

**‘New Takes on Time’: A critical dissertation on
time-distort fiction and *The Serpent House*, a novel
for children.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of PhD

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2012

ABSTRACT

This project consists of a reappraisal of children's historical time-distort literature and a children's novel within the genre, entitled *The Serpent House*, aimed at readers aged 9 -12. The submission consists therefore of a critical piece of academic research into the genre, which reflects throughout on how the two pieces of work have informed each other.

The research component of the project argues that the critical consensus, which suggests that children's historical literature employing time-distort elements is prone to conservatism and convention, misrepresents this body of writing. As I show from its earliest examples, it has been a genre at least as progressive as any other in children's literature. An overview and two detailed case studies demonstrate these innovative elements.

The chronological overview and the texts that make up the case studies illustrate ways in which writing of this kind has been and continues to be experimental at a variety of levels. Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1988) was chosen for its challenging content and Gary Crew's *Strange Objects* (1990) for its experimental form. Analysing the primary texts and the related scholarship was part of the process by which I shaped my aspirations and creative decisions while writing *The Serpent House* and so the academic submission leads into a reading of my children's novel, which forms 70 per cent of the submission.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this project began with a writer's compulsion to tell a story, it has been improved immensely because it was shaped within the process of the Creative Writing PhD.

My thanks therefore go to my two supervisors: to Kimberley Reynolds, for her support, wisdom and unfailing patience, as well as her great generosity with her time and expertise, and to Jackie Kay, whose inspirational input into the novel has made it an infinitely better piece of work.

I would like to thank fellow PhD and MLitt students for their readiness to critique my work. Chris Clark has been a source of great support throughout the process, as has Helen Limon. I am grateful for the support of everyone in the Children's Literature and Creative Writing departments of Newcastle University.

Finally, many thanks to my husband Mark, particularly for proof-reading and formatting the submission, and Patrick, whose IT skills retrieved a crucial lost document. The love and encouragement of Mark, Naomi, Patrick and Mary has meant everything.

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PREFACE

The starting point for the thesis was the creative urge to tell a story. What began as two separate historical fictions and family stories eventually merged to form one children's historical time-distort novel, *The Serpent House*, which became the creative part of this submission.¹ The term 'time-distort' is one that I have coined for the works discussed in this thesis. An explanation of the term, why it is necessary and a time-line of representative works are provided in the appendices. The realisation that such a term was needed arose from research undertaken to deepen my creative practice. The research project which begins this submission was designed to acquaint me with the development and critical history of the kind of novel that I intended to write: the genre traditionally known as either time-slip or time-travel fiction, meaning fiction in which a character or characters move between two or more historical periods. Having completed the investigation, I was in a position to employ, depart from, subvert or challenge this genre's conventions (see Appendix 1) and was aware of mistakes for which previous writers have been criticised. In the course of the study it became clear that this is an under-researched aspect of children's literature and that critical thinking about it has not kept pace with the primary material. In addition to employing aspects of this learning in *The Serpent House*, then, I have further used the critical component of this submission to correct and challenge aspects of received thinking about historical fiction that moves between primary and secondary time periods. For this submission, then whilst there are two distinct discourses: the creative work of children's fiction which forms the larger section of the submission and the examination of the primary texts and related scholarship within my chosen genre. The overall submission reveals the intratextual relationship between the two.²

The research led me to the recognition that because most critical studies of time-distort fiction have tended to look at a small number of well-known texts, many written before 1960, assumptions about the nature of the genre have become outdated. During the time that I was engaged in this study, this situation has started to change and I find my work is now in dialogue with that of others,

¹ Texts which involve historical time-fantasy are referred to in this submission as 'time-distort.' For a full explanation of this terminology, see Appendix 1.

² For a discussion on my decision to refer to this body of work as a genre, see Appendix 1.

discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two. However, even more recent engagements with time-distort fiction tend not to examine some long-held assumptions and so perpetuate a misleading stereotype of the genre. A principal aim of this study is to argue against the view that time-distort fiction is both ideologically conservative and stylistically hidebound. As a writer who was about to embark on a time-distort novel, I was initially concerned to establish that I was writing in a genre which is capable of innovation and experimentation and that I would not become somehow trapped by the form. Earlier critics have tended to present the history of the genre as one of decline, from a handful of exceptional individual texts to a derivative body of writing large designed to help young readers become interested in the past. The alternative history I propose, in the overview and two case studies, reveals time-distort fiction as capable of innovation and experimentation as any other developing form of children's fiction and therefore deserving of reappraisal.

The Serpent House took as its dual inspiration (i) the history of the village where I live, Spittal in Berwick-upon-Tweed, which took its name from the early medieval leper hospital which was sited there, and (ii) my own family history, upon which stories from my great-aunts and their lives in service in large homes in Newcastle and Cumbria could be drawn. As parts of the narrative formed on paper it became clear that this was not only to be a historical novel, but one in which two periods of the past needed to be explored and shown to converge. Its primary chronotope (see Appendix 1), therefore, is the late Victorian period and its secondary time is the very early medieval period, around the eleventh century.³ The linking of the two historical periods was not merely convenient: the fascination of the Victorians with medieval history (or their version of it) is well-documented and it was a time when illness, particularly leprosy, was greatly sentimentalised, and assumptions created about the condition in the nineteenth century persist today.

³ For a definition of the term 'chronotope', see Appendix 1.

The initial ideas for this children's novel were discussed at the earliest stage of the PhD with my creative supervisor, Jackie Kay, at which point I began some related exercises in creative writing and an early draft of the narrative. For instance, we experimented with different voices, with telling the narrative in first and third person and with using a diary format. The results of these decisions informed the early work done on the novel. So, too, did my reading across the history of the genre, from 1906 to the present day. Whilst conducting these creative experiments, I was also immersing myself in primary texts and their related scholarship. This meant I could compare my strategies with those that had been used previously. Whilst wishing to place myself as a children's writer firmly within the time-distort tradition, I also proposed to demonstrate how my own work and that of others continues to refresh the genre. The methodology section which comprises the following chapter goes some way to answering this question, with regard to *The Serpent House*, and it also offers insights into how many of the creative decisions were considered and resolved. Although it may be unusual to place this information ahead of the literature review, in this submission the creative section must necessarily bear the most weight, and therefore this decision is, I feel, the correct one.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the children's historical time-distort genre, with a focus on key periods in which there were notable and critically-acclaimed additions to the genre. The overview is organised chronologically in terms of the primary texts and links are made between it and a literature review which summarises and critiques the available scholarship on authors and texts from these time periods. Discussion of the scholarship is not chronological because it was often preferable to consider critical debates that shared approaches or concerns. The most important periods in terms of the flourishing of the genre are the turn of the twentieth century, the years following the Second World War, and the years between the late 1970s and the early twenty-first century, in which time-distort became the most ubiquitous form of children's historical fiction. As becomes apparent in Appendix 2, time-distort as a fictional form, in spite of an apparent lack of critical attention, has consistently won awards and proved both innovative and enduring.

Chapter Two is followed by two case studies into historical time-distort texts which were both notably innovative, in terms of content and form, and which strongly influenced my own creative process. It is in these case studies that the interactions between these key works, the scholarship attached to them and the creative part of this submission are most fully developed. The short conclusion summarises the findings of the submission and is followed by a reflective coda outlining the changes made to it since the viva in September 2010. The submission concludes with *The Serpent House*, a 69,000-word juvenile time-distort novel for readers broadly between the ages of nine and twelve.

CHAPTER 1. THE SERPENT HOUSE AND THE RESEARCH-CREATIVE NEXUS

1.1 *The Serpent House*: Background and Preliminary Decisions

The Serpent House, which forms approximately 70% of this submission, tells the story of twelve-year-old girl Annie, who has recently lost her mother and is living unhappily with her aunt and cousins.¹ The trauma of her mother's death has caused Annie to lose her hair; this is one aspect of the theme of disfigurement which runs throughout the book. Annie's disfigurement is one that a modern young reader might understand more readily than those associated with leprosy, the other cause of disfigurement in the novel.² Annie has come to work at Hexer Hall, where her older brother Tom is a gardener. Lady Hexer has been experimenting with the occult; her actions enable Annie to travel back in time to the eleventh century, when the site of the Hall was a leper hospital. Lady Hexer tasks Annie with bringing back a book which she believes to contain magical cures. Annie learns that the 'cures' are dangerous and destroys the book in a fire, whilst fires simultaneously destroy both the medieval hospital and Hexer Hall. A sequel, *The Witch's House*, currently in progress, follows Annie, Tom and Tom's sweetheart Lucy through the period after the fire. The book was shortlisted for the 2010 Times/Chicken House award and Chicken House have asked me to make revisions and submit a new draft with a view to publication.³

One of the earliest decisions I made as a result of my research was to raise the age of the novel's intended readership. Initially I had planned to write for readers of approximately the same age as my own children, who were then eight and ten. However, various studies, notably J.A. Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader* (1991), indicated that time-distort is a genre which appeals to readers of nine and above.⁴

¹ The names of central characters in the novel were chosen from my own family history, the exceptions being Lady Hexer and Miss Haggstone.

² As an exercise before starting the first draft of the novel, my creative supervisor Jackie Kay suggested that I write about my own experiences of childhood hair loss. The subsequent piece of writing was turned into a short story, *Alopecia*, which is published in the 2010 *Momaya* anthology of short stories. *Momaya Annual Review 2010*. London, U.K. and Gaylordsville, Connecticut: MomayaPress), pp. 57 – 64.

³ These revisions are, at the time of writing, still under scrutiny by the editorial team at Chicken House.

⁴ J.A. Appleyard (1991) *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

This, in combination with the issues I wanted to explore, convinced me that the novel would work best if aimed at a slightly older audience. As my thinking on the novel itself progressed, I realised I wanted to explore some psychological issues; reading across the genre showed that time-distort is a helpful device for writers when exploring issues of the psyche. In keeping with the wider body of children's literature as a whole, protagonists' psychological development has been a central concern of the genre, particularly since the 1980s.

Appleyard points out that it is normally between the ages of ten and thirteen that a child reader begins to empathise with others and imagine what others are thinking and feeling. He gives the example of 'Stephen', who at the age of fifteen is both looking backward at the magical 'heroes and villains' world of childhood literature, yet also leaving behind his more concrete way of thinking to embrace the mind of an adolescent and what Piaget calls 'formal-operational intelligence.' By this he means the young reader is no longer limited to thinking about concrete objects but is able to think hypothetically and empathise with others' points of view, whilst also reflecting critically on his or her own thoughts.⁵ This was important for my writing, as issues of disfigurement and the isolation connected with illness were to be explored in the novel. By aiming at an older readership, these issues could be explored in a more detailed way, which would also be more satisfying on a creative level. Appleyard points out that it is also at this age when young readers begin to see conflict in people's motives and points of view: they stop seeing people in a simplistic 'good or bad' way.⁶ Characters and their complexities become more important. This resonated with a creative exercise carried out whilst developing the character of Lady Hexer. This exercise was suggested by my creative supervisor and began because initially the character of Lady Hexer was imagined as an evil woman who had little regard for those she used in her quest to retrieve her ancestor's book. This clear identification of Lady Hexer as 'bad' reflects my original intention to aim the novel at a younger readership. In the exercise, I 'allowed Lady Hexer to speak to me,' which involved placing myself within this character's mind-set to write the story entirely from her point of view. It quickly became clear that her motives, if not

⁵ J.A. Appleyard (1991), p. 90. Appleyard agrees that 'Stephen' is a little old for the chapter on 'Later Childhood', but cites him because he demonstrates a particular level of reading and critical ability which will be more common in my slightly younger intended readership.

⁶ J.A. Appleyard (1991), pp. 86-7.

her methods, were more complex and morally ambiguous than would be consistent with an unambiguously bad character. As a result an additional narrative voice and stronger character of Lady Hexer that should challenge the reader was added. The exercise helped to confirm the decision to write for an older audience. This kind of exercise meant that I was able to explore the motives of more than one central character and also able to develop the character of Annie so that she too was imperfect and often less than heroic.

The book raises questions about how people treat children who have an obvious physical difference and how such children may feel. The use of two time periods was helpful in that Annie finds even more potential for isolation in the secondary chronotope than she experiences in the primary time. Hair loss in particular can result, for girls, in a sense of loss of femininity. In literature, physically-challenged protagonists are often treated as paragons.⁷ Annie, however, is not a wholly good or noble character; she can be weak, vain and bad-tempered. I wanted to show her developing psychologically and socially as a result of the time-distort episodes. This I feel I have achieved and in a fresh way, in that Annie feels able towards the end of the book to rebel and challenge those in power rather than learn to respect her elders, as is often a desired outcome in earlier time-distort fiction.⁸ Rather than returning to her adult carer, her aunt, Annie, chooses a new and less conventional family structure in her brother and his girlfriend.

Appleyard's observation of adolescent readers identified three aspects of their reading that are relevant to my research and novel. These are the level of involvement and identification, the realism of the story and the way in which a story 'made them think.'⁹ Fiction aimed at this age group tends to show the world as a complex, not wholly innocent place, with both growth and disillusionment often found in the texts. This summary gave me the confidence to include darker, less innocent aspects of life in the novel, whilst previously I was not clear whether or not such features would be acceptable to both gatekeepers and readers of children's

⁷ See, for instance, Katy and Cousin Helen in Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872) or Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Lois Keith (2001), *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls*. (London: The Women's Press)

⁸ For a fuller discussion of this notion, see Chapter Two.

⁹ J.A. Appleyard (1991), p.100.

literature. I also had to contend with the long-established belief that children's fiction should be, in general, optimistic. This, it transpired, is no longer the consensus, and has always been less insisted upon for older readers. The research into Jane Yolen's work, which forms Chapter Three of this submission, is an example of a time-distort novels for adolescents that employs dark themes and subjects. In its historical background is given an extra element of time-distort, which is linked to the protagonist developing maturity and strength of character.

Although I determined to write for older readers, I was aware that there are difficulties with the concept of the 'implied reader,' and these were considered during the writing process.¹⁰ While I was writing the novel the issue came to the fore with the public controversy that arose around printing suggested reading ages on book covers.¹¹ I found it almost impossible to write a novel without some imagined recipient in mind, however, and so, at first unconsciously but then deliberately, I returned to writing for my own children. By this time they had become the ages of my chosen readership. Although some writers prefer not to do this, such a practice has worked for a number of other children's authors and illustrators, including Penelope Lively. In her book on writing children's fiction, Judy K. Morris, the author of *Nightwalkers* (1996) and *The Crazies and Sam* (1985), states that it is usual and often helpful for writers to keep their own children in mind whilst writing: 'Some of the best-told stories grow out of parents' entertainment for their own children.'¹² Other writers, such as Francesca Simon, author of the *Horrid Henry* series, admit to being inspired by their children, if not to writing 'for' them.¹³

¹⁰ Peter Hollindale explores this concept in his 1988 work on ideology in children's literature, which first appeared in *Signal Magazine* 55 in 1988 and is reprinted in Peter Hunt (ed.), (1992), *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge), pp.19-40. It was earlier discussed by Aidan Chambers in his 1977 essay, 'The Reader in the Book', which may be found in Peter Hunt (1990), *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge), pp.91-114. Although neither Hollindale nor Chambers developed the concept of the implied reader, their contribution was to apply it to the child reader.

¹¹ In June 2008 a number of leading publishers announced their intention to use 'age banding' on their children's books to guide readers and parents on its suitability. The idea was denounced by a number of influential children's writers including Philip Pullman, Michael Rosen, Michael Morpurgo and Jacqueline Wilson, on the grounds that it may dissuade a young reader from selecting a book and also may discourage a reader who, whilst being in the correct age band, still finds the book too difficult.

¹² Judy K. Morris (2001) *Writing Fiction for Children: Stories Only You Can Tell*. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press).

¹³ Helen Brown (2008), 'Henry is Horrid so they don't have to be', *Daily Telegraph* interview with Francesca Simon, 15th March 2008. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3671833/Henry-is-horrid-so-they-dont-have-to-be.html> (Accessed 9th January 2011).

1.2 Key research questions for *The Serpent House*

Although *The Serpent House* is a time-distort novel, the historical elements of the project meant that factual research necessarily influenced both its conception and its creative development. In utilising this research, the knowledge that even nonfiction contains unconscious subjectivity and ideologies remained a consideration. As suggested in the Preface, the inspiration for the novel had two components. These were the legends, based on a small number of historical facts, that have grown up around an early medieval leper hospital based in my home village of Spittal in Berwick upon Tweed, and the oral histories of family members who worked in service in large houses in Newcastle and Cumbria. I have also indicated [that](#), as the project took shape, it became clear that the late Victorian and early medieval time periods needed to marry and form part of the same narrative, which is why the time-travel element began to feature. Because both the primary and secondary time periods are set in the past, and in spite of the strengthened elements of fantasy in the later draft, both had to be researched. Although unusual in its use of two such periods, *The Serpent House* follows something of a tradition in its choice, use and combination of settings. Suzanne Rahn points out that the early phases of the historical novel were closely linked to ‘Romantic medievalism and its adoption by the Victorians’ and also that nineteenth century novelists were sometimes sceptical about the earlier era; it was, she says both an attraction and a repulsion.¹⁴ Mark Twain, for example, critiques medieval society as brutal and medieval religion as superstitious in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882). In a typical historical time-distort novel, an attraction for the writer has been to examine what the present day may find to say to an era of the past, as well as what contemporary societies may learn from history.

¹⁴ Suzanne Rahn (1991), ‘An Evolving Past: The Story of Historical Fiction and Nonfiction for Children’. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Volume 15, No. 1, June 1991, pp. 1-26; p.5

1.3 History and Fiction

The re-creation of the past [...] is more than a purely intellectual task[...] It requires imaginative powers and an eye for detail not unlike those of the novelist - John Tosh (2002)¹⁵

Both ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ are terms which are today acknowledged as being inherently unstable. What is generally accepted since the emergence of New Historicism in the 1980s is that, whilst it is sometimes possible to establish a historical fact, such as the date of a given event, when a series of ‘facts’ are assembled into what appears to be a historical record, such a document can no longer be read without taking into consideration the biases and discourses of the record-keeper and the times in which the account was written. Historical fiction in many ways can be understood as a related process where the speculation is acknowledged and the filling in of gaps more thorough. For example, Margaret Atwood, in her Afterword to the adult novel *Alias Grace* (1996), based on the Kinnear-Montgomery murder trials in Canada in 1843, points out that, whilst working with historical records, she felt at liberty to invent where necessary:

I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history). I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally “known.” When in doubt, I have tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent.¹⁶

Although Atwood may have felt compelled to clarify certain aspects of the novel because she was basing the work on the life of a real person, her dilemma is one which faces all writers who set their works in the past. It is therefore an authorial decision whether or not to add an author’s note or epilogue setting out, for the benefit of the reader, which elements are based entirely on known records and which are invention. Jane Yolen, for example, chose to write an epilogue to *The Devil’s Arithmetic* in which she explained that the events are based on the accounts of Holocaust survivors, whilst Gary Crew challenges readers to work out for themselves which parts of the novel may or may not be ‘true’. In Susan Price’s *The Sterkarm*

¹⁵ John Tosh (2002), *The Pursuit of History*, rev. 3rd edition (Harlow: Pearson Education), p. 141.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood (1996), *Alias Grace*. (London: Bloomsbury), Author’s Afterword, pp. 466-7.

Handshake (1998), what may appear to the reader as painstaking historical detail is in fact largely the product of the writer's imagination. In this case, the author has chosen to clarify this in a detailed section of her website, dedicated only to the *Sterkarm* novels and set out in question-and-answer format. For example, Price says that, although the history and landscape of the Borders inspired the novel, she 'wouldn't like anyone to use it as a text-book.' She adds:

The border between Scotland and England was a dangerous, lawless place for many centuries, and the 'riding-families' or reivers did exist. My description of their way of life is, I think, fairly accurate, but I used my imagination a lot too. The book is fiction, not history.¹⁷

The question of whether to spell out for the younger reader which elements of *The Serpent House* are historically verifiable and which either realistic invention or fantasy was one which was considered at some length. Ultimately, because in a later draft many of these elements are more clearly defined, I decided this was not necessary, although, should a publisher feel that such a coda must be included, then I would be guided by this. Landscape and regional history are common prompts for a creative process and played a large part in the writing of *The Serpent House*. The historical fiction writer Jamila Gavin suggested that the need to 'claim' her own local landscape was a key motivation for the writing of *Coram Boy* (2000), a notion which echoed some of my own motivations for *The Serpent House*.¹⁸ Compared to what is known about the Border reivers, factual documentation about the leper hospital at Spittal is available only in the barest sense, although it was possible to augment the detail using documentation from and about similar institutions in the North-East, UK and Europe.

1.4 Illness in the Victorian and Medieval Chronotopes

In writing *The Serpent House*, it became an interest to explore how the Victorians viewed aspects of medieval life, including illness, and in this way to point the reader

¹⁷ Susan Price (2011). Available at www.susanpriceauthor.com (Accessed 27th June 2011).

