

Chapter Five



Ada tiptoed to the top of the grand staircase as quietly as she could, though it wasn't easy. The higher she went, the creakier the stairs became, until, as she approached the attic landing, every step caused a creak or a squeak.

'Very good,' said Emily Cabbage, who was waiting for her on the landing. 'I hardly heard you coming.'

Ada noticed that Emily was wearing her outdoor slippers. There was a ripple as William Cabbage stepped away from the plaster wall. 'Put your clothes on, William!' said Emily. There was another ripple as William stepped back into the shadows. He emerged a moment later in a flowing nightshirt.

'Follow me,' he said.

They walked along the attic corridor that ran the



length of the east wing past a row of closed doors. The sound of low, rumbling snores filled the air. 'The kitchen maids,' explained Emily, 'They go to bed at eight o'clock sharp because they have to get up so early.'

She stopped outside one of the doors and tapped on it lightly. The door opened and a small girl in a large cap and apron stepped out. When she saw Ada she looked startled, then blushed and gave a little curtsy.

'Ruby the outer-pantry maid, miss,' she mumbled.

Ada smiled and held out her hand.

'Please, call me Ada. Lovely to meet you. None of the maids have ever talked to me before,' she said as Ruby shyly shook her hand.



RUBY THE OUTER-PANTRY MAID

'That's because Mrs Beat'em says we're not allowed to,' Ruby said.

She glanced at William and Emily and her bottom lip trembled. 'I won't get into trouble, will I?'

'What happens in the Attic Club stays in the Attic Club,' said Emily firmly.

They continued down the corridor and turned the corner into a dark passageway at the end of which was a ladder fixed to the wall. At the top of the ladder was a trapdoor. Emily climbed the ladder and pushed open the trapdoor. She looked down at Ada, who was staring up at her.

'Welcome to the Attic Club,' she said with a smile.

Ada climbed the ladder, followed by Ruby and William. Stepping through the trapdoor, she found herself in a huge room with a sloping ceiling consisting of hundred of criss-crossing struts and beams. Along one side, close to the ground, were small round windows through which shafts of moonlight shone down across the dusty

floorboards. In the centre of the attic was a table made of fruit crates, ringed by old coal sacks stuffed with dried haricot beans, some of which had spilled out on to the floor. Two boys, both a little older than William, were sitting on the sacks. When they saw Ada, they jumped to their feet.

'Don't be nervous,' said William. 'Ada has come to join the Attic Club. This is Kingsley, the chimney caretaker, and this is Arthur Halford the hobby-horse groom.'

Ada had seen the hobby horse grooms in the grounds of Ghastly-Gorm Hall, but, like the kitchen maids,

they never talked to her.

Arthur Halford was short, with wire spectacles and unruly fair hair. He wore an oil-stained smock with various tools attached to it and a Gothkerchief knotted at the neck.



ARTHUR HALFORD THE HOBBY HORSE GROOM

By contrast, Kingsley the chimney caretaker was tall and thin, with spiky black hair and a pair of brushes strapped to his back like two sooty wings. He wore leather knee pads and black boots that were even bigger and clumpier than Ada's.

'I used to be the chimney caretaker's apprentice but then Van Dyke the chimney caretaker ran away with your governess, Hebe Poppins, so I got promoted,' said Kingsley with a smile.

'And I look after your father's hobby horse, Pegasus,' said Arthur, not wanting to be outdone. 'I'm getting it ready for the metaphorical bicycle race.'



KINGSLEY THE CHIMNEY CARETAKER

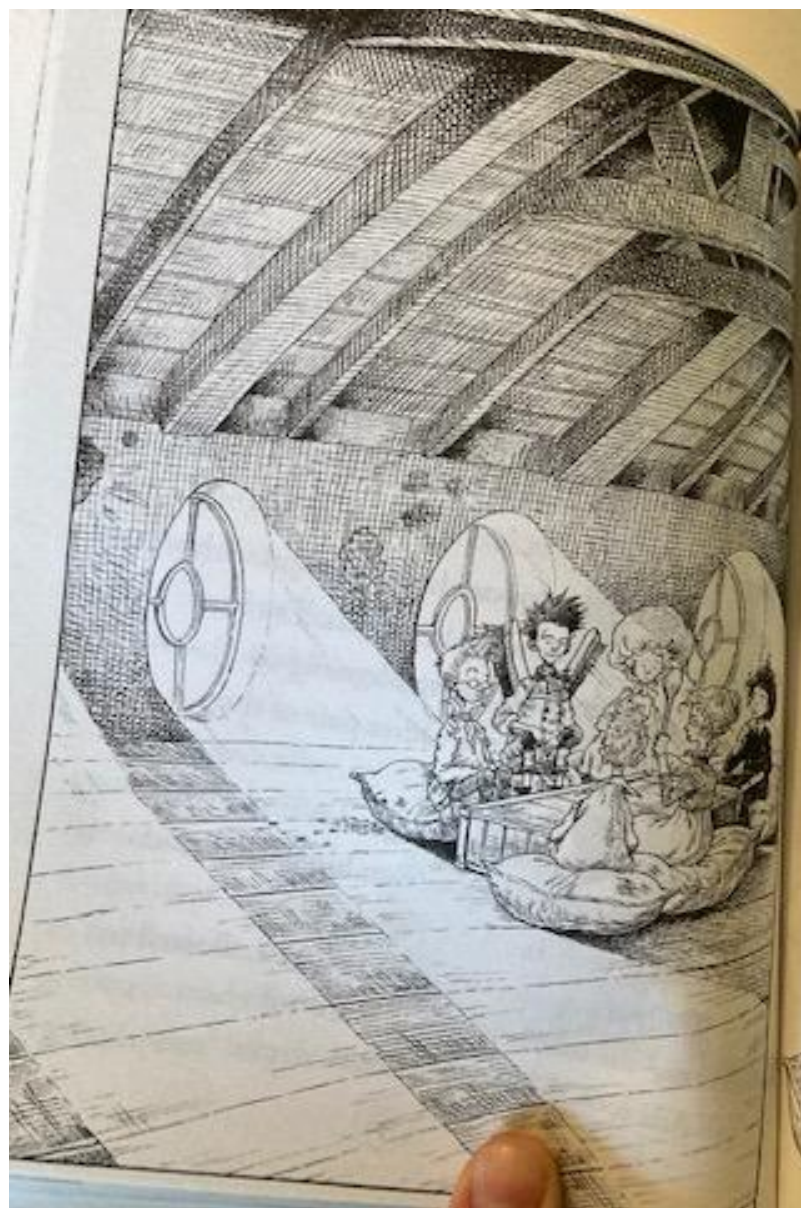
William, Emily and Ruby each sat down on a coal sack while Kingsley and Arthur shared one so that Ada could take the remaining seat. 'I declare this meeting of the Attic Club open,' said Emily, rapping on the table with the wooden spoon Ruby had just handed her. 'Who would like to go first?'

