Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

The Wee Free Men

Written by

Terry Pratchett

Published by

Random House

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



Chapter 1

A Clang Well Done

Some things start before other things.

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

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

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

The items had been tied and twisted together to make a . . . device. It moved oddly when she prodded it. One of the sticks seemed to pass right through the egg, for example, and came out the other side without leaving a mark.

'Yes,' she said quietly, as rain poured off the rim of

her hat. 'There it *is*. A definite ripple in the walls of the world. Very worrying. There's probably another world making contact. That's never good. I ought to go there. But . . . according to my left elbow, there's a witch there already . . .'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Excuse me!' Tiffany shouted. 'Are you fairies?'

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

Probably not, Tiffany decided.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miss Tick looked up.

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

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

'At that age? Impossible!' said Miss Tick. 'There's been no one to teach her! There're no witches on the

Chalk! It's too *soft*. And yet . . . she wasn't scared . . .'

The rain had stopped. Miss Tick looked up at the Chalk, rising above the low, wrung-out clouds. It was about five miles away.

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

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

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

She arrived at the farm.

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

wandering teachers came to the village, she went and got a bit of education. But mostly she worked in the dairy, which was dark and cool. She enjoyed it. It meant she was doing something for the farm.

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

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

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

have been handed down from Aching to Aching for hundreds of years.

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

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

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

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

There were only five books if you didn't include the big farm diary, which in Tiffany's view didn't count as a real book because you had to write it yourself. There was the dictionary. There was the Almanack, which got changed every year. And next

to that was *Diseases of the Sheep*, which was fat with the bookmarks that her grandmother had put there.

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

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

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

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

Tiffany stood on a chair and took it down. She turned the pages until she found the one she was

looking for, and stared at it for a while. Then she put the book back, replaced the chair, and opened the crockery cupboard.

She found a soup plate, went over to a drawer, took out the tape measure her mother used for dressmaking, and measured the plate.

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

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

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

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

'Sweeties, Wentworth,' she shouted.

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

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

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

Tiffany watched the water carefully. Was it getting

darker? Was it getting greener? Was that just water-weed down there? Were those bubbles just a trout, laughing?

No.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Crivens, Wee Bobby, did yer no' see that?'

'Aye. We'd better offski an' tell the Big Man we've found the hag.'

Miss Tick was running up the dusty road. Witches don't like to be seen running. It looks unprofessional.

It's also not done to be seen carrying things, and she had her tent on her back.

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

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

'I know!' snapped Miss Tick.

'And she just hauled off and hit it!'

'Yes. I *know*.'

'Just like that!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miss Tick smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

'Then you can have half a dozen carrots and an

egg. I dare say they could do with an egg, poor things,' said her mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

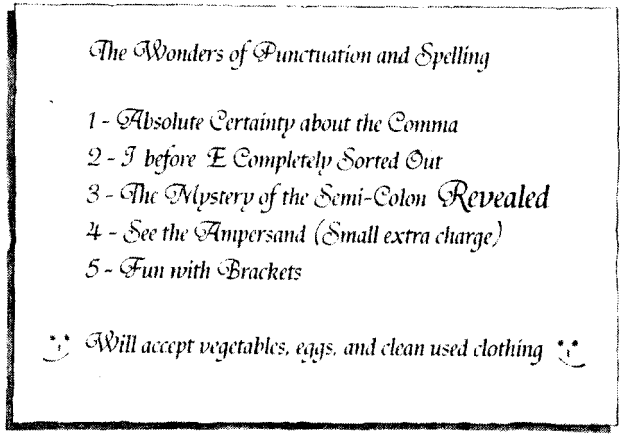
Today the brightly coloured little booths and tents were pitched in a field just outside the village. Behind them small square areas had been fenced off with high canvas walls and were patrolled by

apprentice teachers looking for anyone trying to overhear Education without paying.

The first tent Tiffany saw had a sign which said:



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



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

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

'Not really,' said Tiffany.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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