¹⁸ Jamila Gavin (2009), 'When Life Becomes History', *Past Continuous: Historical Fiction for Children*, 10th October 2009, University of Newcastle. Jamila Gavin (2000), *Coram Boy* (London: Egmont).

towards the otherness of the past and the partisan nature of historical account. These links between attitudes to illness in the two chronotopes were reinforced through the historical research. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was renewed leprophobia, particularly in Scotland, owing to accounts of a recurrence of the condition in parts of Europe and also to British colonial activities and their linked interest in tropical medicine.¹⁹

Some mention of terms is appropriate here. It is more acceptable in the twenty-first century to refer to the condition as Hansen's disease, rather than leprosy, and to the sufferer as patient rather than leper. Nevertheless, the two modern terms were not used to describe the condition or those suffering from it in either the Victorian or the medieval periods, and therefore *The Serpent House*, and so this accompanying submission, retains these more archaic terms. In creative terms the word 'leper' is also more resonant with other meanings involving isolation, rejection and fear.

The leper colony proved an attractive subject for Victorian writers. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, wrote of how notions of 'deformity and living decay have been burdensome to my imagination since the nightmares of childhood', and we may see evidence of this in *The Black Arrow*, which was serialised in 1883.²⁰ By the late nineteenth century, leprosy became a figurative descriptor in a number of works of literature. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for example, Mina Harker describes herself as "unclean" after her neck is pierced by the Count, and throughout the novel descriptions of the vampire echo those of the traditional leper figure.²¹ More explicit references to the condition may be found in stories by Kipling and Conan Doyle, in both cases seen as linked with imperialism.²² Although *The Serpent House* therefore is part of a more general literary interest in leprosy, it is nonetheless

¹⁹ Leprosy does not conform to type for a tropical disease but the Victorians considered it to be so. During the 1880s there were calls for compulsory segregation of those with the condition in the colonized countries.

²⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson (published posthumously 1896), 'The Eight Islands', in A. Grove Day, (ed.) (1973), *Travels in Hawaii: Robert Louis Stevenson*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), p. 64.

²¹ For example, when Mina is burned with a sacred wafer, she pulls her veil over her face 'as the leper of old his mantle' and the description of Mina's face becoming corrupted with characteristics of the vampire describes these as a thickened forehead, considered a feature of emerging leprosy. See Bram Stoker (1897), *Dracula* (Oxford: World Classics, 1996), pp. 296 and 323.

²² For a further discussion of the links between perceptions of leprosy and the imperialism of the Victorian era, see Rod Edmond (2006), *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

a subject which has been little touched upon in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This silence influenced the choice of the Victorian era as the primary chronotope since then interest in the condition was still very much a medical, an imperial and a creative concern.

The starting point for the medieval time-fantasy was in a historical fact: the site of the early medieval leper hospital in Spittal, which derives its name from this former building. Little has been recorded about the hospital, although many legends are told about it and some of these are used in the novel: for example, the notion that bodies were sometimes buried but sometimes instead were thrown out to sea. Historians at a local church named after St Bartholomew, a saint often associated with lepers in the medieval period, recently uncovered the tomb of a knight. Archaeologists from Newcastle University have suggested that he might have suffered from leprosy, since a likely reason for a knight to have been buried so far from his home would be because he died at the local leper hospital. The church also contains a 'leper window.'

Local information, anecdotes and legends were supplemented with further research to ensure that, as far as possible and in line with the amount and level of detail appropriate for my chosen audience, an accurate picture of the period was provided. The principal focus of my research into this period was around leper hospitals and the inhabitants' daily lives. Such hospitals comprised communities largely set apart from society with specific rules and routines, including dress. As part of this research I communicated with the charity Lepra, which provided historical information and recommended specialist histories including Anthony Weymouth's *Through the Leper Squint* (1938). The purpose of studying such an old work is that Weymouth's volume was the basis on which many popular assumptions have been, and are still, made about the treatment of leper communities in the medieval period. More recently Carole Rawcliffe, Professor of Medieval History at the University of East Anglia, has produced the first serious academic study of the disease and its social ramifications in the medieval period: *Leprosy in Medieval England* (2006).

Rawcliffe dispels many long-held misconceptions and stereotypes about the treatment of the disease which led to changes in my novel. For example, an early draft includes an episode involving the so-called ‘leper mass,’ in which a person suffering from the condition underwent a religious service, rather like a funeral, intending to declare the sufferer ‘dead’ to society. Such an incident was described by Geoffrey Trease in the first chapter of *The Red Towers of Granada* (1966), which opens with the words: ‘It is a strange and terrible thing to listen to one’s own funeral service.’²³ Although I have no direct evidence that Trease drew on Weymouth’s work, the subsequent wording of this section in the novel is remarkably similar to Weymouth’s description of the leper mass. According to Rawcliffe, however, there is no evidence that such a ritual ever took place in either England or France; belief in its existence, amongst both scholarly and popular literature, is ‘persistent but entirely erroneous,’ she writes.²⁴ However, as she acknowledges, ‘Fictitious or not, the morbid spectacle of the ‘Leper Mass’ appealed to Victorian sensibilities.’²⁵ Nor were reactions to the medieval leper as universally negative as has traditionally been assumed, while the standards of living were not as low as much post-Victorian literature has depicted it. Details of potential cures, uniform, layout and gardens from English and Scottish leper houses are also provided in Rawcliffe’s work, although I also made some judicious use of Weymouth, material from the charity Lepra, David Marcombe’s *Leper Knights* (2003) and Peter Richards’ 1977 work *The Medieval Leper*.

1.5 Stretching Time in *The Serpent House*

As with all time-distort novels, the treatment of time itself was a key element in the writing. It is important to distinguish, however, between those texts which fit more easily into the category of science-fiction, where an explanation for the manipulation of time is usually provided, and those more deliberately historical time-distort novels in which a magical object is used as a portal to the past but comparatively little is said about the ‘mechanics’ of the time-distort process. In the latter, the object – be it Nesbit’s amulet, Pearce’s garden door, Lively’s tamburan, or, in my own case, the

²³ Geoffrey Trease (1972) *The Red Towers of Granada* (Harmondsworth: Puffin), p.7. [1966].

²⁴ Carole Rawcliffe (2006) *Leprosy in Medieval England*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press), p.19.

²⁵ Carole Rawcliffe (2006), p. 20.

depictions of serpents around Hexer Hall - is often intended as a metaphor for the importance and strength of the present's connection with the past. Although time-distort works dating back to Nesbit owe a debt to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (1905) in that time is depicted as potentially flexible, the choice of the Victorian primary time period was also important. The standardisation of clocks, the introduction of railway timetables and the increasing amount of factory *work*, which required workers to clock on and off, all contributed to the changing concepts of time in the nineteenth century. According to Professor Richard J. Evans, 'Time began to stretch back far beyond what people had previously imagined; it became larger, as well as more uniform and more organized.'²⁶

When writing *The Serpent House*, therefore, it was important to show time as changeable. The novel was deliberately set in the old Christmas period, which was longer in the medieval era than in the Victorian, so that Christmas celebrations are over in the primary time before the secondary. In an earlier draft, diary form was employed; when two first-person narrators were employed, the dates were nevertheless kept as chapter headings in order to reinforce the notion of the elasticity of time in the novel. A perpetual calendar was used to ensure that weekdays and dates in the Victorian chronotope were accurate. Because the child character in the medieval chronotope would not have used clocks or calendars in the same way, the dates and times in these sections are deliberately ambiguous, and this is also intended to add to the abstruseness of these sections. When, in the secondary chronotope, Annie does not know what time or date it is and this adds to her feelings of dislocation. This treatment of time will continue in the sequel-in-progress, in which times and dates, particularly those in the secondary chronotope, will tend to be based around seasonal or religious festivals.

1.6 Talking to the Past

Language does, of course, carry the past in it, but the man of words need not always turn back, or need not only turn back

²⁶ Professor Richard J. Evans (2010), *The Victorians: Time and Space*. [Lecture to Museum of London, 13th September 2010]. Transcript available at <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-victorians-time-and-space> (Accessed 26th April 2011).

– Russell Hoban (1975).²⁷

According to Gillian Lathey, fiction set in the past may be divided into two groups. In the first are those driven by ‘a passion for history and a desire to make a historical period live and breathe for the child reader,’ and in the second, a group less easily defined, those for whom the historical setting acts as a ‘catalyst for the imagination.’²⁸ Lathey cites the example of Rosemary Sutcliff as a writer whose recreation of language is underpinned by ‘a serious historical intention.’²⁹ Sutcliff’s method included filling many notebooks with research on details, including the use of language. The problem for readers, however, is that language is ephemeral and that what John Stephens terms a ‘register of antiquity,’ or the archaic words and syntax chosen by the author to conjure up the period, in fact takes on the contemporary values of the author and therefore creates a distinct mismatch between past and present. As an example of this, Lathey cites an early Sutcliff novel, *The Armourer’s Daughter* (1951), in which the archaisms cannot disguise the portrayal of value and mores typical to a 1950s middle-class British household. Sutcliff also feels the need to explain unfamiliar terms, such as when she tells the reader that ‘mary-buds’ are called marsh marigolds today.³⁰

The concern with language takes on an extra dimension for writers of time-distort fiction because in most instances the central character is made to communicate with others whom, if the text were entirely realist, they would have struggled to understand – if they could understand them at all. It is a dilemma that first occurred to Edith Nesbit, when she sent her characters back to Egypt in 6000 B.C., but she deals with it boldly:

Now, once and for all, I am not going to be bothered to tell you how it was that the girl could understand Anthea and Anthea could understand the girl. [...] Perhaps the children had found out the universal language which everyone can understand and which wise

²⁷ Russell Hoban (1975), ‘Thoughts on being and writing,’ in E. Blishen(ed.), *The Thorny Paradise: Writers on writing for children*. (Harmondsworth: Kestrel), pp. 65-76.

²⁸ Gillian Lathey (2001), ‘A havey-cavey business: language in historical fiction with particular reference to the novels of Joan Aiken and Leon Garfield’, in Fiona M. Collins and Judith Graham, (eds.), *Historical Fiction for Children: Capturing the past*. (London: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.), pp. 32-41.

²⁹ Gillian Lathey (2001), p. 33.

³⁰ Ibid.

men so far have not found. [...] Or it may have been that ... but why pursue the question further?³¹

Even in time-distort fiction which recreates the more recent past, language is frequently used as a device to illustrate the alienation of protagonists from their surroundings and to add an attempted authenticity to the creation of the secondary chronotopes. For example, in Kate Saunders' *Beswitched* (2010), in which the protagonist is sent back to a Blytonesque girls' boarding school in the 1930s, the characters use expressions such as "Oh, blow!" and "When your people are in the colonies."³² Jane Yolen's protagonist in *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1988) needs to make more use of Yiddish during her time in the past and this further reinforces the author's point about the need to preserve the Jewish culture. In the chapter on Gary Crew, it is noted that the author avoided the attempted recreation of language from his chosen period of history by having the diaries translated into modern language for serialisation in a newspaper. Susan Price, who in *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1998) appears to lean towards Lathey's first category, felt that some reference must be made to the fact that the two peoples from the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries would not be able to understand each other. She explains how she considered various solutions to the dilemma, including whether to pastiche middle English or to have the Sterkarms speak a kind of antiquated English full of dialect words:

All of these solutions seemed to draw attention to the trickery involved [...] The most straightforward way of solving the problem was actually to have the Sterkarms speak - at least some of the time - in a way that was close to English, but quite obviously hard to understand.³³

Price's solution was to use Danish, on the basis that it is a language different from but close to English, creating what she terms 'dog Danish.'³⁴ Price further makes the connection that the Sterkarms are geographically placed in the Scottish-English borderlands, where many dialect words bear a similarity to Danish words. For example, the Danish word for a church is 'kirke' and the Scottish word is 'kirk'; the Scots and Northumbrians often call a child a 'bairn' while the Danish for child is

³¹ E. Nesbit (1996) *The Story of the Amulet*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p.58. [1906].

³² Kate Saunders (2010), *Beswitched*. (London: Scholastic).

³³ Susan Price (2011). Available at www.susanpriceauthor.com (Accessed 29th. June 2011).

³⁴ On her website, Price says she is a Danish speaker. Ibid.

'barne'; the Danish words for home is 'hjemme', pronounced 'hyemma', while Northumbrians often pronounce the word 'home' as 'hyem.' One of the roles of the central focaliser, Andrea, an anthropologist, is to translate the language for her twenty-first century colleagues and she is therefore a filter for the otherness of the Sterkarms. This 'dog-Danish' device created problems of its own, however. Since few British readers speak Danish or are familiar with its alphabet, the 'Danglish' sections had to be written phonetically. Price also admits that the reader would have to employ 'a bit of concentration' in order to follow fully the Sterkarm language.³⁵ Certainly, at times, the created language halts the flow of the narrative, and appears unnecessary. For example, on pp. 148 and 149 are the following pieces of dialogue, which are written in a way common throughout the narrative: "'*Yi seer nigh!*" I said no!' and later, "'*Vah air day?*" Per asked. What's that?"³⁶ Not only do readers have to concentrate, but they also have to read what is effectively the same piece of dialogue twice. What Price has created, therefore, is an effective way of emphasising the otherness of characters from the distant past. It becomes a creative decision whether or not this interferes with the elegance of the writing and whether it is an additional requirement the author wishes to impose upon the reader.

It is also unclear why some sections of dialogue are written in Price's faux sixteenth-century language and others not, but certainly the invented words challenge the reader. This decision therefore reflects the young adult age group which *The Sterkarm Handshake* targets and the followers of the Sterkarm page on Facebook may also suggest an even older readership. Returning to my own concerns about audience age, I had to make similar decisions about how far to create separate languages for my two chronotopes, though, particularly for the Victorian period, the changes did not need to be as pronounced as in the Sterkarm series. Effective strategies for this formed the basis of several discussions in creative supervisory sessions. As *The Serpent House* is aimed at a younger readership than the Sterkarm novels, the suggestion that a language should be created which would attempt authentically to portray that spoken in the secondary time period was ruled out at an early stage in the creative process. For a writer, the creation of a cod-medieval dialect, which would be as inauthentic as a modern one is anachronistic, was

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Susan Price (1999), *The Sterkarm Handshake*, p. 148 and p.149.

particularly unappealing and, we concluded, might present a barrier to the reader's enjoyment. In historical time-distort fiction central characters are often called upon to go to places where they are not intended to go. To make this journey too grounded in reality could in some cases, and particularly for readers of the targeted nine-to-twelve age group, destroy the elements of magic, one of which is, for many writers in the tradition, that the protagonist does not need a translator or a phrase book but is, somehow, understood and can understand.

Many creative writing textbooks also advise against the over-use of dialect when writing for children. Joan Aiken, for example, says that dialect must be used with great discretion and what may have been acceptable some decades ago is no longer: 'Fear of snobbery and racism, disgust at sentimentality, dislike of phoniness and simply fashion, have reduced dialect in fiction to a minimum [...] The contemporary writer has to convey dialect, if any, by cadence and word order, rather than eccentric spelling.'³⁷ Aiken herself makes use of her research into the Elizabethan underworld and 'thieves' cant' throughout her James III series, but later admits that the texts are 'probably too self-indulgent, full of dialect and adult word-play.'³⁸ Similar advice about the pitfalls of overusing dialect in juvenile time-distort fiction is found in other creative writing textbooks, for example, those of Louise Jordan (1998).³⁹ Accordingly, in the latest revision of *The Serpent House*, both dialect and an invented faux-medieval language have still been avoided. Exploring how this could be used creatively, in the latest draft Annie and Meg are unable to understand each other quite as easily as they would have done in a Nesbit time-distort story. Currently the problem is encountered directly in places, with the two girls having to fall back on a kind of signing, particularly in their earlier encounters:

It was clear she didn't understand. But then she gave me a big grin and said: "Bet you're hungry. I have food." She rubbed her skinny tummy and pointed to her mouth.⁴⁰

³⁷ Joan Aiken (1982), *The Way to Write for Children*. (London: Penguin), p. 62.

³⁸ Joan Aiken (1986), Interview with S. Nettell, *Books for Keeps* 39, pp. 12-13. Cited in Gillian Lathey (2001), pp. 39-40.

³⁹ Louise Jordan (1998), *How to write for Children – and get published* (London: Piatkus Books).

⁴⁰ *The Serpent House*, p. 41.

In common with Price, my research suggested that those living on the England-Scotland border, even in the much earlier time period of the eleventh century, would have spoken a kind of English, although one which would be unrecognisable to the modern or nineteenth-century ear. To gain a better understanding of what English might have been like at this time I consulted the historian Alistair Moffat, who specialises in early Border history. Moffat explains:

Most people spoke English in the Borders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a northern dialect like Geordie, using early forms of words like bairn, hoose, gan for going and so on. The area was part of Bernicia/Northumbria until the eleventh century and Geordie (not Scots) is likely to have been the descendant language. Given that 1066 happened and there was a later small-scale influx of Anglo Normans, posh people will have spoken French while in the hills and more remote areas I believe that [...] the original speech of the area clung on.⁴¹

As Annie is of a Northumbrian background it became feasible that she may have, in time, come to recognise some of the words in the secondary chronotope. In a work where communication is imperative for narrative flow and in which language itself is not a central concern, once issues of language difference have been established, readers of time-distort fiction must generally be prepared to accept, to some degree, that eventually the characters from opposing chronotopes begin to understand each other:

She started speaking again, this time more slowly, and my ears caught the odd word. I had to concentrate really hard to make it out. After a few moments, her strange language seemed to start forming in my ears, like when someone plays you a tune a few times until you know how it goes.⁴²

1.7 Other key aspects of research informing *The Serpent House*

As suggested earlier, the starting point for the sections of the novel set in the late nineteenth century, however, were the stories of three of my great-aunts, all of whom

⁴¹ Alistair Moffat (2010). Email to Barbara Henderson, 24th May. Alistair Moffat is director of the Borders Book Festival and author of (2002), *The Borders: A History of the Borders from Earliest Time*, (Selkirk:Deerpark Press), amongst other historical studies on Scotland and North-East England. This quote forms part of an e-mail conversation held between Moffat and myself during 2010 on this aspect of my research.

⁴² *The Serpent House*, p. 40.

worked in service. These histories were passed down orally by my own mother and my late aunt (born 1917 and 1915 respectively), who were brought up collectively by these women when their own mother died at a young age. This use of oral histories is discussed further in Chapter Three; for now it suffices to say that such a method, first considered to hold authority in the 1960s, enabled details of the lives of lower working class North-East women to be retold, with the support of other similar sources and historical evidence.

The possibility of the black servant girl, Lucy, having been brought up in Scotland in the late nineteenth century was investigated using a CASBAH (Caribbean Studies Black and Asian History) survey carried out with Glasgow City Archive as a key source. Records, particularly those found in the Poor Law Relief Applications Database, show a not insignificant population of immigrants from the West Indies from 1852 onwards; it therefore is conceivable that Lucy could both be of black or mixed race parentage and also have been brought up and worked in service in Edinburgh.

Research into late Victorian and early Edwardian séances, taken from books and archive accounts, inspired the scene in which Miss Haggstone appears to conjure up a spirit in order to discredit Annie in the eyes of Lady Hexer.⁴³ The Victorian interest in the supernatural will be investigated further in the writing of the sequel, in order to link this time period with the proposed secondary chronotope of the late sixteenth century era of witch persecution in Scotland. For *The Serpent House*, secondary research into the late Victorian period concentrated on Victorian households, gardens and food. I drew particularly on Anne Wilkinson's *The Victorian Gardener* (2006), C. Anne Wilson's *The Country House Kitchen Garden* (1998), and C. Anne Wilson's *Eating with the Victorians* (1994). Other sources for this information can be found in the bibliography.

In order to create a convincing secondary chronotope, many further works were also used in a later draft to provide detail on aspects such as the life of children, medieval food and cookery and belief in magic. These can be found in the bibliography, but particularly useful were Nicholas Orme's *Medieval Children* (2001) and Barbara A. Hanawalt's *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (1986). A recurring issue was an attempt to ensure, as far as

⁴³ Such as Antonio Melechi (2008), *Servants of the Supernatural: The Night Side of the Victorian Mind* (London: Arrow Books) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, (1926), *The History of Spiritualism, Volume 1*. (Middlesex: The Echo Library). Available from: <http://www.classic-literature.co.uk/scottish-authors/arthur-conan-doyle/the-history-of-spiritualism-vol-1/ebook-page-02.asp> (Accessed 25th January 2012).

possible, an accurate portrayal of social mores and customs, something which was more difficult for this very early medieval period than it would have been for the thirteenth century onwards. Much of the information provided by Orme and Hanawalt, for example, concerned the later medieval period. Some information is conflicting: for example, whether or not it would have been acceptable for a girl to be married in her teens. Trevor Rowley, Emeritus Fellow of Kellogg College, Oxford, who has written several works on the Normans, says that: ‘Children were considered to be adult at twelve, the age at which it was acceptable for girls to marry.’⁴⁴ Hanawalt, however, suggests that, whilst in the thirteenth century (later than the setting of *The Serpent House*) it was common to wait until the early twenties before marriage, this average age fluctuated and dipped lower during times of disease, such as during the plague.⁴⁵ Orphans and females with an inheritance tended to marry at a younger age than the average, which she estimates as nineteen in the fourteenth century; Hanawalt also cites the case from the late 1300s of Dionisia, daughter of John de Hatfield, who at fourteen and a half was married to a draper.⁴⁶ I therefore felt able to suggest that Meg could tell Annie that a cousin was married in her teens, as my research indicates that this was a possibility, even if uncommon. Annie, we know, is also often sceptical of information given to her by Meg.