Arthur and Kingsley both reached for the wooden spoon in Emily's hand, but William beat them to it.

Holding up the spoon, he blended in with the blue-grey shadows behind him. 'I've been doing some very interesting blending-in recently,' he said, 'in the oldest part of the house.'

'The broken wing!' exclaimed Ada excitedly. Emily took the spoon from her brother and handed it to Ada.

'Only the person with the spoon is allowed to speak,' she told her. Ada took the spoon.



The broken wing,' she repeated a little more calmly before handing the spoon back to William.

'Yes,' said William. 'Two days ago I followed that gamekeeper Maltravers. He was collecting mice from his traps and then resetting the traps with cheese...'

From close by Ada heard

Ishmael let out a

little gasp, but nobody else seemed to notice. Looking down, she saw his outline shimmering at her feet.

'He opened a pair of doors with brass handles and crept inside,'

William went on. 'He was definitely up to something. But he closed





the doors before I had a chance to take a look.'

Ada took the spoon again.

'That room is called the Bathroom of Zeus, and it is where Maltravers hatches the miniature pheasants for my father's indoor hunt,' she told them.

Ruby reached out and gently took the spoon from Ada with an apologetic smile.

'Mrs Beat'em says she's fed up with Maltravers and his strange demands,' she reported. 'First it was Blue Gormly for his traps, and then it was porridge oats, a whole sackful, and then three smoked salmon, not to mention most of the carrots from the kitchen garden.'

Emily held out her hand

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and Ruby gave her the spoon.

'Whatever he's keeping in there has certainly got an interesting appetite,' she said. 'Porridge, smoked salmon, carrots and dead mice . . .'

Ada heard a strangulated sob ending in a squeak.

'I propose that the Attic Club find out what Maltravers is keeping in the Bathroom of Zeus,' Emily concluded, looking round the table.

'If you ask me,' said Ada, taking the spoon, 'Maltravers is up to no good.'

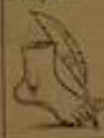
The rest of the meeting was taken up by reports from other members. Kingsley the chimney caretaker was a talented climber and had discovered some ornate chimneys* on the east wing that he wanted the rest of them to see. Arthur Halford, meanwhile, was a talented mechanic, and had perfected a safety harness they could wear while they did so.

Ruby, a talented cook, reported that she was getting everything they would need for

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Foot
Notes

*The ornamental chimneys of Glasty-Gorm Hall are some of the finest in the land. The Barley Sugar, The Hedgehog and The Six Chimneys of Henry VIII are among the more ornate examples.



a rooftop midnight feast, and William told them that he would borrow his father's telescope so they could all stargaze.

Ada didn't say anything. Every member of the Attic Club had a special talent, it seemed, except her. 'What can I do?' she asked.

'You have a wonderful imagination,' said Emily, squeezing her hand. 'I'm sure you'll think of something.'

At eleven o'clock Emily placed the wooden spoon on the fruit-crate table and they all went off to bed.

'When's the next meeting?' whispered Ada as she parted from William and Emily on the stairs.

'Same time next week,' said Emily.

'But the indoor hunt is on Saturday night!' said Ada. 'That's only three days away!'

'Don't worry, we can talk about our Maltravers investigation at breakfast tomorrow,' said Emily reassuringly.

Ada said goodnight and crept back to her room.

Glowing faintly in the dark, Ishmael followed her. Ada found her nightgown laid out on the Dalmatian divan and got changed for bed. Then, yawning sleepily, she climbed into the eight-poster bed, blew out her candle and drew the curtains before falling straight to sleep.

'What a strange day it has been,' said Ishmael with a little sigh.

