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The Angel of Nitshill Road

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Anne Fine

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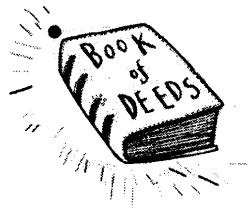
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The Angel of Nitshill Road

ANNE FINE



Illustrated by Kate Aldous

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Contents

1	Until the angel came . . .	1
2	'Why are you all staring at me?'	8
3	'Comfy as a cloud . . .'	19
4	'Stuck again.'	28
5	'Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!'	34
6	'Normal.'	43
7	Round robin	53
8	The Book of Deeds	62
9	'Only a joke. Only a game.'	72
10	Goodbye, Celeste	78



'And the angel did wondrously . . .'

Judges, 13

1

Until the angel came . . .

Until the angel came, there were three terribly unhappy children at Nitshill Road School: Penny, Mark and Marigold.

Shall we take Penny first?

Penny was plump. If you weren't friends with her, you might even say that she was getting on for fat. She had a pretty face, and lovely hair, and she was bright enough in class. But as the hands of the clock rolled round towards playtime she'd get a horrible feeling, as if her stomach was being gripped by a hard, invisible hand. However boring the lesson was, she wanted it to go on for ever and ever. Inside the classroom she was safe. Outside, Barry Hunter might go wheeling past, his arms stuck out like jet-plane wings, making the

usual big show of having to swerve to avoid her.

'Beware of the mountain! Danger! Danger! The moving mountain is coming this way!'

'He's just stupid,' said Lisa, her friend. 'Ignore him.'

'You must treat him with the contempt he deserves,' said her father.

'Some people are just born pig-ignorant,' said her gran.

But Penny still felt terribly unhappy.

And so did Mark. Mark was small for his age. He had strange sticky-up hair, and he wore glasses thick as bottle-ends. He gnawed his fingernails and his pencils, and fussed and fidgeted, and even when he finally stopped racketing around the classroom and tried to sit down and work – not very well – he still got on everyone's nerves. But only Barry Hunter knew how to

push him and push him and push him, till he flew into a temper.

'Mark the Martian!' he'd call from behind, imitating the rather peculiar stiff way Mark walked.

'Bionic eyes!' he'd shout, swooping up and peering through the thick lenses of Mark's spectacles.

'Controls not working properly?' he'd jeer whenever Mark dropped a ball, or missed a kick, or ran into a wall by mistake.

And sooner or later, unless the bell rang in time, Mark lost his temper – not like you or me, just getting red in the face and yelling, 'Oh, shut up, Barry Hunter! You're so stupid!' No. Mark went haywire, right out of control. With tears of rage spurting behind his glasses, he'd scream and howl and rush at Barry Hunter, trying to tear out chunks of his hair. Everyone turned to stare at him clawing and kicking and

yelling. Some couldn't help grinning quietly to themselves, but Barry Hunter laughed out loud. He was so big, he could hold Mark at arm's length and watch him flailing about like a windmill in a high gale.

Then he'd tease him some more. 'Now, now, now! Temper, temper!'

Mark's elder sister said:

'Just stay right away from him, Mark. Then maybe he won't bother you.'

The teachers said:

'Really, Mark brings a lot of it on himself. He has to learn a bit of self-control. They'll have to sort themselves out.'

Mark's mother said:

'I'm going up to see the school if it doesn't stop.'

It didn't stop.

The third child was Marigold. Nobody knew that Marigold was unhappy. She never looked particularly sad, but then



again she never looked particularly happy. In fact, she never looked anything. A portrait painter would have had no trouble at all with Marigold. Her face never cracked into a smile, or darkened with a scowl. People had tried to make friends with her but they never got very far. She'd be

away from school for a whole week, but only shrug when you asked what had been wrong with her. She'd hear your secrets, but she'd never tell you hers. In fact, come to think of it, she hardly ever spoke, even when Mr Fairway sighed over her slipshod and unfinished work, or Barry Hunter and his gang tormented her in the playground.

'Where do you live, Marigold? Is it that really smelly street we see you walking down after school?'

Marigold didn't answer. Others did.

'Push off, Barry Hunter,' said some of the girls. 'Leave Marigold alone. Don't be so mean.'

'You don't exactly live in a palace yourself,' said the others.

But when the girls turned to smile at Marigold, she'd simply drift away, not even saying thanks. What was the point of sticking up for someone who doesn't care?

You might as well leave her alone and get on with your own games.

'She can always join in if she wants,' they said to one another.

'She doesn't mix at all,' the teachers said.

'I'd try and do something about it,' said the head teacher. 'But, honestly, she doesn't seem all that unhappy. I'm sure in this school we've got worse.'

But she was wrong. These were, by far, the most unhappy children in the school.

Until the angel came.