As the novel makes links between the medieval healing garden and the grounds of the Hexer estate, I used a visit to the Uzès area of France in 2008 to create an authentic layout and used research into plants and herbs grown there as the basis for the invented magical plants which appear in the grounds in 1899. The Jardin médiéval d’Uzès has a recreated walled botanical garden similar to those of the Middle Ages.

A key aspect of the medieval sections of the novel is the use of snakes and other more fantastic creatures by the doctor in his attempts at magical cures. For the earlier drafts, I first established a potential, if arduous, trade route for a traveller from the Scottish ports in the early medieval period, which was possible via Flanders,

⁴⁴ Trevor Rowley (2010), *Norman England*. (Oxford: Shire Publications), p. 25.

⁴⁵ Barbara Hanawalt (1986), *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 95-96.

⁴⁶ Barbara Hanawalt (1993), *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), p. 205.

overland to Venice and then the East, thus creating a possible way by which the doctor could have had access to exotic species of reptile. Research into the physical characteristics of snakes and other reptiles was carried out initially through herpetological websites. These characteristics, however, were just for my own guidance and did not remain entirely accurate in the novel, as the creatures were intended to be fantastic rather than realistic. These fantasy elements of the creatures described in the novel are given more prominence in the latest draft in order to distinguish them from more factual elements of the narrative. Revisions to the later draft were intended to clarify these fantastic elements to the reader. Some of the snakes featured were based on images of creatures portrayed in medieval manuscripts, whilst the ‘mermaid’ was based on the true story of the nineteenth-century ‘Feejee Mermaid hoax’ carried out by P.T. Barnum. Such ‘mermaids’ were a regular attraction at fairs and sideshows from the Renaissance onwards, but in Barnum’s case, the ‘mermaid’ consisted of the torso and head of a baby monkey sewn to the back half of a fish. This has the overall effect of producing a text which, overall, is more weighted towards fantasy than was originally intended. Fantastic elements in time-distort literature veer from the very minimum, such as in Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (1980) or Jill Paton Walsh’s *A Chance Child* (1978), to texts which make far more use of the magical, such as those by Edith Nesbit. Given that critics of children’s literature often categorise historical time-distort as a sub-genre of either fantasy or historical fiction, strengthening the use of the fantastic in the novel does not appear to stray from the remit of the time-distort tradition.

Throughout the project, historical research has informed the creative writing, but there were other aspects to the research component of this submission, particularly my need to study and reappraise the development of time-distort fiction over the last century. That is the basis of Chapter Two.

CHAPTER 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME-DISTORT

*Time-slip...may be defined as a story with its feet in the present but its head and heart in the past*¹ –Linda Hall (2001).

This chapter offers an overview of the development of the genre of children's historical time-distort literature. It explores its potential for experiment and innovation and highlights the relevance of key texts to the creative aspect of the submission. Because of the relationship with the creative project, the question of the genre's creative and innovative potential became the prism through which I examined the primary texts. I wished to establish that I was writing in a genre which, far from becoming moribund, has persistently demonstrated and continues to demonstrate innovation or experiment, particularly at the levels of form and content.

What follows therefore is a history of the development of the genre, which will focus attention on those works which have proved most noteworthy. This introductory section is also a literature review, which considers the critical response to these works and the genre more generally over time. As I have already indicated, criticism of time-distort fiction has been and remains limited. Throughout the research component of this submission I position my own work in relation to these critical works and explain the reflective process by which the academic research informed the creative project and the creative writing element influenced the scholarly component of the thesis.

Although it is possible to highlight a number of articles and relevant chapters which interrogate the creative qualities of children's historical time-distort fiction, this overview will demonstrate that scholarly interest in the genre has not developed in line with the growing body of primary texts. The research component of my thesis both addresses this gap and shows how the views of a small number of academics, notably John Stephens (1992) and Linda Hall (2001), have significantly affected the way the genre has been portrayed. Following their

¹ Linda Hall, 'Time No Longer' – history, enchantment and the classic time-slip story. From Fiona M. Collins and Judith Graham (eds.), *Historical Fiction for Children: Capturing the Past*. London: David Fulton Publishers, 2001, p. 46.

lead, many others assume the genre has a tendency towards forms of conservatism. Hall, who is later discussed in detail with particular reference to Edith Nesbit, suggests that it is a *necessarily* conservative form, whilst others, such as Tess Cosslett, focus more on content and convention, identifying areas of similarity between works in the genre.² It is not my argument that radical or experimental form or content are necessary or even desirable within historical time-distort literature, but rather that as a genre it has been less conservative than has been recognised. This willingness to break new ground contributes, I suggest, to the fact that several texts in the genre are now considered to be ‘classics’ within the wider canon of children’s literature, whilst several have won literary awards, further demonstrating the creative promise of the genre.

Although the chapter takes a broadly chronological approach to constructing an overview of critical writing about the genre, it begins with an examination of two key works which have influenced my overall approach to the genre. These are the prescient, but rarely cited, work on the genre carried out by Eleanor Cameron in 1962, and Maria Nikolajeva’s discussion of intertextuality within children’s fantasy writing. A third scholar, Adrienne Gavin, is also particularly important to this project but her work is discussed in the section on post-war time-distort fiction.

More than fifty years have passed since the publication of one of the earliest comprehensive studies of children’s time-distort fiction, which is the chapter in Eleanor Cameron’s critique *The Green and Burning Tree* (1962).³ Whilst it has limitations, this work holds relevance to my central question in that it maps, for the first time, the emerging genre of children’s historical time-distort fiction. It may also be argued that Cameron’s interpretation of the potential of the then emerging genre anticipates Nikolajeva’s focus on intertextuality. Cameron links the notions of time employed by children’s time-distort writers such as Edith

² Tess Cosslett’s article ‘History from Below’ (2002), which is discussed at more length later in this chapter, sets out a list of characteristics which she views as common to all historical time-distort texts. This approach stresses the conventions and similarities which may be found in the genre, rather than any areas of innovation. ‘“History from Below”: Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity’, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Volume 26, Number 2, April 2002, pp. 243-253.

³ Eleanor Cameron (1962) *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children’s Books*. (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company).

Nesbit, Lucy Boston, Philippa Pearce and William Mayne to the Buddhist notions of the 'Eternal Now,' and credits their work with gifting an understanding of deeper philosophical questions to the minds of young readers. For example, she shows how Tom's Uncle Alan is unable to grasp the illogical aspects of the concept of time, whilst *Earthfast's* David's attempts to use scientific approaches to analyse the time candle by which he changes centuries are less successful than the character Keith's more intuitive reaction.⁴ She also places emphasis on the British time-distort writers' sense of history and place as being a key strength which distinguishes their body of work from that of American writers, a notion developed in Charles Butler's later, more comprehensive, examination of British fantasists.⁵ The positive values, however, which Cameron attributes to British writers also reveal a limitation to her study, which is a reluctance to acknowledge writers of time-distort from North America and Australia. This is a limitation which has been echoed by later academics, such as Tess Cosslett (2002). Cosslett critiques what she considers to be the ethnically-limited and sometime patriarchal nature of time-distort fiction, but does not widen her study beyond British writers in the genre, although doing so would go some way to mitigate this accusation. Cameron's significance here, therefore, is in being perhaps the earliest critic to define the genre and, from the point of view of a writer herself, her recognition of its creative potential. It is unclear why she is not cited more often by critics today, although it may be because her writing style is rather naive and heavily adjectival, creating a chapter which, despite some useful content, suggests a personal more than an analytical viewpoint.

Cameron returns to the genre in her 1984 article, 'The Eternal Moment', in which her intention is to illustrate the progression in time-distort since her critique of William Mayne.⁶ What is most notable about the article, and why it is important for this project, is that Cameron is not only able to justify the assertion that there is a progression in what she already terms a genre, but also to anticipate

⁴ Discussing Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) and William Mayne's *Earthfasts* (1966). Eleanor Cameron (1969), pp. 132-133 and pp. 126-127.

⁵ See Charles Butler (2006), *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones and Susan Cooper*. (Lanham, Maryland, Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, Inc).

⁶ Eleanor Cameron (1984), 'The Eternal Moment', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Vol.9, No.4, Winter 1984-85, pp. 157-164.

that it will continue to evolve. Cameron justifies this conclusion by focusing not on plot, but on style, sense of place, characterisation and structure in such texts as K.M. Peyton's *A Pattern of Roses* (1972), Penelope Lively's *The House in Norham Gardens* (1974), Jill Paton Walsh's *A Chance Child* (1978) and Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980). Cameron's analysis emphasises the differences between the texts, rather than, as some later critics have done, any similarities at the level of plot. For example, strong characterisation in the novels she chooses to discuss means that the similar narrative devices, such as the magical objects used to transport a protagonist back in time, become less important. Cameron suggests reasons why a novel such as *A Chance Child*, in spite of its depth of historical research, works better as a time-distort text than as a realist historical novel, stating that it has 'an edge, provided by Creep's particular situation in the present linked to the past'.⁷

Anticipating later critics, such as Hollindale, Cameron also points out how child readers who may not be drawn to historical novels may find more to attract them in the time-distort text: '(T)hey can learn much of the past by osmosis in the absorbing form of time fantasy shaped by the conception of the eternal moment.'⁸ In this comment we can recognise the impulses which other writers of time-distort, such as Jane Yolen, claim were behind their decisions to choose the genre. There are, however, limitations to the study: because the article covers a wide range of texts, it does not analyse the works in any depth. Cameron also includes works such as Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence (1965–1977) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Beginning Place* (1980), which may be categorised more as high fantasy than time-distort or historical fantasy. Cameron does, however, conclude that this is a genre with more to offer:

It is never alone the core of plot that is of foremost importance, but always tone, characterization, theme, style, evocation of place and private vision [...] In this way there is no end to originality, to the ability of private vision to give us something new and treasurable.⁹

⁷ Eleanor Cameron (1984), p. 161.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eleanor Cameron (1984), p. 164.

Throughout this research, the notion of intertextuality, as Maria Nikolajeva discusses it in relation to children's literature, has influenced the analyses. Rather than identifying 'sameness' in genres such as historical time fantasy, Nikolajeva furthers the idea of the dialogue, from Mikhail Bakhtin and later Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin uses the term 'dialogics' to suggest that art and literature are created in a continuous conversation, dialogue or discourse in which each new creation is a new development in this conversation.¹⁰ The meaning of a given text is therefore always in relation to others, both existing and to come. Rather, therefore, than stating that two texts have certain similarities, the critic using dialogics will seek out what the text being analysed does with an element in another work: what transformations have been made and why. The key to an intertextual approach is to seek what Nikolajeva describes as 'hidden echoes and latent links'; every part of a text both looks backward towards previous texts and also forward to new and as yet unwritten texts.¹¹ Whilst dialogics suggests a conscious decision on the part of the new writer and places more emphasis on the author's intentions, intertextuality suggests the relationship with an existing text may be both conscious and unconscious.¹²

I found this approach a useful one for my purposes because it supports my hypothesis that, from a tradition such as historical time-distort fantasy, innovation can be and is consistently achieved. Whilst the two case studies demonstrate obviously challenging content and experimentation with form, some of the primary texts cited in this overview offer innovations which are less apparent on a simplistic reading, and therefore the notion of a new text adding to an existing dialogue, rather than conforming to a prescribed set of conventions, is useful. It was also pertinent to *The Serpent House*, which drew on a number of precursors, not only from the time-distort tradition, but also children's non-fantasy historical fiction and the Gothic tradition. Rather than interrogating what *The Serpent House* does which is similar to any texts within these bodies of work, thinking about its relations to other texts helps show how the novel contributes to the genre,

¹⁰ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1982) [1975]

¹¹ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing), pp.153-5.

¹² Ibid

refreshing and adding to the existing dialogue. Unlike that of other critics, such as Hall, Nikolajeva's work is not associated with any one particular writer or time period, but covers a wide range of works from Nesbit to writers of the 1980s.

Having identified the works that most influenced my thinking, there follows a chronological overview of the genre and its related scholarship and the relevance of both primary and secondary texts to my creative project.

2.1 'A curious new form': Nesbit, Kipling and early time-distort texts

... A curious new form, utterly removed from scientific rationalism, which for the first time touches English history with an aura of enchantment- Linda Hall (2001).¹³

It is sensible to begin an overview of the genre with its earliest pioneers, Edith Nesbit and Rudyard Kipling, who coincidentally in 1906 both published the works which can claim to be the first children's time-distort fictions: Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* and Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*. It is not only sensible chronologically, however. It is Nesbit's work in particular which, because it is credited with creating a blueprint for future works in the time-distort genre, has prompted some critics, notably Linda Hall (2001), to view it as necessarily conservative or prone to convention.¹⁴ The result of Kipling and Nesbit's work is, Hall suggests, 'a curious new form' and, working before what have become established rules and conventions for the genre had evolved, the two authors employ technically differing methods of time distortion. Kipling has his child characters meet Shakespeare's Puck, who then orchestrates a series of episodes in which figures from the past enter the present of the two child protagonists, Una and Dan. Nesbit, by contrast, allows her characters to travel back in time via the magic token of the amulet, setting a pattern more usually followed by subsequent authors in the genre.

¹³ Linda Hall (2001), 'Time No Longer' – history, enchantment and the classic time-slip story', Fiona M. Collins and Judith Graham (eds.), *Historical Fiction for Children: Capturing the Past*. London: David Fulton Publishers, p.43.

¹⁴ Linda Hall (2001), pp. 43-53.

Kipling's form of 'time-slip,' although it has not been emulated in the way that Nesbit's has, is for Hall a radical way of telling history because of its emphasis on the role of the ordinary person in key events throughout England's past. Hall suggests Kipling's message is that 'anyone' can make a difference. It is Kipling who is cited by Jane Yolen, the subject of my first case study, as pioneering a new and engaging way of teaching history to young readers – although it is Nesbit's model of a protagonist's time travel to the past that Yolen chooses to emulate. Hall accepts that Nesbit's time travel model is exciting for young readers, but, she maintains, this does not prevent it from being a conservative form 'because history is, by its very nature, fixed; events have already been determined.'¹⁵ Such a statement does not bear close analysis, since it could equally be applied to any historical fiction. Neither does it offer any explanation for the continued critical and popular interest in literature set in the past, whether or not it contains an element of the fantastic. What Hall in fact demonstrates is *not* that time-distort is necessarily a conservative form, but that Nesbit's passive ideology is more conservative than she had expected.¹⁶ Hall suggests, for example, that similarities of plot and device can be drawn between Nesbit, Alison Uttley and Lucy Boston. This leads to an assumption that the genre as a whole is one chosen by writers seeking to propound ideological notions of tradition, perhaps linked to aristocracy and heritage, whether consciously or not. As evidence, Hall points to the way Nesbit's texts concentrate on middle-class protagonists and sometimes display a 'sympathy' for the aristocracy, which Hall alleges 'may have derived from socially snobbish fantasies of aristocratic descent.'¹⁷ Hall's interpretation of how Nesbit's politics are, or are not, reflected in her texts is an unusual one in relation to other academic studies of the author. In the book of essays edited by Raymond E. Jones, *E. Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy* (2006), for example, the opposite interpretation is made. Contributors detail how

¹⁵ Linda Hall (2001), p. 45.

¹⁶ Whilst Hall is correct to question the author's ideology, her interpretation of it does not live up to very close scrutiny. For example, whilst it is true that Nesbit does little to challenge the existing class structures in her works, the author's contrasting of the 'organic' countryside with the more mechanical cities can be interpreted as a critique of early twentieth-century British capitalism. Other critics, as detailed in the text above, also interpret Nesbit's work as more ideologically faithful to Fabianism than Hall would suggest.

¹⁷ Linda Hall (1998) 'Aristocratic Houses and Radical Politics: Historical Fiction and the Time-Slip Story in E. Nesbit's *The House of Arden*'. *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol 29. No. 1 (1998) pp. 51-58.

her concern with issues of class and poverty did add thematic depth to her stories, and this concern did pave the way for later writers to introduce serious social problems in books for children.¹⁸

While they acknowledge the ‘middle-classness’ of the protagonists and the author’s utopian visions, contributors to this volume also point out more instances of social critique than Hall acknowledges. For example, Suzanne Rahn and Monica Flegel each note the social progress achieved in the London of the future, in which the city is no longer polluted, conventional gender roles have changed and children in particular are accorded more attention and value. Class divisions no longer appear to exist:

“But beggars, and people like that?” persisted Anthea; “and tramps and people who haven’t any homes?”
“People who haven’t any homes?” repeated the lady. “I really don’t understand what you’re talking about.”...
“I haven’t seen any working people,” said Anthea.
“Why, we’re all working people,” said the lady, “at least my husband’s a carpenter.”
“Good gracious!” said Anthea; “but you’re a lady!”¹⁹

Even Hall acknowledges that there is evidence in the texts of Nesbit attempting to show the past as unreconstructed, in the sense that, as a Fabian, she sees past practices as needing reform, and uses history as a vehicle for social commentary on her own time.²⁰ At a later point, Hall draws on Hollindale (1990) to describe Lucy Boston and other post-war time-distort writers as ‘essentially conservative, in the best sense of the word, meaning...conservationist, historically and environmentally.’²¹ Whilst I do not take issue with this description of Boston, Pearce and Lively, Hall’s assertion here leads to some confusion of terms. This confusion appears to be on the part of Hall rather than the reader. A more precise definition of the terms employed would greatly strengthen Hall’s argument.

¹⁸ Raymond E. Jones (2006) (ed.), *E. Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy: A Children’s Classic at 100*. (Lanham, Maryland, Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow Press), Preface, xiii.

¹⁹ E. Nesbit (1994), *The Story of the Amulet*. (London: London: The Folio Society), p. 237. [1906].

²⁰ For example, in *The House of Arden* (1908), Nesbit stops the story at one point to use her own voice to ‘instruct’ the readers about the unacceptable treatment of women who were accused of being witches.

²¹ Linda Hall (2001), p. 47.

Despite its limitations, Hall's analysis is significant for this submission because it has been influential - it is often cited by later academics - and it has remained largely unchallenged.²² For the purposes of this discussion it is significant that Hall recognises the existence of a time-distort genre, a subject to which she returns in a number of articles. Citing Hollindale (1979), Hall describes *Puck of Pook's Hill* as a perfect example of 'creative history,' in which the imagination of the artist is employed to make up for the lack of written record. To an extent, this term applies to *The Serpent House* in the sense that the secondary time period, the eleventh century, is one about which there is less documentary evidence than, for example, the later medieval period. Because less is known about this period as a writer I felt justified in using more artistic licence during this secondary time period than in the well-documented primary Victorian chronotope.²³ The reader will note, therefore, that most of the 'fantasy' elements of *The Serpent House* are set in this secondary chronotope.

Of greater significance than Nesbit's politics must be the author's influence in the wider field of children's fantasy literature. It is recognised that her time travel novels were a first attempt to combine time fantasy with historical realism and, albeit unwittingly, they provide a template for many future time-distort texts. Hall and Maria Nikolajeva (1996) differ on the question of whether this 'blueprint' offers writers a formula bound by convention or, in fact, contributes to a new genre in which writers may create and innovate. Nikolajeva, for example, reminds us that it was Nesbit who created the genre and that her prototype was followed by later writers:

All these writers, without referring to Nesbit, accept her "rules" for magical travel in time as if these rules really existed: primary time stands still while the travellers enter other chronotopes, travellers have no difficulty understanding and speaking foreign languages; and most important, travellers can in no way interfere with history.²⁴

²² For example, Charles Butler (2006), Ann Lawson Lucas (2003) and Tess Cosslett (2002).

²³ More detail on the research carried out for both chronotopes may be found in the methodology section of the submission.

²⁴ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 168.

Many writers, particularly post-1980, have chosen to abandon this template, but Nikolajeva is correct to point out how important it was for many time-distort writers in the preceding decades. Alison Uttley, notably, left her protagonist in *A Traveller in Time* (1939) powerless to interfere in the capture of Mary, Queen of Scots. After due consideration I decided that I wanted to challenge some of these conventions in *The Serpent House*. For example, primary time does move on when Annie is in the secondary chronotope, and, unlike many of her predecessors, in the latest draft, Annie has difficulty following the language spoken by those she meets in the eleventh century, although eventually she is able to communicate with others.²⁵ In *The Serpent House*, Annie is also allowed to ‘interfere’ with history, an ability which is potentially easier for writers to justify when they are not describing known events or famous historical figures. The extent of Annie’s interference, however, is deliberately ambiguous, in that some events may also appear to occur as a matter of course and may not have a magical explanation.

