.'

Tiffany groaned, but only to herself. She said, 'That is very kind of her. There is always so much to do; surely the kelda knows this. It doesn't matter what I do, there is always more to be done. There is no end to the wanting. But there is nothing to worry about. I am doing fine. And please don't take Horace out again in public – you know he gets excited.'

'Well, in point of fact, it says up on that banner over there that this is for the folk of these hills and we is more than folk. We is *folklore*! Ye cannae argue with the lore! Besides, I wanted tae come and pay my ain respects to the big yin without his breeks. He is a fine big wee laddie and nae mistake.' Rob paused, and then said quietly, 'So I can tell her that ye are quite well in yourself, aye?' There was a certain nervousness to him, as if he would like to have said more but knew it wouldn't be welcome.

'Rob Anybody, I would be very grateful if you would do just that,' said Tiffany, 'because I have a lot of people to bandage, if I'm any judge.'

Rob Anybody, suddenly looking like a man on a thankless errand, frantically said the words he had

been told by his wife to say: 'The kelda says there's plenty more fish in the sea, miss!'

And Tiffany stood perfectly still for a moment. And then, without looking at Rob, said quietly, 'Do thank the kelda for her angling information. I have to get on, if you don't mind, Rob. *Do* thank the kelda.'

Most of the crowd was reaching the bottom of the slope by now, to gawk or rescue or possibly attempt some amateur first aid on the groaning cheese-runners. For the onlookers, of course, it was just another show; you didn't often see a satisfying pile-up of men and cheeses, and – who knew? – there might be some really interesting casualties.

Tiffany, glad of something to do, did not have to push her way through; the pointy black hat could create a path through a crowd faster than a holy man through a shallow sea. She waved the happy crowd away, with one or two forceful pushes for those of slow uptake. As a matter of fact, as it turned out, the butcher's bill wasn't too high this year, with one broken arm, one broken wrist, one broken leg and an enormous number of bruises, cuts and rashes being caused by people sliding most of the way down – grass isn't always your friend. There were several young men clearly in distress as a result, but they were absolutely definite that they were not going to discuss their injuries with a lady, thank you all the same, so she told them to put a cold compress on the afflicted area, wherever it was, when they got home, and watched them walk unsteadily away.

Well, she'd done all right, hadn't she? She had used her skills in front of the rubbernecking crowd and, according to what she overheard from the old men and women, had performed well enough. Perhaps she imagined that one or two people were embarrassed when an old man with a beard to his waist said with a grin, 'A girl who can set bones would have no trouble finding a husband,' but that passed, and with nothing else to do, people started the long climb back up the hill . . . and then the coach came past, and then, which was worse, it stopped.

It had the coat of arms of the Keepsake family on the side. A young man stepped out. Quite handsome in his way, but also so stiff in his way that you could have ironed sheets on him. This was Roland. He hadn't gone more than a step when a rather unpleasant voice from inside the coach told him that he should have waited for the footman to open the door for him, and to hurry up, because they didn't have all day.

The young man hurried towards the crowd and there was a general smartening-up because, after all, here came the son of the Baron, who owned most of the Chalk and nearly all their houses, and although he was a decent old boy, as old boys go, a little politeness to his family was definitely a wise move . . .

'What happened here? Is everybody all right?' he said.

Life on the Chalk was generally pleasant and the relationship between master and man was one of

mutual respect; but nevertheless, the farm workers had inherited the idea that it could be unwise to have too many words with powerful people, in case any of those words turned out to be a word out of place. After all, there was still a torture chamber in the castle and even though it hadn't been used for hundreds of years . . . well, best to be on the safe side, best to stand back and let the witch do the talking. If she got into trouble, she could fly away.

'One of those accidents that was bound to happen, I'm afraid,' said Tiffany, well aware that she was the only woman present who had not curtsied. 'Some broken bones that will mend and a few red faces. All sorted out, thank you.'

'So I see, so I see! Very well done, young lady!'

For a moment Tiffany thought she could taste her teeth. *Young lady*, from . . . him? It was almost, but not entirely, insulting. But no one else seemed to have noticed. It was, after all, the kind of language that nobs use when they are trying to be friendly and jolly. He's trying to talk to them like his father does, she thought, but his father did it by instinct and was good at it. You can't talk to people as though they are a public meeting. She said, 'Thank you kindly, sir.'

Well, not too bad so far, except that now the coach door opened again and one dainty white foot touched the flint. It was her: Angelica or Letitia or something else out of the garden; in fact Tiffany knew full well it was Letitia, but surely she could be excused just a tiny touch of nasty in the privacy of her own head? Letitia!

What a name. Halfway between a salad and a sneeze. Besides, who was Letitia to keep Roland away from the scouring fair? He should have been there! His father would have been there if the old man possibly could! And look! Tiny white shoes! How long would they last on somebody who had to do a job of work? She stopped herself there: *a bit* of nasty was enough.

Letitia looked at Tiffany and the crowd with something like fear and said, 'Do let's get going, can we please? Mother is getting vexed.'

And so the coach left and the hurdy-gurdy man thankfully left and the sun left, and in the warm shadows of the twilight some people stayed. But Tiffany flew home alone, up high where only bats and owls could see her face.