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For Laura

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GLADYS SAYS NO



Most people are happier when their feet are dry. They do not care to hear squelchy noises in their shoes or feel water seeping between their toes – but the Hag of the Dribble was different. Having wet feet made her feel better: it reminded her of the Dribble where she was born and had lived for the first seventy eight years of her life, and now she dipped her socks into the wash basin and made sure they were thoroughly soaked before she put them on her feet and went downstairs to make porridge for herself and her lodgers.

The Hag did not care for porridge – being fond of porridge is quite difficult – but she was glad to be busy; it helped her to cope with the terrible homesickness which attacked her each morning when she woke and saw the sooty brick wall of the house opposite instead of the wide sky and scudding clouds of the place where she had lived so long.

It is not easy to describe a Dribble. A Dribble is not exactly a marsh, nor is it really a bog or a water

meadow, but it's a bit like all of these. Anyone who has been brought up in a Dribble suffers terribly when they have to leave; it is so quiet and so peaceful, and the damp air is so soft. You are never alone in a Dribble – there are frogs and newts under your feet, and birds wheeling overhead, and dragonflies hovering over the pools, but often you do not see a human being for days on end.

Hags live for a very long time and she had expected to end her days there, and sink peacefully into the marshy ground when her life was done – but one day men had come with machines – more and more men and more and more machines, and had started to drain the Dribble and turn it into a building site.

So the Hag had come to London, not because she liked cities, she detested them, but because she needed to find work – and the work she found was running a boarding house for other Unusual People like herself – displaced witches or exhausted wizards or weary water sprites who had to do ordinary jobs because the time for magic seemed to be past.

The kettle had just come on to boil when she heard a noise like thunder coming from the room on the first floor where the troll was getting out of bed, and then a roar of fury. Ulf Oakroot also felt homesick when he woke up but his homesickness was not a damp, dreamy homesickness like the Hag's – it was a wild and angry longing for the forests of northern

Sweden where he had been born.

Trolls are fierce and hairy, and extremely strong – and they have violent tempers. They can throw boulders for miles across fields and lift up small houses – but they love the woods in which they live and will do anything to protect them. So when the men had come with great saws and started to cut down the forests – not felling carefully – just destroying everything in their path, the trolls' world had been destroyed too. Ulf's brother had been killed trying to protect his home. And the men just came with more lorries and bigger saws – until they had turned whole hillsides into a wasteland.

After the death of his brother, Ulf had left his homeland and taken a ship to Great Britain and moved into a room in the Hag's boarding house. Now he worked as a hospital porter, and because he was so strong and didn't put up with any nonsense, the patients loved him. No one was ever kept waiting on a trolley in the corridor when Ulf was on duty, he just put his huge hairy hand on the handle of the trolley and with a great cry of: 'Out of my way' he shot off, with the patient shouting gleefully as they passed everybody else.

The Hag and the troll were good friends and by the time they had drunk three cups of tea they felt better. After all, when so many Unusual Creatures were going through bad times, losing their homes, doing jobs

they would never have thought of doing in the olden days, it was wrong to grumble – and life at 26 Whipple Road was really not too bad.

'Where's Gertie?' rumbled the troll, spearing a sausage. 'Still in the bathroom, I suppose?'

The Hag nodded. 'She's had a bit of trouble with her lip. She tried to kiss a frog she found in a pet shop because she thought it might turn into a prince but it was the wrong kind of frog and she came up in awful blisters.'

The troll was not surprised. People were always being brought into the hospital with blisters from kissing the wrong kind of animal.

Gertie was an enchantress, though you wouldn't think it to look at her. She was a rather silly girl but she had a kind heart and the Hag was fond of her.

The other lodgers at Whipple Road were sisters, henkies – those faerys who limp and have hollow backs. They worked as dinner ladies in a school and were no trouble at all. There was also a man called Mr Prendergast, an absolutely ordinary man without a trace of magic in his blood. He had been living in the house when the Hag took it over and he saw no reason to leave.

They were all sitting round the kitchen table when the postman came by with an exciting letter. It was an invitation to the Summer Meeting of Unusual Creatures, which was just a week away.

Everyone was pleased. The Summer Meeting was important. It was there that they were told what the Holiday Task was going to be, and it was always something nice. Last

year they had all gone to the seaside at Southend to put the evil eye on a plague of jellyfish, which were bothering holiday makers, and they had spent a happy week in a Grand Hotel. The year before they had gone to Scotland in two charabancs to deal with a gang of cattle rustlers who were threatening a herd of Highland cows. The scenery had been quite beautiful and everyone had come back feeling strong and well.

It was always fun, the Summer Task; it meant that they met all the other Unusual Creatures like themselves, and had a break from their daily lives. And the meeting gave them a chance to dress up a bit and show that they were still important.

'I'll go and tell Gladys,' said the Hag, 'so that she can prepare herself.'

Because the Hag was a kind of witch (most Hags are, one way or another) she had a familiar – an animal that helped her with her magic. The Hag had brought Gladys with her from the Dribble and they had been together for years.

Gladys was a toad. She lived in the back yard under a stone and had grown fat on the worms and beetles that the Hag's lodgers brought her.

So now the Hag went out to give Gladys the good news.

'We're off to the meeting next week, Gladys,' said the Hag, and waited for her to come out for her worm and look pleased.

But Gladys did not move.

'Did you hear me, Gladys?' asked the Hag. 'It's the summer meeting on Saturday.' Gladys came out from under the stone. She came out very, very slowly. She opened one eye. Then she shut it again – and said a single word.

'Tired.'

'What do you mean, tired,' said the Hag crossly. 'I'm tired. Everyone's tired. London's full of people who are tired. They got tired in the war when their houses were bombed and food was rationed and all that, and they've been tired ever since. But we have to do our work.

Gladys did not shake her head. Even toads who are familiars find it difficult to do that because their necks are so thick. All she did was repeat the same word.

'Tired.'

Gladys had never been a nice toad but this didn't matter. Familiars aren't meant to be nice, they are meant to be powerful. Now she turned her back on the Hag and began to crawl towards her stone.

'Are you telling me you aren't coming to the meeting?' cried the Hag.

Gladys did not answer but her back end looked obstinate and nasty.

'But I can't go without a familiar, it's impossible. I should feel undressed. I should feel stripped and naked!'

The troll shook his head. 'It's a bad business,' he said, 'but it's no good forcing her. She was always a bad-tempered animal. Goodness knows what she might get up to if you dragged her to the meeting against her will.'

'Yes, but what am I going to do?' cried the Hag.

'Could you perhaps get another familiar?' suggested Mr Prendergast. Being a completely ordinary person who worked in a bank made him see things very simply. 'There's a whole week to go.'

'A week's nothing,' cried the poor Hag. 'Oh why is everything against me? Nothing's gone right since I left the Dribble!'

The other lodgers came out then and stood round looking worried. Once the Hag got upset she was apt to go downhill very fast and remember sad things like that she was an orphan. People are often orphans when they are eighty-two, but it is true that when you have no mother or father you can feel very lonely at any age.

But she was a brave person and soon pulled herself together – and the next day the hunt for a new familiar began.