It is not clear why Hall’s commentary on Nesbit appears to have proven more influential to today’s critics than, for example, that of Suzanne Rahn. Although Rahn’s original essay, ‘News from E. Nesbit: *The Story of the Amulet* and the Socialist Utopia’ pre-dates much of Hall’s writing, it was reproduced in Raymond Jones’ book of essays released to mark the centenary of *Amulet* in 2006. These essays may, arguably, be viewed as being of a celebratory nature, but this does not detract from their overall analyses. Julia Briggs, for example, points out Nesbit’s ability to break down stereotypical gender divisions between her male and female protagonists, as well as her undoubted influence on other fantasy writers such as C.S. Lewis, whilst Teya Rosenberg credits Nesbit with an early form of magical realism.

In his paean to childhood reading, the writer Francis Spufford pays tribute to the imaginary worlds conjured up by Nesbit, whose politics mattered less to him as a child than her ability to engage the young reader in her narrative:

²⁵ More detail on the creative decision making behind the use of language in *The Serpent House* may be found in the chapter dealing with methodology and in the case study on Gary Crew.

The books I loved best were....the ones that started in this world and took you to another....The ordinary children in the story - my representatives, my ambassadors – wore their shorts and sweaters amid cloths of gold and said *Crumbs! And Come off it!* among people speaking the high language of fantasy...E. Nesbit invented the mixing of the worlds in *The Amulet*...On a grey day in Kentish town, Robert and Anthea and Jane and Cyril travel to blue sky through the arch of the charm.²⁶

As the chapter progresses to interrogate the time-distort literature which emerged after the Second World War, it will become apparent that Nesbit's influence remained considerable.

2.2 Seeking 'what was lost': Time-distort texts in the post-war context

*On the whole it is a backward-looking literature, a product of the age of anxiety – Ann Lawson Lucas (2003).*²⁷

*The houses' pasts offer space for the imagination and empower domesticity by offering escapethrough time, ghosts or dreams – Adrienne E. Gavin (2003).*²⁸

As the above quotes suggest, whilst elements of nostalgia are clearly, perhaps inevitably, present in literature of the post-war period, to suggest this underpins the appeal of the genre is too simplistic a reading. Certainly, the genre did begin to demonstrate an obvious appeal, and more to women writers than to men. Julia Briggs, who also wrote a biography of Edith Nesbit, describes in her essay 'The Amulet and Other Stories of Time' the author's pioneering role, stating how

After Nesbit, time travel became a major theme of children's books ... Nesbit had shown what could be done, in fictional terms, with time travel... [Her] great strength was the way she managed to keep magical and metaphysical elements in a balance with the familiar and everyday world.²⁹

²⁶ Francis Spufford (2002), *The Child that Books Built*. (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 85-6.

²⁷ Ann Lawson Lucas (2003), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger, Preface, p. xix

²⁸ Adrienne E. Gavin, 'The Past Reimagined: History and Literary Creation in British Children's Novels after World War Two.' From Ann Lawson Lucas (2003) (ed.), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger, p.163.

²⁹ Julia Briggs (2006), 'The Amulet and Other Stories of Time', from Raymond E. Jones, (ed.), pp. 215-230; p. 229.

Briggs notes the influence of Nesbit on writers including Alison Uttley, Lucy Boston, Philippa Pearce and Penelope Lively. This section, therefore, examines the development of the genre in a period of approximately 35 years following World War Two. After the war, new concerns about the loss of connection with the past began to occupy writers and the time-distort genre offered a useful set of devices and a creative space in which to explore such concerns. Several critics have noted this post-war inclination, most notably Valerie Krips (2000) in *The Presence of the Past: memory, heritage and childhood in postwar Britain* and the writers in Ann Lawson Lucas' collection, *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature* (2003). Lawson Lucas notes the opposing sentiments of post-war loss and peace-time optimism, which for her created the conditions in which fantasy writing would thrive, but often with an added sense of 'the deep damage done, both societal and individual.'³⁰ The collection contains a chapter by Linda Hall on "House and Garden" which repeats many of the ideas (and indeed much of the exact wording) of her earlier 'Time No Longer' chapter. In her introduction, Lawson Lucas reiterates Hall's ideas by suggesting that a certain longing for tradition and a social snobbery is at play within Nesbit's work. Yet she does recognise some potential for innovation.

...These narratives draw from a traditional setting thoughts about time (perhaps even more than about the past) which are innovative and unsettling.... On the whole it is a backward-looking literature, a product of the age of anxiety. Its most positive quality, though, is its endorsement of experimental thoughtfulness and questioning.³¹

Hall, in this chapter, again critiques what she believes to be Nesbit's social snobbery and adherence to a romantic notion of a feudal past, which, it may be argued, is not borne out in the texts. She credits Lucy Boston and Philippa Pearce, in spite of their own use of the similar metaphor of house and garden to represent a former and better age and sense of values, with a more developed and progressive ideology:

³⁰ Ann Lawson Lucas (ed.) (2003), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*. (Westport, CT and London: Praeger), Preface, p. xix.

³¹ Ibid.

It has been noted that a feeling for the past and for nature, combined with the spirit of place, belongs to a conservative ideology.³² But in the modern world, it also confronts capitalist and corporate despoliation of ancient and beloved townscapes and landscapes and substitutes an organicist view of social relations built up over time.³³

Hall argues that Boston and Pearce's 'poetic' form of time-distort is a 'cultural challenge' both to materialist aspects of historical fiction and to materialist political rhetoric, from either the left or the right, and that this challenge is still relevant today. There is, however, nothing new in Hall's chapter which might build upon her 2001 work, in spite of its greater emphasis on post-war time-distort literature. It fails to unpick and support substantially her argument that the ideologies behind the works of Boston and Pearce are somehow more radical than those of Nesbit.

A more useful chapter in the collection, for the purposes of this project, is by Adrienne E. Gavin, who in 'The Past Reimagined' further interrogates why so many female writers chose the historical time-distort genre during the post-War period. Gavin notes conventional readings of the genre, which consider such elements as the child's understanding of the present via the past, the nostalgic yearning for a pre-war idyll, and the notion of the child's journey or link with the past as one which aids the maturation process. Where Gavin differs from such readings, however, is in her further suggestion that, in the post-war works of Boston, Pearce, Lively and Penelope Farmer (*Charlotte Sometimes*, 1969), the past is a metaphor for the creative act or the imagination. The 'past' portrayed in the works is one drawn from literature rather than history, and this past reflects 'a significantly female literary imagination.'³⁴ For me, this is a significant point: there are other aspects of the time-distort genre, discussed later in the chapter, which make it a peculiarly (although not exclusively) female form, a notion which

³² Here, Hall is referencing Rustin and Rustin (1987) in *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction*. (London: Verso), p. 35.

³³ Linda Hall (2003), "'House and Garden': The Time-Slip Story in the Aftermath of the Second World War'. Ann Lawson Lucas (ed.), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*. (Westport, CT and London: Praeger), pp. 153-158; p. 157.

³⁴ Adrienne E. Gavin, 'The Past Reimagined: History and Literary Creation in British Children's Novels after World War Two.' From Ann Lawson Lucas (ed.), *The Presence of the Past in Children's Literature*. (Westport, CT and London: Praeger), 2003, pp. 159-166; p. 160.

Gavin's work supports. Rather than interpreting the spheres of house and garden as necessarily nostalgic or conservative, Gavin suggests they are 'fittingly central' to female writers for children at a time when expectations of domesticity increased after 1945. The houses' pasts offer 'physical space and freedom,' whether they are the rambling house and grounds at Green Knowe or the spacious Victorian house and garden which Tom finds when the clock strikes thirteen; they offer escape, 'not necessarily from the domestic world the children and women live within, but escape within the domestic world through time, ghosts or dreams.'³⁵

The key to this escape is the imagination or memory of an older woman, who via their storytelling or their dreams can act as a conduit into the past for the child protagonist. Gavin offers several clear examples: Mrs Oldknow, whose stories allow Tolly to escape into his own imaginative past (the *Green Knowe* series), Mrs Bartholomew, whose dreams of her childhood allow Tom to experience the past with her (*Tom's Midnight Garden*), Emily's memory or imagination which transforms Charlotte into Clare (*Charlotte Sometimes*) and the great-aunts' past which inspires Clare (*The House in Norham Gardens*). Gavin's essay allows me to position my own work in this tradition, in the sense that it is Lady Hexer's desire which similarly enables my own protagonist, Annie, to travel back into a past of which she was previously unaware. A difference between *The Serpent House* and the classic texts cited by Gavin is that, in my work, Lady Hexer's intentions are not initially benign towards Annie, whom she sees as a cipher for her own purposes, and when she begins to develop feelings of an almost maternal nature towards Annie, she feels compelled to suppress them. Although Annie does develop psychologically as a result of the time-distortion, the benefits to her are less obvious than in some of the novels discussed by Gavin. Lady Hexer, in spite of some of her more progressive ideas, displays a general adherence to notions of class and lacks the older woman's wisdom typically found in the classic novels cited above. With this growing awareness and understanding of her mentor, Annie is encouraged to question and ultimately reject any kind of status quo.

³⁵ Adrienne E. Gavin (2003), p. 163.

Another original and little-discussed aspect developed in Gavin's analysis of the genre is her suggestion that the past is a metaphor for the creative act: 'The child protagonist's experience of the past is the equivalent of the writer's experience of writing and the reader's experience of reading.'³⁶ For a creative writer of historical time-distort fiction, this notion is one which needs to be explored further. Gavin's emphasis on the imaginative and creative potential of the child corresponds with the prevailing construction of childhood from the early 1960s onwards, which emphasised children as 'autonomous, complex beings,' an attitude reflected in the child-centred education policies of the era and further contextualised by books such as *A Stitch in Time* and the *Green Knowe* series.³⁷ It led to the positioning of fantasy as a 'natural' genre for children's literature.³⁸ Gavin explains the problematic treatment of real or imagined history in such novels thus:

... It is no more "unreal" than any other elements of the novel. Everything in the story is created and unverifiable. As readers, we only get to the past through layers: the layer of the writer writing the story, of the character experiencing the past, of the stories told by historical characters. As we peel each layer off, we are no more certain of "truth"; each layer is a creation, a fictional act.³⁹

The true absence of long-past history to all of us, but particularly to children, except in textual form, is something that critics of the historical time-distort genre sometimes overlook when placing demands on an author for more historical realism in their texts. In spite of starting my research for *The Serpent House* with an avowed intention to be as historically accurate as possible, my research led to an awareness that such accuracy is something of a chimera, a notion that is further discussed in my chapter on Gary Crew's *Strange Objects*. Drawing on Penelope Lively's assertion that "[a]wareness of the past is an achievement of the imagination," Gavin points out that the child protagonists in historical time-distort fiction use their imaginations to re-create a history that they

³⁶ Adrienne E. Gavin (2003), p.160.

³⁷ Lucy Pearson (2010), *The Making of Modern Children's Literature: Quality and ideology in British children's publishing of the 1960s and 1970s*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

³⁸ See Matthew Grenby (2008), *Children's Literature*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 144.

³⁹ Adrienne E.Gavin (2003), p.160.

have never experienced, whilst their creators, the writers, rely on textualised narrations of the past to form their own imagined versions of it. *Tom's Midnight Garden*, for example, draws upon Victorian fiction for its imagined house and garden of the past, whilst Gavin sees echoes of several Bronte novels in *Charlotte Sometimes*, *A Stitch in Time* and *The House in Norham Gardens*. The link between history and the literary imagination, therefore, is obvious – and another example of an intertextual tendency in time-distort fiction. It is, however, the stopping or slowing of time which allows the imagination or memory to move through the past, within a shorter or distorted time-frame, much as the act of reading may do when it allows the participant to travel mentally to another era. Again, the relevance for *The Serpent House* was clear: Annie is able to tell stories from a history which she could not possibly have experienced, almost as a story-writer or teller herself. She does this as a diarist in an early draft and as a first-person narrator in a later version of the novel. In many examples of historical time-distort, the child protagonists become amateur historians themselves as they grow in empathy with figures from the past. Examples would include *Tom's Midnight Garden*, in which Tom researches Victorian costume, or Christopher, in Jill Paton Walsh's *A Chance Child* (1978), who looks up Victorian Parliamentary reports whilst trying to trace his half-brother Creep, who has disappeared into the past. As is clear from the methodology section of this submission, the usual problematic issue of an author's reliance upon textualised versions of history was exacerbated in my own case because of a lack of such detailed written material for the secondary chronotope, necessitating a greater reliance on the imagination and fantasy than is apparent in the primary time.

Gavin's chapter then is, for me, very relevant, in that it posits a new and more radical reading of post-war historical time-distort than has been offered by other critics, particularly Hall. Gavin's suggestions about the reasons why the domestic settings of house and garden were so prevalent in this period add weight to my own observations about the 'female-ness' of the genre and go some way to explain why so many female writers were and still are attracted to the time-distort genre, often creating adventurous and intelligent female protagonists. Gavin draws on a wide range of primary texts and interviews with writers, including Lively and Joan Aiken, in making her case and carefully explores the intertextual links

between works of this post-war era and those of the Victorian period. Her evidence supports my claim that the genre is more innovative and creatively experimental than has usually been suggested.

It is important to note that, during the 1960s and 1970s, Britain witnessed the growth of the 'heritage' movement. Several critics, including Tess Cosslett in her article "History from Below" (2002), link the notion of heritage to contemporaneous trends in historical children's fiction and in particular to time-distort texts, with its apparent correlation to the notion of 'living history' or the attempt, as Raphael Samuel defines it, 'to animate the inanimate and bring tradition back to life.'⁴⁰ Samuel goes on to connect this tendency with the increasing popularity of historical re-enactments, all of which 'living history' he sees as in opposition to the notion of 'formal' history. Valerie Krips' landmark study examines this cultural movement in relation to children's literature, although it covers a wider social tendency. Via her examination of authors including Philippa Pearce, Alan Garner and Susan Cooper, Krips notes the recurrent narrative theme of a child protagonist attempting to link an artefact from the past with the present. Cosslett's article both offers a definition of recurring themes in time-distort novels and further links them specifically to the 'living history' movement, suggesting that the genre may provide some solutions to it both by its openness to 'other' histories than nationalistic ones and because, in its construction of childhood, it avoids the dangers of nostalgia.⁴¹ In William Mayne's *Earthfasts* (1966), for example, the youthful protagonists discover a history which is not their own and 'the radical differentness of the past is stressed.'⁴² Cosslett points out that this is why the critic Fred Inglis prefers the time-distort device to what he terms 'unproblematic historical romance.'⁴³ In *The Serpent House*, the past of both chronotopes is also presented as radically different. Neither period is presented with nostalgia, as both contain dangers; the dangers of the secondary chronotope are more fantastical and linked to the nightmare than those in the primary, which are based around more worldly issues

⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel (1996), cited in Valerie Krips (2000), *The Presence of the Past: memory, heritage and childhood in postwar Britain*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing), p. 72.

⁴¹ Tess Cosslett (2002), "'History from Below": Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol. 26, pp. 243–253.

⁴² Tess Cosslett (2002), p. 247.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

such as bereavement, jealousy, illness and the threats of poverty and homelessness.

In the light of Cosslett and Gavin's analyses, those by Krips and Hall, which connect the time-distort genre to nostalgic movements within the popular culture, appear reductive. Hall revisits the genre in a more recent article, in which she examines Jill Paton Walsh's 1978 time-distort novel *A Chance Child*, where the neglected boy known as Creep travels back 150 years into the realistically-portrayed Industrial Revolution and, unusually, stays there for the rest of his life, although he is able to leave traces for his half-brother in the twentieth century to discover.⁴⁴ Hall claims that Paton Walsh has 'reinvented the time-slip' partly because of her use of this unusual device but also because of the way the novel addresses changes to the landscape in its present day. Connections with the past can be found only in what remains of the natural world. Hall ends the article with the assertion that:

Where earlier time-slip novelists had shown a quietly lurking anxiety about the way the contemporary world might go or was already tending, in the light of the levelling ideology of the post-war dispensation, which had appeared to reveal a hatred of this country's history and heritage, twenty years later Paton Walsh bears witness to the outcomes envisaged by those fears.⁴⁵

Yet Hall is not the first critic to note the merits of Paton Walsh's time-distort novel. Cosslett refers to it in her 2002 article as an example of how it interrogates the notion of heritage, and, in the paper 'The Irrelevance of Genre to Historical Books for Children', Charles Butler (2010) details how the novel examines the relationship between past and present, avoiding a romanticised past and blurring the conventional genre boundaries between historical and fantasy fiction.⁴⁶ Using somewhat emotive language, Hall seems to have revised her earlier opinions to suggest that the time-distort genre is not necessarily confined by content, form or political ideology; yet she chooses a well-examined text from

⁴⁴ Linda Marian Hall (2011), "A Chance Child": Jill Paton Walsh and the Re-Invention of the Time Slip Story. *Children's Literature in Education* Vol. 42, pp. 1–18.

⁴⁵ Linda Marian Hall (2011), p. 18.

⁴⁶ Charles Butler (2010) 'The Irrelevance of Genre to Historical Books for Children', The National Centre for Research in Children's Literature (NCRCL) inaugural conference 8th May 2010, University of Roehampton, Surrey.

the late 1970s to demonstrate this, despite the fact that there are many later works which may also merit such an analysis, including those by Jane Yolen, Gary Crew and Susan Price. I suggest that, had she ventured into newer territory, she would have found it hard to sustain her argument about the conventionality of the genre.

2.3 Female Quests: Patterns in time-distort texts of the 1980s

[In] the recent trend in English language fantasy ...authors are more interested in the character's psychological development than in the magical events as such – Maria Nikolajeva (1996).⁴⁷

Nikolajeva sums up the noted movement amongst post-1980s children's or young adults' texts in which authors employ elements of the fantastic as devices to enable a protagonist to cope with problems or situations in the realist domain of the narrative. This concern with the maturation process was not restricted to works involving fantasy and is to be noted in texts which are also entirely realist, both before and during this period. It was not an issue which concerned Nesbit, whose young protagonists do not appear overtly to be psychologically altered by the time-distort episodes in *The Story of the Amulet*, but it is a development apparent in time-distort texts even earlier than the 1980s. We see, for example, elements of the after-effects of the fantastic episodes in Uttley's *A Traveller in Time*, in which the protagonist is unable to forget her first love and, we learn, never marries. Psychological growth is also very apparent in *Tom's Midnight Garden*, in which we see Tom brought to an acceptance of the need to grow up, and an understanding that eventually childhood will progress to old age. I would further suggest, however, that it is during the 1980s that this emphasis on maturation or psychological development overtakes other concerns which may have dominated earlier time-distort texts, such as the adventure narratives of Nesbit or the notion of preserving or valuing the past which is apparent in post-war texts. One way in which this is reflected in key works of the period is that, for perhaps the first time in the history of the genre, protagonists are allowed to alter the past and indeed in some cases this is a key reason for their journey. By this observation I do not

⁴⁷ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, p. 172.

suggest that the genre's concern with history is entirely abandoned, but that it becomes at times secondary, and, in this interest in psychological growth, the time-distort genre does not lag behind the wider canon of children's literature. As previously noted, the time-distort genre in the 1980s also became the literary device most commonly used for writing children's historical fiction; it was during this decade and the early 1990s that historical fiction without an element of fantasy was to fall out of fashion amongst readers and publishers until at least the early years of the twenty-first century.

This was a trend interrogated by John Stephens in his exploration of ideology in children's fiction.⁴⁸ Stephens' work is not primarily concerned with time-distort texts, although he does utilise Penelope Lively as an exemplar in his chapter on the wider canon of historical fiction. Although Stephens' work has been highly influential in children's literature studies generally, it proved to be of limited use for this submission. One reason for this is that since 1992, when *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* appeared, the popularity of single-chronotope historical fiction has grown significantly, rendering parts of his chapter on historical fiction out of date. Stephens, a medievalist and linguistic scholar, says the problem which threatens to deprive historical fiction of its readership is that the assumptions of its ideological base are no longer dominant within Western society.⁴⁹ He talks of the challenge to humanism posed by cultural relativism and the 'loss of curiosity about, and devaluing of interest in the historical past.'⁵⁰ Stephens was writing a decade before the renewal of interest in historical fiction, both for child and adult readers and the interest in history, which is also widely reflected in popular culture.⁵¹ With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that children's historical fiction was not permanently deprived of its readership. Indeed, the level of interest in fictionalising and otherwise engaging with the historical past is growing, as can be witnessed further in the increasing number of factual and dramatic television programmes set in the past and the

⁴⁸ John Stephens (1992) *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. (London and New York: Longman).

⁴⁹ John Stephens (1992), p. 203.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ In popular culture, such as British television, this interest is often played out in the form of programmes in which the participants effectively 'time travel.' These would include the recent *Victorian House* and *Victorian Farm* reality programmes and drama such as *Life on Mars*.

popularity of genealogy as a pastime. Stephens' theory about the demise of children's historical fiction, therefore, has been overtaken by events and the genre was not rendered obsolete in the way he suggests. Nevertheless, he makes some claims about the genre that I had to consider as part of a comprehensive overview and in relation to my own creative practice.

For Stephens, the tenets of humanism inform the work of many writers of historical fiction. He cites in particular Rosemary Sutcliff and Penelope Lively as authors whose work subscribes to such values. Stephens is of course correct in pointing out the ideological elements to these and other, including more recent writers, although, as a general rule, there is no evidence of a diminishing of humanist ideologies in more modern texts. Whilst there may still be a tendency for writers, perhaps particularly of time-distort fiction, to seek commonality with the past, this should not necessarily be interpreted as an indication that they are backward-looking. Indeed, at a psychological level, as Stephens himself points out in his analysis of Penelope Lively's *A Stitch in Time* (1976), this return to the past is often about allowing a protagonist to 'move on.' Stephens develops his point about inadvertent ideological contradictions in the narrative in his more recent collaborative work on new world orders and utopias in children's fiction,⁵² which examines the dissonance between writers' ideological intentions and the resulting directions of their narratives.⁵³ Unlike Hall, Stephens does not confuse the terms 'conservative' and 'conservationist', because his focus is much more clearly on ideology. Stephens lists the somewhat prescriptive criteria by which historical fiction is often measured and suggests that texts which satisfy such criteria must result in 'a very powerful tool for inculcating social conservatism.'⁵⁴ Citing a 1976 paper by the children's writer and critic Robert Leeson, he suggests that attitudes to change in this literature tend to be conservative and show a 'class bias' in the choice of historical period; for example in a preference for ancient Britain over the Industrial Revolution. He further suggests that writers privilege the upper classes over the lower in terms of interest and value and that writers

⁵² Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2008), *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformation*. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

⁵³ With particular reference to post-colonial English fiction.

⁵⁴ John Stephens (1992), p.205.

look to show the past as having a desire for stability which is absent today.⁵⁵ Again, this is more apparent in texts in the genre which were written before the publication of *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* than it is in post-1990s texts; it is also something which *The Serpent House* consciously aimed to avoid.

Although it is a time-distort novel, the dual-historical element (relevant to both its primary and secondary chronotopes) means Stephens' study is highly relevant and his work makes clear the danger of imposing a modern-day viewpoint on the past. Even emotions such as happiness, he reminds us, are culturally specific, and writers must be aware that a historical setting can give a sometimes false sense of authenticity to the narrative. Indeed the whole issue of what is 'authentic' when it comes to cultural identity is an issue, as is also apparent in Stephens *et al* (2008).⁵⁶ Stephens' work helped me keep in mind the need to be alert to the ideological dimensions of the themes, morals and insights contained in *The Serpent House*.⁵⁷ Where Stephens' focus on ideology leads him to see the genre as constrained, Nikolajeva's emphasis on relationships between texts leads her to test for innovation. Discussing the use of time-distort elements in Janet Lunn's *The Root Cellar* (1981), for instance, she seeks to determine 'whether her novel represents a new contribution to the genre or merely copies old models.'⁵⁸

In the novel, twelve-year-old orphan Rose is unhappy at having to live with her aunt and cousins, and accidentally discovers that she is able, when certain conditions prevail, to use the root cellar as a portal and travel back to the time of the American Civil War. From this minimal description it is already evident that some elements in *The Root Cellar* are indeed familiar from other classic texts in the genre. For example, at first Rose's encounters with the past appear as visions, rather like those in *A Traveller in Time*; at the end of the novel, Rose discovers that her friend Susan is in fact, in the present day, the old lady Mrs Morrissay, a

⁵⁵ John Stephens (1992), p.221.

⁵⁶ Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2008), *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

⁵⁷ John Stephens (1992), pp.9-14; citing Peter Hollindale (1988).

⁵⁸ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 169.

revelation reminiscent of *Tom's Midnight Garden*. Primary time does not pass when Rose is in the past, but when she returns, time in the secondary chronotope does move on, a dilemma also faced by Tom in his encounters with Hatty; and at the end of the novel a storm destroys the cellar, irreversibly separating the two chronotopes, also echoing the end of Pearce's novel. The combination of these elements and other unusual devices around time travel make for a novel which, according to Nikolajeva, 'displays a high degree of sophistication, some daring solutions and interesting patterns that stimulate the reader's imagination. In this respect the novel is indeed innovative and fresh.'⁵⁹

For Nikolajeva the central question remains that of the effect of the time-distort adventure on the protagonist. We see how Rose becomes aware that everyone 'belongs' to a certain time and with this realisation comes her own longing for her primary time or 'home.' This, for Nikolajeva, puts the time-distort in a new light:

Rose's journey is not an escape into a world of dreams and ghosts, but a journey home, towards a full and conscious awareness of reality.⁶⁰

The same is true for Abigail in Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980), whose journey to the past is a quest to save one of her ancestors, but who emerges from the experience with greater emotional maturity and a stronger sense of her own identity. Nikolajeva's work, with its focus on fantasy but with a recurring theme of time, is therefore important in positioning my own work in part because it foregrounds elements of innovation which other approaches overlook. Additionally, Nikolajeva's identification of the 'paradigm shift', which texts such as *The Root Cellar* and *Playing Beatie Bow* brought about for historical time-distort fiction, with its new emphasis on psychology, helped me clarify my thinking about this aspect of the time-distort element of *The Serpent House*. At the same time, it gave me a sense of how the genre evolved in the 1980s as an experimental and forward-thinking area of writing for children in ways earlier critics had not recognised.

⁵⁹ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 171.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Contemporary to these notable time-distort texts of the 1980s is the influential feminist criticism of Lissa Paul, whose ‘Enigma Variations’ essay in *Signal Magazine* is acknowledged by Peter Hunt as one which breathes new life into the discipline of children’s literary criticism.⁶¹ Citing the work of Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction* (1982), Paul claims that the archetypal quest romance (containing elements of a call to adventure, a journey, battle with the enemy and victorious return) is a masculine model, ‘about turning boys into men, not girls into women, or children into people.’⁶² When Pratt developed her theory of a female identity quest, she proffered five phases for this psychological journey, which were: a splitting away from family; a ‘green-world’ guide or token; a ‘green-world’ friend or lover; a confrontation with parental figures and a plunge into the unconscious/entrapment.⁶³ To this Paul adds a sixth phase, which is ‘an integration with society.’⁶⁴ Such a narrative pattern may be traced in almost any post-1980s time-distort fiction. Ruth Park’s *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980), Janet Lunn’s *The Root Cellar* (1981) and Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (1988), all have female protagonists aged between 12 and 14 and may be seen to follow the Pratt-Paul model for a female identity quest. Many later novels, from Linda Buckley-Archer’s *Time Quake* trilogy (2006 – 9) to Kate Saunders’ *Beswitched* (2010) also follow a similar narrative pattern – as does *The Serpent House*. For Annie, who is aged 12, for example, the splitting-off from the family occurs when she leaves her aunt’s home to live at Hexer Hall; the green-world tokens are the snake motifs and her green-world friend is Meg. Confrontation with parental or authority figures comes when Annie tries to steal writings from the leper hospital doctor and tries to challenge Miss Haggstone and later Lady Hexer. Entrapment occurs when Annie is imprisoned by the doctor, whilst the plunge into unconsciousness is the final Twelfth Night fire.

⁶¹ Lissa Paul (1987) ‘Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children’s Literature’, *Signal*, Vol. 54, (September 1987), pp. 186 – 201. Reproduced in Peter Hunt (ed.) (1990), *Children’s Literature: The Development of Criticism*. (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 148-166.

⁶² Lissa Paul (1987), p. 199.

⁶³ Annis Pratt (1982), *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press), pp. 139 -143.

⁶⁴ Lissa Paul (1987), p.199.

Paul's notion of integration with society requires further unpacking. In her essay, Paul cites the way the identity quest in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) 'fizzles out', because in its conclusion the focus shifts, so that the story becomes Colin's rather than that of the central focaliser, Mary. Mary has undergone the quest, but the rewards are Colin's. The issue of what constitutes integration, for a female protagonist, is therefore a fraught one for a feminist critic. It has been noted that, in line with Paul's contemporaneous reading of *The Secret Garden*, in the key time-distort texts of the 1980s, although the time fantasy provides adventure for a central female character, the lesson learned is often that she must return to a normalcy in which she resumes an expected place in her family or culture, often with a renewed respect for her elders. This pattern is evident in the novels by Lunn, Park and Yolen. Although *The Serpent House* does not go as far as to 'unvent'(sic) this tradition, as Pratt suggests may be a possibility within any archetypal pattern, nevertheless there was a distinct attempt at some subversion of it.⁶⁵ Although Annie returns to the primary chronotope with the intention of forming a new life with her brother and his girlfriend, it was my intention that Annie, having learned some level of independence and the ability to challenge and rebel, returns to society as a more confident but also less malleable and biddable adolescent than she was before the time-distort episodes. It was further the intention that this new family grouping was unconventional enough to cause further difficulties for Annie in the future.⁶⁶ Just as for Mary in *The Secret Garden*, there are historical, societal limitations on how far a character of Annie's gender and class can challenge the conventions of the time, and these are noted, but the suggestion is that there are further battles for Annie to fight and she is now better equipped to cope with them. The novel's sequel also intends to explore aspects of otherness, in that a central narrative strand will be the experience of a black British woman in nineteenth century Scotland.

Historical time-distort fiction was therefore particularly well-placed to develop this notion of a female quest, which may again be a reason why the genre appeals disproportionately to female writers. Linked to the female identity quest,

⁶⁵ See Annis Pratt (1982), p.178, for the term 'unvention.'

⁶⁶ A planned sequel aims to explore in greater detail the racism experienced by Lucy and exacerbated because of her relationship with Annie's brother Tom.

however, is developmental theory, which Alison Waller interrogates in her study *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (2009). Waller includes time-distort texts in her definition of the ‘fantastic realism’ genre.⁶⁷ Citing Julia Kristeva’s *Women’s Time* (1986), Waller points out that developmentalism (within adolescent fiction in particular) ‘is located within a predominantly patriarchal context’, in that it relies on the politicised ‘time of history,’ which unfolds in a linear way. Kristeva points out that feminine subjectivity is excluded from such political time through its links with cyclical, repetitious or eternal time.⁶⁸ Clearly, the premise of time-distort is that time is not linear and that it may be, as Kristeva suggests, ‘cyclical, repetitious or eternal.’ Waller cites Robert Westall’s unusual time-distort novel *The Devil on the Road* (1978) in which she says we see a particularly ‘gendered’ use of time: the witch-figure Johanna represents the non-linear, fluid, ‘women’s’ time, and it is portrayed as dangerous and emasculating for the protagonist John to bond with her. For Waller, ‘developmental theory is conventionally based on male experience and female versions of adolescence are represented as deviant or other.’⁶⁹ This may be illustrated by the Westall novel, which is an unusual time-distort text; it is possible to argue, however, for a different reading of much other time-distort fiction, in which the ‘green world’ guide is often a wise female, and in which, although there is often a threat of entrapment in the past, the time travelling is a conduit to some kind of progression, although this certainly has gender implications. For Waller, the dilemma is whether time travel represents positive aspects of development or whether ‘it articulates the dangers of deviant adolescence’, particularly because of the emphasis on a return to normalcy and often away from any attempts at rebellion. Problems may lie in the ‘backwards motion’ of time-travel novels, ‘suggesting as it does the danger of stagnation in protagonists who cannot ‘move on’.’⁷⁰ There may be particular problems too for the female protagonist. Waller suggests that girls can go only so far on the progressive, developmental route before they ‘slip back into matrilineal patterns

⁶⁷ For a fuller discussion of the theories of transition and developmentalism, see Alison Waller (2009), *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*. (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 30-35.

⁶⁸ Alison Waller (2009), p. 35.

⁶⁹ Alison Waller (2009), p. 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* It is, however, rare to find a post-1970s children’s/ young adults’ novel in which the protagonist does not ‘move on’ psychologically following a time-distort episode.

of ‘women’s time’ and are asked to embrace stereotypical roles of reproduction and motherhood as part of their maturation.⁷¹ It is this conventional pattern which *The Serpent House* and its proposed sequel aim to avoid.

2.4 Fin de siècle time-distort: the 1990s

By guiding the reader into the imagined history, removing the ‘panes of glass’ that separate us, yet also giving an open and inquiring intelligence its due place,[...] the time-slip novel can bring new life and drama to the historical novel – Peter Hollindale (1997).⁷²

It has already been noted that, by the 1990s, critics began to recognise the lack of either appetite or prestige for children’s historical fiction without an element of fantasy. Just a few years earlier, however, John Rowe Townsend, known as a defender of historical fiction as an important genre, located in *Written for Children* (1987) what was, in his opinion, its central problem. For Townsend it was not, as Stephens averred, the decline of humanism as the accepted western ideology, but something, for young readers, rather more simple:

An historical novel, starting as it does at a backward remove in time, has a special need of richness, vitality, and above all the power to draw the reader into the middle of things, rather than leave him watching as if through a pane of glass. Accuracy of historical detail is not enough. The past must be made new, made *now*.⁷³

His comments are taken up by Peter Hollindale in his article ‘Children of Eyam’ (1997), which suggests that with the time-distort genre comes an answer to this very problem. Describing the time-distort novel as a ‘second stage’ in the genre of historical fiction, Hollindale says that, rather than being relegated to a sub-genre of fantasy, ‘[w]hat we are seeing is a new wing of the historical novel, one specially designed to make the past *now*, to bring past and present face-to-

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Peter Hollindale, ‘Children of Eyam’: The Dramatisation of History, *Children’s Literature in Education*, Vol. 28, No. 4, December 1997, pp. 205-218, p. 217.

⁷³ John Rowe Townsend (1987), *Written for Children*. (London: Penguin), p.195.

face.⁷⁴ In Hollindale's analysis, which exemplifies the genre using retellings of the story of the plague at Eyam, Derbyshire, in 1665, the critic and the writers of time-distort reach an agreement, both on the impulse behind choosing to write in this genre and its merits for the reader. The modern historical novel may learn from the best examples of time-distort: from its narrative technique and its heightened sensitivity to time, as well as the writer's decisions on what to include and what to omit. To illustrate his points, Hollindale cites Berlie Doherty's *Children of Winter* (1985), which is now a staple of the English National Curriculum, and Jill Paton Walsh's *A Parcel of Patterns* (1983), which he notes makes a subtle use of the time-distort device by giving the protagonist an 'open intelligence' and an ability to see Eyam as clearly as a modern-day reader may do. A similarly modern scepticism is given to Jack in Linda Kempton's *The Naming of William Rutherford* (1992).

This raises, of course, the problematic nature of imposing modern values on characters from the past, values which may be seen as anachronistic. Yet the imposition of modern sensibilities could be seen as occurring more transparently or unproblematically when the protagonist is genuinely from a more modern era. Other time-distort writers of the 1990s have achieved a successful blend of making the characters from the past more authentic in their values and mores – for example, Susan Cooper, in *King of Shadows* (1999), and Susan Price, whose clan in *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1999) is portrayed as having codes of behaviour which we as modern readers are not expected to recognise. Both novels are written towards the end of the 1990s, so it may be the case that at this point the genre is increasing in sophistication. Certainly Tess Cosslett, in 'History from Below', picks out two runners-up for the same year's Guardian Book Prize, *King of Shadows* and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) as exemplars in the field.⁷⁵ Cosslett also notes the potential usefulness of the time-distort genre as a means of presenting a world from the past which is 'real' or 'everyday.' Although Cosslett draws upon Krips and the notion of heritage, she suggests that, as a genre, time-distort in fact 'provides ways out of some of the dilemmas and

⁷⁴ Peter Hollindale (1997), "'Children of Eyam": The Dramatisation of History', *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 28, No.4, Dec 1997, pp. 205-218; p.206.

⁷⁵ Tess Cosslett (2002).

negative features of ‘heritage’ as a concept and practice’. This, she says, is born of its openness to other histories, its construction of childhood, avoiding nostalgia, and in its critique of ‘empty reconstructions of the past,’ which problematises the notion of simple access offered by the heritage site. Cosslett’s defence of historical time-distort suggests it offers more to the child than the blander experience of living history projects. For example, in several of the texts she cites, including Penelope Lively’s *A Stitch in Time* (1976) and *The House in Norham Gardens* (1974), the protagonist must let go of mistaken or romantic perceptions about the past. For this project, both Hollindale and Cosslett are useful in that they appear to take on board the writers’ intentions and accept that for both literary and educative reasons the historical time-distort novel may offer the reader more than the sum of its parts. Hollindale’s limits in his article are that he focuses only on the novels covering a particular short period of history and does not go beyond texts written in the early 1990s. What appeared, fourteen years ago, to be a way of making history more accessible to young readers by imbuing characters from the past with modern sensibilities, now appears rather more questionable. Usually, however, the time-distort device means that at least one character is able to see the past from a present-day perspective and, crucially, make this contemporary perspective apparent to the reader.

Cosslett’s suggestion that the genre is even more open to otherness than non-fantasy historical fiction is not entirely borne out in her discussion. The piece is also limited by its use of exclusively British texts; her criticism of a tendency to employ a patriarchal line and the ‘namesake’ device, such as Nat in *King of Shadows* and Kit in David Almond’s *Kit’s Wilderness*, would have been mitigated had she considered works from the US, which are less likely to employ the device of a displaced English child discovering his or her “roots”.⁷⁶ Cosslett also wonders why there are no immigrant protagonists, whereas Hannah in *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, for example, is from Polish-Jewish descent and her family are post-war immigrants to America. Like Hollindale, however, Cosslett too suggests that the potential in a time-distort fiction is to go beyond a traditional, non-fantasy approach, offering the reader a more nuanced approach to the past. Her analysis of

⁷⁶ Tess Cosslett (2002), p.251.

the commonalities between most time-distort texts, however, does not, for me, shed as much light on the genre as Lissa Paul's development of the Annis Pratt female quest model, although it covers some of the same or rather similar ground.

This comparative approach highlights those aspects which are usually found in historical time-distort fiction noted earlier in this chapter, such as the deracinated child in a new locality, a bond with a child from the past and, Cosslett notes, the subjectivity of the modern-day child as a key factor. The limitations of this analysis can be clearly seen through examination of one of the most acclaimed time-distort works of the 1990s, Susan Price's *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1998).⁷⁷ This is an unusual time-distort novel in that it does not employ any elements of magic in order to facilitate the journey to the past. Price claims she was uncomfortable with this notion and therefore based her Time Tunnel on contemporaneous debates amongst scientists about the potential for creating a time machine. Additionally, the central character, Andrea, is not a displaced child but a young woman, old enough to embark upon a romantic relationship, and a professional, employed by the twenty-first century FUP Company. In her capacity as company anthropologist, she lives and negotiates with the sixteenth-century Sterkarms. The fact that Andrea is not a child also lessens the compulsion to make the time-distortion part of a maturation process; nevertheless, she has to make difficult decisions. The novel ends with Andrea choosing not to stay with her sixteenth-century lover and mourning this loss at what was once Sterkarm land but is now a heritage site.⁷⁸

Other elements of Cosslett's list of commonalities, such as that the protagonists become historians to verify their experience, do not apply to Price's novel, or indeed to some others written around a similar time, including Gary Crew's *Strange Objects* (1998). This suggests some of the limitations of the comparative approach. For this project, Susan Price is a useful study because her novel can be seen as an attempt to take the genre in new and innovative directions, particularly in the form of research and historical detail, and the creation of a

⁷⁷ The novel won the 1999 *Guardian* Children's Fiction Award.

⁷⁸ In the sequel, *A Sterkarm Kiss* (2003), however, Andrea reverses this decision and chooses to remain in the past.

double-dystopia. There is also an attempt, if not altogether a successful one, to offer the reader a series of underlying messages which may not be considered either nostalgic or conservative; these were also aims in *The Serpent House*, in that I also attempted to create a double dystopia and an underlying anti-authoritarian message. Authorial intention of itself is only a beginning and must be translated into creative process. In the process the original starting point may be changed irrecoverably. Price's Sterkarm series, for example, carries a strong message about the impossibility of positive change in a twenty-first century society ruled by an aggressive form of capitalism and concludes that the only way the cultural identity of colonies such as the Sterkarms can be protected is by resisting and excluding outsiders. According to Price critiquing capitalism was not her original starting point or goal. Citing Kipling, Price alludes to the more unconscious part of her writing as her 'daemon' and credits this muse figure as responsible for some of the underlying themes in her writing:

I'm not always aware of what the 'daemon' is plotting. As I worked my way through the story - especially as I rewrote - I became aware of sub-texts. Which I then strengthened.⁷⁹

With reference to Jill Paton Walsh's *A Chance Child* (1978), Linda Hall suggests that concern for the environment is a common trope in historical time-distort fiction. Although, in Price, the landscape of the sixteenth century is portrayed as desirable, in the sense that it is unspoiled and unpolluted when compared with that of the twenty-first, the author is careful not to suggest that the lifestyle of those in the past is wholly utopian. So, whilst the members of the FUP Company are impressed with the appearance of the countryside, this is set in contrast with the primitive living conditions of the Sterkarms:

There seemed to be more tints to the colours here than there were at home in the 21st. More greens, subtle but distinct; rich greens, luminous pale greens, golden greens, tawny greens. In the stone, the bracken, the trees, there were tawnies, russets, greys, ochres, purples – and all the colours seemed to softly vibrate somehow, to shimmer.

It was the air. It was so clean, so clear. His eyes were no longer looking through a filter of smog and dust.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Susan Price (2011) Email to Barbara Henderson, 24th June.

But within a few pages, the representatives of the company are taken to the Sterkarm tower, which is not grand but dark and cramped:

It stank. It reeked of sewerage and garbage and smoke and old food. And it was noisy. Children screamed, dogs barked, someone was hammering and clanging away at iron with a hammer....You had to wonder about people who were happy to live in such filth. It was all a damned sight too authentic, and would need a hell of a lot of development and improvement before anyone could be expected to pay to stay there.⁸¹

Throughout the text, Price also draws attention to the other dystopian aspects of the past, such as the lack of adequate medical care and the likelihood of wounds and diseases becoming fatal; the chaotic lifestyle and aggressive culture of the reiver clans; and the dichotomous status of women, sometimes revered but also downgraded. Parallels can sometimes be drawn between this historical period and the twenty-first century. Andrea considers herself ‘lucky’ to be living amongst the Sterkarms and finds much to admire about their values, but at the end of the novel chooses to stay in her primary time. In writing *The Serpent House*, similar care was taken not to romanticise the medieval chronotope. This was particularly pertinent because of the choice of the two time periods. The Victorians had a wide cultural interest in the medieval period but their portrayals of it were often romantic in nature, as can be seen in, for example, Tennyson’s poetry based on Malory’s Arthurian tales, the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Gothic-style architecture of the time.⁸² The medieval house or castle is a familiar trope in Gothic literature and I was aware of this tradition in creating the two time periods. Although Hexer Hall is on the site of the former hospital, we are told that much of it has been rebuilt since the death of Lady Hexer’s husband, so that it is a (nineteenth century) contemporary building based on the imagination and desires of its present incumbent. The Victorians also tended to sentimentalise the condition of leprosy; in the portrayal of the leper hospital, therefore, whilst making full use of available historical information about

⁸⁰ Susan Price (1998), *The Sterkarm Handshake*. (London: Scholastic), p.81.

⁸¹ Susan Price (1998), *The Sterkarm Handshake*, p. 91.

⁸² See Charles Dellheim (1982), *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

such communities, care was taken to romanticise neither the condition or the context. The dangers for the protagonist, Annie, are also increased because of the magical elements and the mythical creatures present. Some of the attempted cures, however, are based on ones which were in fact used to treat some symptoms – for example, the use of hedgehog skin for hair loss. Snakes are today widely used in medicine even as they are associated with dark magic. There is, therefore, some deliberate ambiguity about the effectiveness of the doctor’s work, but the creation of a dystopian past as well as a dystopian present is intended to be apparent to the reader.

2.5 The Future of Looking Backward: twenty-first century time-distort

With the publication of texts such as Jamila Gavin’s *Coram Boy* (2000), Michael Morpurgo’s *Private Peaceful* (2003) and Philip Reeve’s *Here Lies Arthur* (2007), historical fiction that does not employ an element of fantasy found new status in the first years of the twenty-first century. Although a natural assumption may be that writers should, therefore, no longer feel compelled to employ a time-distort device in order to connect a reader with the past, in fact the genre is still attracting writers, readers and some critical attention. At the time of writing it is too early to find academic criticism of some of the latest time-distort works, although some have attracted book reviews in newspapers such as *The Times*, *Independent*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian*. In 2010, for example, three books were published in the genre, all receiving reviews in these newspapers, and all by female authors: *The Queen Must Die* by K.A.S. Quinn, which is planned to be the first part of a series, *Beswitched* by Kate Saunders and *Frozen in Time* by Ali Sparkes, which won the Blue Peter Book of the Year. What is significant about the latter two novels is their knowing intertextuality. Both pay literary homage to traditional school and adventure stories.⁸³ The authors acknowledge their debt to the novels they read themselves as children and deliberately set out to recreate those fictional worlds of

⁸³ Such as those made popular by Enid Blyton and Angela Brazil. K.A.S. Quinn (2010), *The Queen Must Die*. (London: Atlantic); Kate Saunders (2010), *Beswitched*. (London: Scholastic) and Ali Sparkes (2010) *Frozen in Time*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press). In her acknowledgements, Ali Sparkes says : “Oh – and thank you very, very much, Enid.”

boarding schools and child detectives, the time-distort device proving a useful way of doing so. For example, the journalist Amanda Craig, who reviews children's literature for *The Times*, says of *Beswitched*:

Although the time-travel element has been done before in *Charlotte Sometimes*, Penelope Farmer's 1969 children's classic, Saunders's book is not about a child's loss of identity but its opposite. Flora retains her "unique character", and she discovers, ultimately, what she has in common with her rejected grandmother.⁸⁴

These Blytonnades are perhaps to be understood as instances of writers looking backwards, with varying degrees of nostalgia, at the works popular during their own childhood, and this is a trend which looks likely to continue within the genre. Whether this movement results in works which become imitations/variations of earlier texts, or ones which add something new to the ongoing time-distort dialogue, is something which cannot be predicted at this stage. The exploration of more recent periods of history, such as the 1950s, is a direction newer authors may, on the evidence of some recent works, be expected to take, and an interrogation of a past which is so much within living memory may add an additional dimension to the genre. An intertextual approach, however, would point out that readers of Saunders and Sparkes benefit from some familiarity with the tropes of Brazil and Blyton and that the more modern texts enter into a dialogue with the earlier ones. It is to be hoped that creative developments, rather than variations on existing patterns, will occur, showing that the time-distort genre has a future in which writers are still able to produce new and vital interrogations of the past.

The chapters which follow take the form of two detailed time-distort case studies, in which I refer to my own work and reflect upon what it owed to these texts in combination with the research component as a whole. The case studies chosen illustrate examples of radical content and breaking of boundaries in Jane

⁸⁴ Available from:
http://www.amandacraig.com/pages/journalism_01/journalism_01_item.asp?journalism_01ID=109 (Accessed 20th July 2011).

Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1988) and radically experimental form in Gary Crew's *Strange Objects* (1998). The analyses have a dual focus. First, they look at the way each text breaks new ground and challenges the charge that works in the genre are necessarily conservative. Their second concern is with how each has influenced and informed my own creative project.

CHAPTER 3. THE HOLOCAUST AS TIME-DISTORT FICTION - Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*

When Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* appeared in 1988 it constituted a powerful challenge to what had previously been considered suitable for children at the level of content; first, as an example of juvenile Holocaust fiction, and second, for its use of a time-distort framing device within such a context. Yolen's was not the first attempt to write about the Holocaust for young readers, or even the first to attempt to try to represent a death camp. Anne Holm's *I am David* (1965) begins in what is evidently such a camp, though details of where and when it is located are withheld and David, the young central character, escapes from the camp in the opening pages of the book.¹ Three years before *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Roberto Innocenti produced *Rose Blanche* (1985), a picture book about the discovery of a death camp outside her town by a little girl who attempts to help the children she finds there and is killed in crossfire when the camp is liberated.² Holm wrote in Danish and Innocenti in Italian. Their work was swiftly translated into English; both went on to win major children's literature prizes and were regularly studied by pupils in both the UK and the USA, suggesting that there was a willingness to see this horrifying period in history explored in writing for children.³

Nevertheless, the subject was and remains particularly difficult to present to juvenile audiences and, as this chapter explains, the combination of time-distort and Holocaust content was not universally approved.

Like many time-distort novels, *The Devil's Arithmetic* won prizes,

¹ Anne Holm (1965), *I Am David*, trans.L.W. Kingsland (London: Methuen).

² Roberto Innocenti and Ian McEwan (1995), *Rose Blanche* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995); first published in a version with text by Christophe Gallaz (1985). In fact, many books were produced about the Holocaust prior to the publication of *The Devil's Arithmetic* in 1988, although their content is treated in a less controversial manner. A useful list of children's fiction about the Holocaust can be found at the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center. See <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/chldbook15.htm> (Accessed 4th June 2011). A further list intended for teachers, broken down by the suggested age of the reader, may be found at <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/books.HTM> (Accessed 4th June 2011).

³ For example, *I Am David* won several awards including the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and the American Library Association Notable Book. *Rose Blanche* too won several awards including the Notable Book citation, American Library Association (ALA), Honor Book citation, *Boston Globe-Horn Book*, and Mildred L. Batchelder Award, ALA.

including the Jewish Book Council Award (1989), the Sydney Taylor Book Award (1989) and the Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award (1997). Along with other time-distort works of the 1980s, the increased emphasis on the quest for emotional development places the genre in a new and no longer traditional light, according to the critic Maria Nikolajeva.⁴ The impact of this more progressive form of the genre becomes stronger than those involving abstract distant worlds or times, so, although Yolen deliberately places herself within the time-distort tradition, *The Devil's Arithmetic* is able to add to the 'dialogue' forming within the genre.⁵ However, her book was the subject of considerably greater controversy and criticism than Holm's and Innocenti's, becoming, primarily because of its graphic content, one of the most challenged books in the United States in the last fifty years.⁶ The debates around children's Holocaust fiction have moved on, and the decision to use a time-distort device and so categorise her novel as fantasy, concluding with a return to reality and a 'happy' ending, is one of the main reasons for continuing criticism of the text today. The choice of Yolen's work as a case study for this submission, therefore, was because she was an author who made a decision to use the time-distort genre in an unusual way that underscored the challenging nature of her subject. Although leprosy is not such a complex or emotive topic, since in my own novel I too planned to use a time-distort device to help contemporary children gain some understanding of the distressing conditions endured by sufferers in the past, I felt I could learn much from investigating and evaluating the criticisms directed at Yolen and her responses to them.

3.1 Time-distort and *The Devil's Arithmetic*

The two periods in this time-distort novel are the late twentieth century, which at the time of publication was the present day, and 1942, so at the height of the attempted extermination of the Jews though, as the novel makes clear, this was not realised at the time. Hannah, who is almost 13 years old, is reluctant to take part in

⁴ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.), p. 172.

⁵ Maria Nikolajeva, (1996).

⁶ Source: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v34n2/sacco.pdf> (Accessed 19 May 2011).

her family's Passover Seder. The Seder commemorates the ancient history of persecuted Jewry. Since the trauma of the Holocaust, the injunction to remember has had a strong Holocaust dimension; memory and remembering continue to be leitmotifs throughout the book. Hannah's lack of engagement with this ritual based on remembering events in the past is not unusual in children; children have little in the way of personal history and the relation between past and present is often confusing. It is an issue the Seder ritual recognises, and this is the specific reason behind the part of the ceremony in which children must ask questions about it. Yolen's time-distort device addresses this reality: it is simultaneously a way of making the past meaningful to Hannah and to the book's readers who, on the basis of length, style and paratextual evidence are likely to be much the same age as Hannah. Yolen has explained her decision to have her character travel between present and past:

I believe it [time-distort] is a straight road into memory, an experimental act for an understanding of the past. It is a once-upon-a-very-real-time, making history immediate and accessible for the young reader, letting them see backwards through a very clear lens.⁷

She adds that time-distort books 'give children back their memories, by making history an experiential act.' This comment mirrors observations and explanations made by many other writers in the genre, such as Robert Westall, who say that to place the young reader in the shoes of the person from the past is a way to help them feel as if they have experienced history.⁸ Yolen's content is in fact highly educational, proffering much information about both the Holocaust and Jewish cultural traditions; the author appears to recognise that this potentially didactic element needs to be made more appealing and relevant to a young reader and she makes it clear she employs the time-distort device to achieve this. This ability of the time-distort frame to gain the reader's empathy is a reason why the genre

⁷ Jane Yolen (1989), 'An Experimental Act,' Reprinted in *Language Arts*, Vol. 66, No.3 (March 1989), pp. 46-48. Available from <http://www.spectacle.org/396/scifi/exper.html> (Accessed 20th January 2012).

⁸ Westall is quoted as saying: 'On the whole, children [...] don't want to know what the seventeenth century said to the seventeenth, but they become quite interested in what the twentieth century might have to say to the seventeenth.' Source: www.norham.n-tyneside.sch.uk/westall/, a website created by students at the former Norham College in North Tyneside to explore this author's work. Site no longer available. (Accessed 21st February 2008).

continues to prove attractive to writers and readers today, and one to which I subscribed when making the decision to write within this tradition. Although its subject matter is substantially less contentious, *The Serpent House*, with both chronotopes set in the past, sets out to challenge the reader further. In experiencing the past through the double chronotope, readers are, in a sense, more removed than is usually the case from the young protagonist. They will therefore experience both commonality and alienation; the reading experience is intended to mirror the protagonist Annie's own experience of isolation and eventual, but limited, bonding.

In Yolen's novel, Hannah needs to know why things have to be so before she accepts them; it means she can ask the questions that a young, present-day reader may ask when learning about the history of the Holocaust. The nature of the challenge Yolen faced in trying to write for children about events that are still relatively recent and almost beyond the comprehension of adults was facilitated by the time-distort structure, something which she makes clear in her own commentary on the novel.⁹ Her aim in this work was to show how the act of remembering is essential to those of any generation. This is a concern of most writers of time-distort fiction but of course the Holocaust-based content gives this notion of remembrance a particular resonance which cannot be claimed for any other period of history.

My aim in *The Serpent House*, which of course interrogates two very different and much less sensitive periods of history, was different. I was specifically interested in denying readers the notion that they were seeing the past through modern-day eyes, though in one sense this was inevitably the case, as with any historical writing, which must be influenced by the context in which it is written. The double chronotope structure of my novel offers two historical settings, and, in opposition to any notion that either the past is in part desirable or that the primary time offers stability, neither setting is safe or comfortable for the protagonist or the reader.¹⁰ In this sense the experience of the protagonist Annie

⁹ Jane Yolen (1989), 'An Experimental Act', pp. 46-48.

¹⁰ A similar notion is explored in Jill Paton Walsh's *A Chance Child* (1978), in which the child labour of the eighteenth century is set against the child neglect suffered by the character Creep in

again differs from that of Hannah, who longs for the safety and comforts of her primary time, until her memories of it are (temporarily) lost. The issue of how well this past-within-a-past works for the contemporary reader was a consideration. Although the continued popularity of the genre suggested that time-distort fiction has many advantages when engaging young readers with history, the renewed interest in the past in many forms of popular culture has also been reflected in an increasing acceptance of historical fiction, which does not need to have the present day as its primary setting. The decision to set the Victorian era, which features widely on the National Curriculum, as the novel's primary time may allow readers in my target age group some sense of familiarity with it, although it was not chosen specifically for this reason. The secondary chronotope should, however, feel less familiar than the first; it is a period of history which does not, at present, feature on the history curriculum, which at Key Stage Two covers a period before 1066 and then moves forward to the Tudors, then at Key Stage Three does include an element of the significance of the Norman Conquest but does not focus on the spread of leprosy.¹¹ Indeed, many text books omit much about this era, as it is common for works covering the 'medieval' period to begin later, in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.¹² Nor is leprosy a subject that has often been addressed in writing for children.¹³ My decisions to write about leprosy were not solely about calling children's attention to this period and disease from the past. It is well established that historical fiction inevitably (and often deliberately) holds up a mirror to the concerns of the present and in my case I was

the twentieth century. Neither chronotope offers stability; unusually, in this novel, Creep remains in the secondary time period.

¹¹ Source:

http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/uploads/History%201999%20programme%20of%20study_tcm8-12056.pdf (Accessed 5th June 2011).

¹² See, for example, some key texts used as a part of the research for *The Serpent House*, including Barbara A. Hanawalt's *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (1986), which begins in the fourteenth century; Peter Spufford's *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* (2002), which begins in the thirteenth century and Shulamith Shahar's *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (1990), which takes the twelfth century as its starting point. The historian Nicholas Orme, in the introduction to *Medieval Children* (2001), says that his work has its greater depth in the high and later Middle Ages, between 1100 and 1550, when he was able to find most evidence of relevance.

¹³ My contact at the charity Lepra, for example, was unable to name any children's books which covered the subject. My own research found some examples, including Geoffrey Trease's *The Red Towers of Granada* (1966) and Monica Furlong's *Wise Child* (1987), which mention but do not focus upon the condition. Much more recently Pat Walsh's *The Crowfield Curse* (2010) is set in 1347 and again contains a character with leprosy, but does not make it a central focus of the narrative.

interested in using attitudes towards and treatment of lepers to help young readers gain insights into modern-day pandemics and the reaction to them.¹⁴

There is nothing safe or comfortable for Yolen's Hannah when, on being sent as part of the Seder ritual to open the door for the prophet Elijah, she is transported back to a Polish village in 1942. At first, Hannah, who finds herself called Chaya in the second chronotope, does not realise what time period she is in. For several pages, spanning a secondary time period of more than a day, she is convinced that she is either the subject of an elaborate joke by her uncle or else that she is dreaming; she constantly expects to find herself back at home by opening another door or by waking up. At this stage, she complains about comparatively trivial matters. She confidently knows she is really Hannah and not Chaya, 'because she remembered.'¹⁵ Shortly after her arrival, the people of the village where she lives are rounded up to be transported to what Hannah realises will be a death camp. On the journey to the camp, the village rabbi urges Hannah/Chaya not to tell the others what she knows, especially when she claims to be from the future: 'All children are from the future,' he says.¹⁶ By this, Yolen is not suggesting that the rabbi believes Hannah/Chaya has come from a different time period, but that he feels she is young and lacks the experience and wisdom gained by a knowledge of the past; in part, he is asserting his authority and also urging those on the journey to place their faith in prayer. Yolen here also highlights a problem with the time-fantasy mechanism; Hannah/Chaya has some essential knowledge which she could know only because she is from the 'future,' but she is still powerless to act upon it. Whether she is right to obey the rabbi is debatable, but she recognises the dilemma: 'Was knowing – or not knowing - more frightening? She couldn't decide.'¹⁷ Later, when gossip spreads amongst the adults, they are silenced by the reminder that they are making the children afraid and Hannah/Chaya too has, by this stage, learned the need not to remove people's hopes.

¹⁴ At the time of writing the novel, swine flu and the fear of its potential became a matter of concern which was widely reported in the media.

¹⁵ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*. (London: Barn Owl Books), p. 24. [1988].

¹⁶ Jane Yolen (2001), *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p. 76.[1988].

¹⁷ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p. 70. [1988].

The issue of the protagonist being ‘from the future’ and therefore in possession of potentially disruptive knowledge is a consideration for the writer of historical time-distort fiction. In the case of *The Serpent House*, however, the character of Annie is not expected to hold any such crucial knowledge; the choice of content and period meant that specific historical events did not impact upon the plot in the way that they must contentiously do for Yolen. As the choice of the eleventh century time period was also one which is less well-documented, the younger reader will come to the time-distort episodes with a smaller amount of prior knowledge, rather like the protagonist herself. As a working class nineteenth century girl Annie has had an extremely limited education and therefore when the doctor asks her questions about history she is muddled in her answers, making the doctor, in spite of his personal belief in magic, less inclined to believe her.¹⁸ This does not necessarily set Annie apart from other time-distort protagonists, however, as there are several instances in the genre in which the central characters’ claims to be ‘from the future’ are disbelieved. In Robert Swindells’ *In the Nick of Time* (2007), for example, the protagonist Charlie tells her teachers that the king will die the following day, in an attempt to prove her claims – but even when this event comes to pass, she is still not believed.¹⁹

In *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, the daily horror and brutality of life at the camp are spelled out, including the tattooing of the numbers on the prisoners’ arms, the shaving of their hair, the filth, the paucity of food and the indignities which may feel particularly pertinent to a young adolescent, such as having to be naked in front of laughing guards. This level of detail sets Yolen’s book apart from both Holms’s and Innocenti’s, who take a more experimental approach in order to manage the content. Holm makes David a limited focaliser: the extent of the trauma he has witnessed in his camp means that parts of his mind have closed down and he never refers to them. The guards in particular are placed in a compartment in his mind labelled ‘They’. This strategy both gives insight into the effects of trauma on victims and makes it unnecessary to describe the camps, an aspect of the Holocaust that continues to be considered unsuitable for and beyond

¹⁸ Following legislation such as the various Factory Acts of the mid-nineteenth century, which restricted child labour, and the 1870 Education Act, Annie will have had to attend a local church, voluntary or board school. She will have been taught history, on average once a week.

¹⁹ Robert Swindells (2007), *In the Nick of Time*. (London: Random House).

the comprehension of children.²⁰ Innocenti comes closer to depicting the camps in his picturebook: Rose Blanche sees emaciated child inmates in ragged striped clothing behind the barbed wire with the inadequate huts where they sleep in the background. Neither text nor image ventures behind the wire, however, a reluctance which even extends to much Holocaust literature for young adults, as Adrienne Kertzer points out.²¹ It may also be noted that Innocenti's work is about German resistance and some critics today feel that in the work, Jewish children are not important; the use of the death of a German child as, apparently, a metaphor for the Shoah is not seen as acceptable for some Jewish scholars.²² The time-distort device allows Yolen to use a familiar form to describe the camps through Hannah's eyes, preventing the events from becoming safely distanced by being in the past. At the same time, however, the use of time-distort affords a degree of implausibility and so protection for readers, which may allow more detail than in the realistic modes adopted by Holm and Innocenti.

The level of detail, although, again, on a much less sensitive subject, was an issue discussed at some length during the writing of *The Serpent House*. The Yolen text suggested that a high level of detail, even of disturbing subject matter, was appropriate if not used in a gratuitous manner, particularly when coupled with the softening or protective elements of the time-distort form and the assurances to the reader of a return to normalcy. During the draft stages of *The Serpent House*, exercises were written in which attempts were made to describe the symptoms of the disease. During this stage of the creative process, secondary research was used to ascertain what these symptoms were. Detailed accounts are available in both Weymouth and Rawcliffe, both of whom mention factors including alopecia, loss of sensation in the limbs and skin conditions.²³ Images used in these and other text books were also used as prompts for writing about the nature of the condition.

²⁰ Fuller debates on this issue may be found in Hamida Bosmajian (2002), *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust*. (New York and London: Routledge), and in numerous articles, including this on the paperback publication of Marcus Zuzak's *The Book Thief* (2008) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3670593/How-shall-we-tell-the-children.html>. (Accessed 20th June 2011).

²¹ Adrienne Kertzer (2008), *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature and the Holocaust*. (Ontario, Ormskirk, Lancashire, New York and Rozelle, New South Wales: Broadview Press). p. 61.

²² See Eve Tal's discussion of Holocaust fiction, available from http://www.eve-tal.com/homework/holocaust_bibliography.html (Accessed 11th June 2011).

²³ See Anthony Weymouth (1938), *Through the Leper Squint*. (London: Selwyn and Blount), and Carole Rawcliffe (2006), *Leprosy in Medieval England*. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press).

Some detailed descriptions were used in the narrative, such as when Annie encounters a female patient:

Her face was covered in livid sores and swellings. The skin was bulging, lurid-coloured, the lumps and crevices like a cauliflower painted red-purple and forced on top of her usual features. She faced my direction and her glazed eyes didn't seem to see me, yet she heard me. She raised an arm towards me, covered in lizard-skin, and I saw that her fingers were swollen and clumped together like some hideous fungus on the branch of a tree;²⁴

and later on p. 63, where Annie watches the patients in the hospital as they eat. My creative supervisor urged these to be written as if seen through the eyes of a young spectator seeing such a condition for the first time and they were therefore intentionally naive in tone and language. Throughout the novel, Annie uses animal imagery to describe people; this was therefore used as an effective device to describe her response to one of the patients:

a man whose skin was lined and folded so that he looked a bit like a lion – only not fierce, just sad.²⁵

In 'An Experimental Act,' Yolen tells how some young readers of *The Devil's Arithmetic* believed the details about the camps to be entirely fiction. This was one of her reasons, she says, for her choice of form, which she believed would give added authority and impact to the content. Likening the act of reading a time-distort story to 'being there' and 'witnessing,' Yolen believes that readers will 'come back' from the experience with the events effectively in their own memories.²⁶ Yet it also highlights the potential dangers in using any form of fantasy in recounting a period of history, not least one of such sensitivity – that of blurring the boundaries of what is 'real.' Indeed, the 'reality' of any narrative which uses historical strands was also a consideration throughout the writing of *The Serpent House*, and therefore the post-modernist stance that all history is not a list of empirical facts, but a story, told by those who conquer or who survive, was

²⁴ *The Serpent House*, p. 61.

²⁵ *The Serpent House*, p. 63. This was written in response to an image taken from the Weymouth text, p. 148, titled 'Before and After Treatment.'

²⁶ Yolen, Jane (1989), 'An Experimental Act.'

a useful one.²⁷ In *The Devil's Arithmetic*, the time-distortion is the only element of fantasy. In *The Serpent House*, the additional elements of fantasy are present throughout the novel's secondary chronotope and warn against a literal reading of the past, in this sense consistent with post-modern interpretations of history. The suggestion is that the reader cannot know what is factual or to be believed. This would appear to be an acceptable creative choice in a less contentious era of the past, such as the eleventh century. Given the serious nature of her chosen content, however, this element of fantasy may be regarded as a potential weakness in Yolen. Although her use of the time-distort genre forms the 'safety net' necessary for younger readers, the related implication that the central narrative of the camps may also contain elements of fantasy was surely one which Yolen would not have intended.

This softening afforded by the use of time-distort which made it possible for Yolen to write in such relative detail about the camps, has therefore resulted in considerable and mounting criticism. Yolen was one of the first writers to use the child's eye view of the camps for young readers and as a pioneer she was feeling her way towards an acceptable form and level of detail for writing about the events.²⁸ Roger Sutton said Yolen's depiction of the horrors of the camp 'is more graphic than we've seen in any Holocaust fiction for children before,' while Cynthia Samuels of the *New York Times Book Review* claimed Yolen had brought 'the time travel convention to a new and ambitious level.'²⁹ Since then, although a number of works for children or young adults have gone on to tackle the same subject, when *The Devil's Arithmetic* was published Yolen was criticised for even attempting to use the medium of fiction (particularly using the time-travel

²⁷ For a full discussion of these notions, see works including but not restricted to Hayden White (1987), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press); John Brannigan (1998), *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Macmillan Press); D.H. Hackett Fischer (1970) *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. (New York: Harper & Row).

²⁸ Sue Vice (2004) *Children Writing the Holocaust*. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan), p.5 and p.11. Yolen herself saw the novel as firmly part of the time-distort tradition.

²⁹ Web article on Books about the Holocaust: Educational Paperback Organisation. Available from <http://www.edupaperback.org/showauth2.cfm?authid+79> (Accessed 1st May 2010). Roger Sutton is editor in chief of *The Horn Book*, a periodical about children and young adults' literature, and previously editor of *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*.

element, which Yolen says some critics saw as gimmicky) to convey such sensitive events in history.

One of Yolen's strengths in this novel is her ability to balance showing and teaching her readers without traumatising them. For example, on p. 98, Hannah/Chaya must undergo the painful tattooing of a number on her arm. The man carrying out the tattooing is a fellow prisoner and she is wearing a dress that used to belong to his own daughter. The tattooing is a traumatic incident, but the fellow prisoner is able to show some gentleness to Hannah/Chaya and we are not directly told what happened to his daughter. But we see Hannah/Chaya beginning to find a strength:

The tattooing pen burned her flesh, leaving a trail of blue numbers in her arm above the wrist. J197241. She didn't cry. She wouldn't.

[...] When the man finished the number, he reached out and touched the collar of her dress, smoothing it down gently. 'Live,' he whispered. 'For my Chaya. For all our Chayas. Live. And remember.'

Yolen creates a literal and emotional connection between the protagonist and others of her race who lost their lives in the camps. Yolen makes it clear that the process is painful and traumatic but does not dwell gratuitously upon the detail. In the next scene, however, Hannah/Chaya and Gitl make each other laugh over the terrible clothes and even their own hunger becomes a source of humour, because her stomach makes such a loud noise: 'That, too, had the sound of life.'³⁰

Yolen therefore carefully controls her content so that disturbing or graphic material is sometimes followed with a more light-hearted or life-affirming episode, such as we see after Hannah has her arm tattooed and later makes jokes with Gitl about their clothes. For me, this echoed the notion of the time-distort framework and its promise of a return to normalcy; it was a content-based device I therefore felt able to emulate with my less sensitive material. So, for example, there is an episode in which musicians arrive at the hospital and play carols outside the gates; Meg and Annie dance, enabling them to bond, but also creating

³⁰ Jane Yolen (2001), *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p.99. [1988].

some humour when they fall over in the snow. An evident, if fragile, friendship develops between Annie and Meg and this relationship also contains moments of humour, thus lightening the mood for the reader amidst somewhat darker content.

Since Yolen's work was published, the narrative device of the time-distort has since been used by other authors writing on the Holocaust, because the 'return to reality' expectation it sets up is a way of reassuring the reader that the time is past, the protagonist has in fact survived and there is a return to normalcy.³¹ Some twenty-first century critics now find this problematic because it gives a 'fairy tale' ending to events of the Holocaust. Yolen's comments on the work make it clear that, at the time of writing, she felt this reassurance was important for younger readers. The reassurance provided by the frame is reinforced by the fairytale allusions and the expectation that, in a fairytale, the protagonist will find the right way to deal with any situation and that there will be some just or 'happy' resolution at the end. We know that as a writer, Yolen is interested in exploring the fairy tale and it is something to which she returns in her later Holocaust novel, *Briar Rose* (1992). Like *The Devil's Arithmetic* it has met with both positive and negative reactions from critics, based either around the successful use of fantasy to narrate acts of evil or else the problems of mixing fantasy with this particularly sensitive era of factual history. Yolen's use of fairytales in both novels is interesting in that it seems to echo the point made by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975), that although fairy tales often deal with death and other dark issues, children turn to them because their message is important in the development of the young psyche.³² Bettelheim, however, believed that child readers need a happy ending. Yolen's ending is ambivalent in that the protagonist has to choose her own death; this, however, leads to her return to her primary time and normalcy. It becomes, therefore, a fantasy ending, in spite of Hannah's new-found grounding within her

³¹ Notably Han Nolan (1994) in *If I Should Die Before I Wake* (San Diego: Harcourt Paperbacks).

³² Bettelheim claimed that "more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension." Bruno Bettelheim (1975), *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales*. (New York: Knopf), p.4. Because Bettelheim's credibility as a psychologist is now under question, so too are some of his assertions, but it is fair to suggest that fairy tales are seen to play a role in the socialisation process.

family and the Jewish community, which on reflection may be inappropriate for this particular subject matter.

The final act of sacrifice by Hannah/Chaya is, for Holocaust experts and some other critics, one of the most controversial aspects of Yolen's book. It is a traumatic part of the plot to present to a young reader, which explains why the death of the protagonist rarely occurs in Holocaust fiction for young readers.³³ The death itself is not directly portrayed. More importantly, the sacrifice also enables Hannah's return to her primary chronotope, so her action simultaneously saves herself, literally and figuratively.

The concept of the 'heroic', however, causes concerns amongst critics today. Bosmajian, for example, says that subtextually there is an implication that those victims whom the camp brutalities debilitated to the extent that they could not carry out acts of resistance or heroism, are 'somehow less than the central consciousness of the narrative.'³⁴ Bosmajian is specifically discussing *The Devil's Arithmetic* and takes issue with Yolen's comments (in her epilogue) that heroism, which she says was shown in acts of caring, resistance, witnessing and remembering, as well as surviving, were 'the only victories of the camps.' Bosmajian states:

To be sure, there were victims with such goodness; to be sure, there are victim-survivors with such care, but they are not the norm; however, it is as the norm that the reader will perceive them....Given that kind of focus, the untutored reader may indeed conclude that the camps brought out the best in the victims.³⁵

Langer too critiques the urge to glean a positive message from these events:

When we speak of... martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as a pattern of dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than the grievous power of memory, we

³³ Such as Carol Matas' *Daniel's Story* (1993) and Gudrun Pauswang's *The Final Journey* (1998), both written some years after *The Devil's Arithmetic*. See also Eve Tal (2004) 'How Much Should We Tell the Children? Representing Death and Suffering in Children's Literature About the Holocaust.' *Yad Vashem 4th International Conference on Holocaust Education*. Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel. 8-11 August, 2004. Available from www.eve-tal.com/litcrit.html (Accessed 19th June 2011).

³⁴ Hamida Bosmajian (2002), p.143.

³⁵ Hamida Bosmajian (2002), p.144.

draw on an arsenal of words that urges us to build verbal fences between the atrocities of the camps...and what we are mentally willing – or able – to face.³⁶

He sees the ‘happy ending’ as a trait particularly of American children’s literature. Yet in any Holocaust novel for the young, the endings are at best ambivalent and the comparatively positive aspects of, for example, survival are always muted by the experiences of trauma and loss. Such positive rhetoric is seen by some as ‘sparing the child’ (the title of Bosmajian’s study) by offering happy endings which fit with our own desired values, at the expense of the dead and the grieving. Lydia Kokkola is sympathetic to the arguments of Bosmajian and Langer, in that she recognises that, if a body of work, when taken as a whole, emphasises the heroic or omits certain facts about atrocities, it may build up a false picture; nevertheless she argues there is a place for certain omissions in literature for younger readers. So, whilst there is a place for ‘secrets,’ in other words, the omission of certain brutalities or perhaps an unauthentic ‘happy’ ending or satisfying closure, when such ‘secrets’ are repeated in a large body of literature they can become ‘lies.’³⁷ It must be noted, however, that Yolen could not have been deliberately contributing to any kind of false picture of the Holocaust, as her work was such an early example of its kind. There is also a danger of viewing a work of literature only through our present-day sensibilities. At the time of writing, Yolen was attempting to write about a rarely-touched subject in a new and dynamic way; some of the politics of the literature had not, then, been considered. In particular, there was not, in 1988, a large body of children’s literature which over-emphasised heroic acts within the camps and most critics agree that the false picture such literature may create comes about because of the later prevalence of it.

Much as the content of *The Serpent House* could not be as problematic or emotive as any novel about, for example, the Holocaust, so it was never an intention for the ending to be as contentious as that chosen by Yolen. The death of the protagonist, for example, was not something that was ever considered, even

³⁶ L. Langer (1995), *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*. (New York: Oxford University Press), p.6.

³⁷ Lydia Kokkola (2007) ‘Holocaust Narratives and the Ethics of Truthfulness’, *Bookbird* Vol 45. No.4, pp. 5-12

though the deaths of several secondary characters were planned. Death in children's fiction is not new in terms of subject matter. As discussed, much of the controversy linked to Yolen's ending is specific to material about the Holocaust, but there were some generic lessons about her approach to the protagonist's death which were applicable. For example, Yolen does not dwell upon the act of dying; the reader is told that Hannah/Chaya and her two friends walk through the door of the gas chamber 'into endless night.'³⁸ Although I too did not wish to dwell on the detail of Meg's death, which, though accidental, was inadvertently sacrificial in that it was caused by Meg's decision to go back into a burning room to retrieve a healing potion, I nevertheless chose a childlike image which was intended to remain in the mind of the reader:

[T]he angry flames whipped their way up the back of the dress and Meg disappeared into a flash of orange-gold, like a Chinese firework.³⁹

Similarly, Lady Hexer 'threw herself bodily at the flames' but, as Annie runs away at this point, the reader is left to imagine the details of the Lady's fate.⁴⁰ More graphic detail, however, was employed in describing the deaths of two less sympathetic characters, the doctor in the medieval chronotope and Miss Haggstone in the Victorian time period. In making these creative choices, I was conscious of the instances of deaths in certain fairytales and how the reader is granted a certain vicarious satisfaction when an evil character meets an unpleasant end. In some versions of Rumpelstiltskin, for example, the creature's own temper causes him to tear himself in two and in others he stamps through the floor and creates a chasm into which he falls, never to be seen again. The unpleasant Miss Haggstone, who has threatened Annie and brought fear into the household, is herself terrified when she realises she is unable to escape the fire and is reduced quickly to a pile of ash; and the doctor dies after being eaten by his own serpent. It was only on later reflection that the potentially religious nature of the imagery became apparent, as the intention had been to write a novel with subversive, anti-authoritarian undertones. In making the creative decisions, however, the overt

³⁸ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p. 158. [1988].

³⁹ *The Serpent House*, p. 252.

⁴⁰ *The Serpent House*, p. 256.

influences were fairytales and the Gothic; themes of retribution, vindication and evil are common both to fantasy and to Judeo-Christian mythology. Themes of resurrection or redemption were deliberately avoided.

It was further a creative decision to avoid an ending which was altogether either happy or resolved. Annie has no genuine normalcy to which to return, in the sense that she was unhappy with her closest adult relatives and under threat in the primary time at Hexer Hall. At the end of the novel, she and her new-found family group are left both homeless and without employment and we also know that Annie will have to cope with the knowledge that she was, in part, responsible for the death of her friend Meg. The intention was, rather than the return to safety often found in the time-distort genre, for the ending to remain ambivalent. This intention was formed before the decision to write a sequel, but some of these issues surrounding death and the urge to reverse it will be explored in this second novel.

3.2 Memory and Maturity

During her time in the camp Hannah/Chaya visibly matures, in the process learning the importance of survival and, crucially, the importance of memory. The longer she is in this secondary chronotope, the more her memories of her life in the twentieth century fade away, and the glimpses of memory she retains serve only to frustrate her. As she is having her hair shorn, she struggles to recall what she knows about this period of history:

She realised with a sudden awful panic that she could no longer recall anything from the past. *I cannot remember*, she whispered to herself...She'd been shorn of memory as brutally as she'd been shorn of her hair, without permission, without reason... *Gone, all gone*, she thought again wildly, no longer even sure what was gone, what she was mourning.⁴¹

Later we are told that her memories have become camp memories only. This provides an opportunity for a self-reflexive lesson to readers about the

⁴¹ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p.92. [1988].

importance of stories in the act of remembering, as it is the telling of stories that helps her to survive. For example, in Chapter Five, Hannah/Chaya bonds with her new family by telling them the story of the *Yentl* and *Wizard of Oz* movies and the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel. We see how even apparently unrelated stories, such as fairy tales and film plots, have links to her experience in the camp; at first, when Hannah/Chaya warns of the gas ovens, her friends confuse this with her earlier story of the fairytale witch putting the children in an oven. In the camps, Fayge, who was to marry Hannah/Chaya's uncle, also tells religious stories intended to inspire hope.⁴² Towards the end of her time in the camps, Hannah/Chaya eventually remembers and tells what she knows of the Holocaust, but has found a way to tell it with an element of hope: 'That we *will* survive. The Jews.'⁴³ She is caught telling stories instead of working, which is why her friends are sent to the gas chamber and Hannah/Chaya takes the place of Rivka, which we know results in Hannah/Chaya finding her way home.

Perhaps because of the element of fantasy and the fairytale/storytelling motifs, Yolen felt obliged to add an Epilogue to the novel, entitled 'What is true about this book.' In it she makes clear that the historical detail about the camps is as authentic as possible:

[...] the nightmare journeys in cattle cars, the shaving of heads, the tattooing of numbers, the separation of families, the malnutrition, the *musselmen* and the *Kommandos*, the lack of proper clothing, the choosing of victims for incarceration. Even the midden pile comes from the camp experiences of one of my friends. 'Only the characters are made up [...] although they are made up of the bits and pieces of true stories that got brought out by the pitiful handful of survivors.'⁴⁴

Yolen, who saw the writing of the book as a 'mitzvah', which can mean a religious commandment, an obligation and also a privilege, wished to emphasise that the stories have come from survivors, her friends and family members included. This may in part answer some of the concerns of critics at the time, who felt that fiction was not an appropriate medium for such content when factual,

⁴² Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, pp. 140-1.[1988].

⁴³ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p.155. [1988].

⁴⁴ Jane Yolen (2001) *The Devil's Arithmetic*, p.166. [1988].

personal accounts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947) already existed.⁴⁵ These are surely considerations which any author must answer when making use of elements of family history: could the narrative be better served by writing it as a memoir or another form of creative non-fiction, and is the fantasy element in the work both justifiable and purposeful? These were questions I therefore asked myself in using the much less sensitive elements of oral history from my own family. For example, the starting points for the sections of the novel set in the late nineteenth century were the stories of three great-aunts, all of whom worked in service; these histories were passed down orally by my mother and my late aunt, who were brought up by these three women when their own mother died at a young age. Although contentious and sometimes flawed, the value of oral history as a research method now occupies a recognised place within scholarly practice.⁴⁶ The use of such material was also of value for me as a writer in the sense that it contributes to the recovery of histories that may otherwise be lost, such as those of the working class or, often, women. The use of oral histories in research sprang from a newly radical social history movement in the 1960s, which changed the focus of mainstream history away from social or political elites, a movement which was eventually reflected in children's historical fiction. It was also appealing to feminist historians who were able to record the previously hidden lives of working women, and to those documenting the history of ethnic minorities. If, as Georg Lukacs avers, the writing of history is in itself a radical act, then the use of oral histories may be seen as even more so.⁴⁷

The method is obviously flawed because of what Eric Hobsbawm describes as the 'slipperiness' of memory and this was exacerbated in the case of *The Serpent House* because of the generational remove; the original stories were being recounted by my mother and aunt who had heard them as younger children.⁴⁸ Researchers tackle this issue of the unreliability of memory by using

⁴⁵ Anne Frank (1991), *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, (eds.). Translated by Susan Massotty. (London: Viking).[1947].

⁴⁶ See, for example, Gabriele Griffin (2005) (ed.), *Research Methods for English Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

⁴⁷ See Georg Lukacs (1962), *The Historical Novel* (London: The Merlin Press). [1937]. For a further discussion of oral history as a research method, see Penny Summerfield (2005) 'Oral history as a Research Method' in Gabriele Griffin (ed.), pp.47-66.

⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm (1997) *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), p.206.

‘triangulation,’ or, in other words, the support of other similar sources or documentary evidence. Such evidence was not difficult to obtain via historical text books which are listed in the bibliography and also first-person accounts of daily life at the end of the nineteenth century in properties, such as at Cragside in Northumberland. For example, an account of some of the maid’s duties on any given day at a Victorian property now owned by the National Trust confirmed some of the activities recounted by my own ancestors and I therefore felt able to make reference to these duties in the novel. Similarly, oral descriptions of large houses in Newcastle and Cumbria were used as the initial inspiration for Hexer Hall in the novel, but details were added during research visits to such properties.

Returning to *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, Yolen’s use of her friends’ and family’s oral histories for her chosen content may also be triangulated by the evidence of other survivors and in the epilogue she proffers a powerful argument for the use of fiction in dealing with even contentious and traumatic events. Following her argument that the only ‘victories’ of the camps were the acts of witnessing and remembering, Yolen states:

Fiction cannot recite the numbing numbers, but it can be that witness, that memory. A storyteller can attempt to tell the human tale, [...] can point to the fact that some people survived even as most people died.⁴⁹

The book, which began with the sentence: ‘I’m tired of remembering,’ ends with the words: ‘I remember. Oh, I remember.’⁵⁰

Increasingly it is agreed that writers should ‘turn away from some imagined innocence of [...] the victims [...] avoiding the impulse to idealize the experience of coming of age in the center of the Shoa.’⁵¹ This echoes Lawrence Langer, for

⁴⁹ Jane Yolen (2001), *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, p. 167. [1988].

⁵⁰ Jane Yolen (2001), *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, p. 162. [1988].

⁵¹ Theresa Rogers (2002), ‘Understanding in the Absence of Meaning: Coming of Age Novels of the Holocaust’. *The New Advocate* Vol. 15 (3), pp. 259-266. Available from: http://web.me.com/theresa.rogers/Site/Full_Text_Articles.html (Accessed 9th. January, 2012).

whom ‘narratives featuring heroism, resistance and spiritual uplift do little to help students enter the veiled space of the concealed self.’⁵²

While the concerns expressed by both of these critics are valid, in this case Yolen has not necessarily idealised Hannah’s coming of age by placing her in the camp. In fact, she has made the process very difficult for the protagonist and has successfully challenged readers by making them see how a twentieth-century girl, with whom they are likely strongly to identify, may react and survive in this situation.

Hannah/Chaya’s final act of sacrifice, which is also the means by which Hannah returns to her primary chronotope, is one of the most radical and controversial aspects of Yolen’s book. The episode was controversial at the time of publication; today, both the heroic act and the happy ending continue to generate debate. In her epilogue Yolen claims that heroism as shown in acts of caring, resistance, witnessing, remembering and surviving were ‘the only victories of the camps.’ Holocaust studies and trauma theorist refute such interpretations. Hamida Bosmajian explains why this view and the resulting ending to *The Devil’s Arithmetic* are, for some, unsatisfactory:

To be sure, there were victims with such goodness; to be sure, there are victim-survivors with such care, but they are not the norm; however, it is as the norm that the reader will perceive them.... Given that kind of focus, the untutored reader may indeed conclude that the camps brought out the best in the victims.⁵³

There is now a consensus that, when writing for children about the Holocaust, other genocides and indeed any kind of traumatic event, writers need to strike a balance between truthfulness and protecting young readers by acknowledging the complexities and darkness of the events but avoiding graphic descriptions. For example, Clare Rudin, who compiled the list of books on the subject for the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center, says that ‘for the sake of the future, as well as to remember the past, we want to teach children about it’ but

⁵² L. Langer (1998) *Pre-empting the Holocaust*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 189.

⁵³ Hamida Bosmajian (2002), p. 144.

says that children will ‘turn away’ from accounts or images which are too graphic or troubling, in an act of self-protection. She urges careful consideration of the nature of the information presented to younger readers and compiles her list in a manner which is felt to be age-appropriate.⁵⁴ The inherent danger, Bosmajian points out, is that, in choosing to write for younger readers, the author may ‘conceal or limit the site of atrocious history with reader-protective strategies.’⁵⁵ She critiques the focus Yolen and other writers place on survival and on acts of kindness by suggesting that it may create the false impression that the camps somehow brought out the best in the victims. Here, though, she is writing with the benefit of studying a large body of Holocaust fiction, which was unavailable at the time of Yolen’s writing. Thinking about how to write about the Holocaust and other collective traumas has moved on considerably since Yolen wrote *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, and for children’s literature critics the debates have to some degree been generated by this novel.

3.3 Defending *The Devil’s Arithmetic*

Like any children’s book which takes the Holocaust as its subject matter, *The Devil’s Arithmetic* raises serious questions about the boundaries and conventions of children’s/ young adults’ literature. In *Children Writing the Holocaust* (2004), Sue Vice examines texts written by children or with a child’s-eye view and particularly praises W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), which uses not the author’s experience but collected stories from others, including a colleague. This, she says,

marks a new stage in the history of children’s-eye views of the Holocaust, as a move towards fiction based not on the author’s experience but on material from other texts [...] Such a method points towards a possible future for the representation of children during the Holocaust years when this can no longer be accomplished, testimonially or fictively, by survivors themselves.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Clare Rudin (1998). Available from: <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/chldbook.htm> (Accessed 20th June 2011)

⁵⁵ Hamida Bosmajian (2002), p. xv.

⁵⁶ Sue Vice (2004) p. 162.

As is made clear in her afterword, Yolen did this too, some thirteen years earlier, using stories mostly from her family members, friends, and other survivors. Yolen's work, however, is aimed at child readers, whilst Sebald's is a child's-eye view narrative aimed at adult readers. There are similar parallels in the two writers' views on memory. Vice adds that *The Devil's Arithmetic* shows how the child's-eye view of the Holocaust 'symbolises the continuing presence of the past,' which certainly was one of the author's intentions and presumably that of any writer of historical time-distort fiction.⁵⁷ Yolen emphasises this intention, saying: 'The reader becomes part of that "living and continuous process," forced to acknowledge that we are *our* past just as we *are* our future.'⁵⁸

Meanwhile *Austerlitz* says of memory that it is

as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces
interlocking[...]between which the living and the dead can move
back and forth as they like.⁵⁹

Rather than focusing on the problematic nature of memory, *Austerlitz* is concerned with the possibilities of memory; specifically, the potential for full and complete remembrance. This is achieved via a shift from the autobiographical account to intertextual fiction, in which details taken from unreliable memory accounts are placed instead into an account we know to be fictive, thereby giving it a different form of truth and allowing, rather than a partial comprehension, a more complete understanding. Sebald's experiment, therefore, echoes that of Yolen and her defence of the use of fiction to recount the events of the Holocaust. The notion of 'various spaces interlocking' also may serve as a description of time-distort literature, reinforcing many of Yolen's chosen themes of memory and the act of remembering and also adding weight to her decision to use this genre for this particular novel.

It is clear that Yolen's book also represents a move away from earlier examples of the genre, particularly at the level of subject matter. Although to an extent Hannah is protected by the time-distort genre, in which the reader knows or

⁵⁷ Sue Vice (2004), p. 163.

⁵⁸ Jane Yolen (1989), 'An Experimental Act.'

⁵⁹ W.G. Sebald (2001), *Austerlitz*. Translated by Anthea Bell. (London: Penguin), p. 261.

expects her return to her primary time, our assumptions of – and wish for – a ‘pastoral, innocent and joyous childhood’ are seriously challenged by works in which children are victims or else are themselves perpetrators of violence or cruelty, even when these works describe events in history.⁶⁰ Indeed, it has been suggested that knowledge of the Holocaust brings to an end a certain level of innocence in a child.⁶¹ When, in the final chapter of *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, a kinder Hannah explains to her aunt her new-found understanding of the number on her arm, we can glean not only that she has learned to live with a less solipsistic mindset, but also that she places herself now firmly within her family and the Jewish community and tradition. This also affirms the power of memory. It can be argued, however, that Hannah has also learned to conform and take up her expected position within her family and wider culture, a criticism which, with particular relation to female protagonists, is sometimes made of many works of fantastic realism.⁶² This was a convention which has been avoided in *The Serpent House* in the sense that, as Annie matured as a result of the time-distort episodes, she was more inclined to rebel and to refuse to be manipulated, even by those in authority over her.

The Devil’s Arithmetic continues to court controversy and re-interpretation, as well as to win plaudits, some 20 years after its publication. It was innovative, even radical, when it appeared in that it dealt with a subject which had previously not been touched upon in such detail for young readers. Arguably, Yolen is now seen as at the forefront of the well-developed genre of literature about the Holocaust from a child’s viewpoint.⁶³ Yolen’s choice of the time-distort genre also had its clear reasons – not the least of which was to give a fresh, current perspective on this particular period of history. In spite of her decision to embrace many traditions of the genre, the author herself felt it to be an experimental work. For Sue Vice, a child’s memory of the Holocaust years, even if narrated as a work

⁶⁰ Hamida Bosmajian (2002), xi

⁶¹ See, for example, Clare Rudin who makes the claim that ‘an encounter with the Holocaust hastens the end of innocence.’ <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/chldbook.htm> (Accessed 11th June 2011). This concern appears to reflect the notion that child survivors of the Holocaust were in effect no longer children as a result of the traumatic events.

⁶² See, for example, Alison Waller (2009), *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*. (New York and UK: Routledge).

⁶³ Sue Vice (2004), p. 11.

of fiction, 'is paradigmatic of historical memory itself.'⁶⁴ For me, the action of Yolen's protagonist in choosing her own death was a very bold piece of content for a young readership, even though now, particularly for Jewish historians and critics, it is highly controversial because of the way the body of accounts of such acts of heroism may be interpreted. For these reasons, *The Devil's Arithmetic* serves as an example of how time-distort literature can, in spite of the 'fixed nature of events', break boundaries and offer innovative content even as it provides young readers with a lesson in history. For the purposes of my creative project, whilst my own choice of historical setting and the nature of the content were not as controversial, Yolen's authorial courage in testing her protagonist and confronting the reader with difficult issues was both instructional and inspirational.

⁶⁴ Sue Vice (2004), p.163.

CHAPTER 4. STRANGE SYNERGY - Radical Form in Gary Crew's *Strange Objects*

I chose to focus on this novel by the Australian writer Gary Crew because it demonstrates how the time-distort genre can be used to experiment with form. *Strange Objects* (1990) is for an older readership than the Yolen novel, and it too explores a violent and sensitive incident in history. For the critic Eliza T. Dresang, innovative use of forms and formats demonstrates Radical Change Type One: Changing Forms and Formats.¹ These, she says, incorporate characteristics including non-linear or non-sequential organisation and format and multiple layers of meaning. Crew's experiments with form interested me as a writer, which is one reason why I chose his work to study. I took inspiration from Crew's works for my creative project, using the polyphonic diary form in which one of the narrators is both unreliable and unsympathetic, although I did not in the end decide that my own novel called for as radical a treatment as those by Crew.

Gary Crew is a historian who has taught the subject at high school in Australia. He says that he was aware at the time of writing the novel how much teenagers disliked history and how little they knew of the subject. In researching *Strange Objects*, he deliberately sought out an episode from history which dealt with the isolation of a teenager in order to create a rapport with his potential readers.² Twenty-two years ago, it was still comparatively rare for children's or young adults' authors to experiment with form, but Crew deliberately set out, he says, to 'stretch [his] literary wings.'³ There are a number of ways in which this novel has embraced radical and innovative ideas for its time, including polyphony, fictitious diary form, a merging of genres and what have been termed the 'jigsaw puzzle' and 'collage' methods. These terms are considered by Maria Nikolajeva who, writing in 1996, commented that "pure formal experiments" are still rare in

¹ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* (New York and Dublin: H.W. Wilson), p. 19.

² Gary Crew (2000), 'Ideas Behind the Writing of the Creative Non-fiction Novel *Strange Objects*.' *TEXT Special Issue* Website No. 1, April 2000. Available from <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss> . (Accessed 24th June 2010).

³ Ibid.

children's literature.⁴ Whilst not the first author of the period to experiment with the form, Crew was one of the first to do so in the children's time-distort genre. As will become apparent, in doing so he has demonstrated how this genre, far from being a necessarily conservative form, can indeed be radical, dynamic and innovative.

4.1 Strange Objects

The story is played out through a series of letters, documents and journals which take the narrative between the past and the present. They are initially presented by the fictional character of Dr Hope Michaels, an archaeological expert. The time-distort journey is one of the psyche, but the two time periods explored are the late twentieth century and the seventeenth century. During a school camping trip, teenager Steven Messenger discovers the strange objects of the title - a leather-bound journal and a black iron pot which contains a mummified woman's hand wearing a ring. Here, Crew may be drawing on a long literary tradition of powerful rings beginning in early folk and fairy tales, from Norse myths and fairytales such as *Aladdin* to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series (1950-54), and it becomes the device for the psychological time-distort journey. We later learn that Steven took the ring to keep for himself. He describes this act as almost accidental, but it soon becomes apparent that he is an unreliable narrator, and so at various points readers must reassess even basic facts such as this. Steven decides to keep the ring, even though he is aware of the archaeologists' eagerness to find it. The teenager may, in fact, be suffering from schizophrenia, something which gradually occurs to the reader as the narrative evolves. The ring becomes an obsession and seems, from the evidence of his narrative, to take over his mind or else to draw him into the mind of Jan Pelgrom.

As I have indicated, the time-distort journey in this novel can be understood as one of the psyche. The leather-bound journal is revealed to be that of a seventeenth-century Dutch sailor, Wouter Loos, who was cast away with the

⁴ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic* (New York and London: Garland Publishing), p. 220.

violent teenager Pelgrom. Loos and Pelgrom are real historical characters from the shipwreck of the Batavia, a ship of the Dutch East India Company which was shipwrecked on her maiden voyage in 1629. It became famous for the subsequent mutiny and massacre of 125 survivors and has inspired a number of writers during the 1970s and 1980s.⁵

The material links between past and present are the ring and also the mummified hand of Ela, a survivor of the 1622 Trial shipwreck, who is both desired by Pelgrom and later murdered by him, probably in order to gain the ring. The full details of the story, written in Loos' journal, are serialised in a newspaper and presented throughout the book in this way. As the police and archaeologists investigate the hand, the pot and the journal, some of the history is also revealed by the Aboriginal elder Charlie Sunrise, who is later fatally injured. Although it is never firmly established, it is likely he was assaulted by Steven Messenger and later died from these injuries. Throughout the book, facts are called into question and all narrators are revealed as being unreliable to a greater or lesser extent. At the end of the book, Steven disappears and his fate is left unexplained, so there is an indeterminate ending.

4.2 Hybrid Genres - *Strange Objects* as time-distort

For me, it is important to establish whether *Strange Objects* is indeed an example of time-distort fiction. The book's form is so unusual that it could be classified in a number of ways and its genre has been debated by critics and indeed the author himself. Unlike Yolen, who embraced the tradition, Crew, who was heavily influenced by Todorov's ideas in *The Fantastic*, wished to credit it with innovation by calling it a 'new genre of fantastic history.'⁶ In fact, Crew resisted the idea of its being categorised at all: 'I consciously wrote the novel as a

⁵ These include Mark O'Connor (1986), who wrote a poem sequence called *The Batavia* and Deborah Lisson (1990), whose young adults' book *The Devil's Own* won the Western Australia Premier's Award in 1991. Clearly if Crew was to take this subject matter he would have had to tackle it in a fresh way.

⁶ Gary Crew (1990), Cited in Bernard McKenna and Sharyn Pearce (1999), *Strange Journeys: The Works of Gary Crew*. (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 87.

composite or ‘collage’ of genres, as written history itself is a collage of genres.’⁷ The author’s views on history are relevant here. Crew explains how he despises what he calls ‘fictionally reconstructed history’ as a genre because of its stilted prose and dialogue and its inherent didacticism. I will go on to examine ways in which *Strange Objects* avoids the former difficulties, although the author regards the novel as ‘essentially audience-less ...and non-definitive in narrative structure/prevalent genre, being a combination of fact, fiction, reportage, journalese, personal and stream-of-consciousness (automatic) writing.’⁸

Critics have also labelled the work as a ‘horror fantasy thriller.’⁹ Certainly it fits with Todorov’s definition of the fantastic in that it has both integrated old and new myths and also raised the possibility of a supernatural explanation. Crew deliberately heightens the ambiguity in the work by using the elements of real history and pseudo-documentation alongside invented and supernatural elements. The difficulty in classification comes partly because it mixes these real documents, characters and events from history with parallel fictional characters and events from the twentieth century – but that is also why it can be classified as part of the time-distort genre. Clearly Steven Messenger can be seen as taking a journey into the mind of, or perhaps having his own mind taken over by, the seventeenth-century criminal, Jan Pelgrom. Messenger’s schoolmate and neighbour, Nigel Kratzman, seems to have a parallel role to Wouter Loos, Pelgrom’s contemporary. The text implies the ring serves as a talisman which connects Steven to the past (or Pelgrom to the present day). In his writer’s journal, Crew also makes a statement which tallies with the motivations of other authors in the time-distort genre, namely his desire to give young readers a powerful entry into the past:

The real secret of the story depends on [...] its voice which must be an authentic voice of youth – not a cold historical voice; its connection or rapport with kids today who must be able to say “That’s like me.”¹⁰

⁷ Gary Crew (2000), ‘Ideas Behind the Writing of the Creative Non-fiction Novel *Strange Objects*’. Available from: <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss/issue1/crew.htm> (Accessed 20th June, 2010).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bernard McKenna and Sharyn Pearce (1999), p. 87.

¹⁰ Gary Crew (1990), cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 87.

History, therefore – but through a modern-day prism. For these reasons it is appropriate to classify the text as part of the time-distort genre.

4.3 Crew on *Strange Objects*

Even when Gary Crew was planning and researching *Strange Objects*, it is clear that, as well as using experimental forms, he was not intending to follow a traditional plot. In his 1988 writing journal, Crew wrote that he wanted to trace the life of a boy left entirely alone in Australia before settlement, looking not only at the fight for physical survival but also ‘psychic survival.’¹¹ The ideas of displacement, loss, loneliness and fear were central. He uses the ‘narrative hook’ of Steven Messenger’s disappearance to interest readers at the beginning of the book and then also uses the plot to consider other issues important to the author, such as the nature of history and the troubled relationship between indigenous Australians and whites.

Crew claims that he sees his books as ‘symmetrical.’ For me, this is another reason to class the book as time-distort fiction, because the use of symmetry between the past and present, or between the primary and secondary chronotopes, is usually found in texts of this genre and is a device which I used in my own novel. This symmetry is apparent in the parallels between the characters and events from the past and those in the present – there are obvious links between Steven Messenger and Jan Pelgrom, and less obvious but definite links between Loos and Kratzman. Crew says of Messenger and Pelgrom that both represent ‘the continuing incomprehension and mistreatment of the land’ in that they exploit it in a self-defeating way and have no respect for nature (see Messenger’s ‘life frame’ experiment and Pelgrom’s mockery of the dead whale).¹² Both characters are associated with illness and both are apparently responsible for murders which result in the discontinuation of history. Both also vanish without trace; both seem to be troubled, possibly evil characters who can also display cunning and exploit

¹¹ Gary Crew (1988), *Strange Objects Journal*, 11th July 1988, cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 53.

¹² Gary Crew (1988), cited in McKenna and Pearce, (1999), p. 68.

others. Crew does not see them as evil in a clear-cut sense of the word. Of Pelgrom he says he is ‘one of society’s victims (who) finds evil easier,’ while of Messenger he says he has suffered trauma because of the loss of his father and he is isolated and lacking support. He is ‘amoral rather than immoral.’¹³ With Steven Messenger, Crew deliberately makes it difficult for readers to conclude which parts of his world are real and which fictional, so we are left without a stable central protagonist. Messenger is also unusual in that he is an unlikeable protagonist; usually, in a time-distort novel, the reader identifies with the protagonist to a greater or lesser degree, particularly as they begin to ‘redeem’ themselves as part of the time-distort process; this does not happen in *Strange Objects*.

Giving a voice to ‘the other’, in this case the Aboriginal native Australians, was a central concern for Crew, but, as a white author, he felt constrained in how to do this. One method he uses is promoting an interest in Aboriginal literature and history. As there was, at the time of writing, a virtual absence of indigenous Australians in popular literature and film, Crew first had to acquaint the reader with ‘the other’ and then deal with the issues raised by ‘otherness.’ Crew has recorded in his writing journal that, for him, there are two contexts for otherness: the postcolonial and the horror. Crew draws on the idea of the ‘horror’ other from Stephen King. The ‘horror’ other could be Steven Messenger; postcolonial ‘others’ are Ela and Charlie Sunrise. Crew points out how, while the whites either endure or perish, the indigenous black people have a stable culture.

4.4 Radical Form 1: Multiple Voices

The novel as ‘an endless discussion of various issues, a battlefield of ideas and existential questions’ is how the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes Dostoyevsky and its use of the polyphonic technique, in such a way that Dostoyevsky’s fiction writer’s voice disappears altogether.¹⁴ This was something I hoped to achieve in my own use of two narrators and diary form. In *Strange*

¹³ McKenna & Neilsen (1994), p. 16, cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 70.

¹⁴ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 99.

Objects, Crew uses the voices of Steven Messenger, Dr Hope Michaels and Wouter Loos in diary or note form, with the back-up of historical documentation, as well as the oral history input of Charlie Sunrise. Crew has spoken out against the ‘stilted’ language used by many fictional histories. One way he has avoided this is by having Loos’ diary translated and printed as a serial in a present-day newspaper, thereby ensuring he is able to use easily recognisable, modern-day language.¹⁵ Crew’s collected notes on Messenger are represented to the reader via Dr Michaels and, given that Dr Michaels becomes a kind of curator of the collected documents as well as the discovered artefacts, these written documents and testimonies could also be ‘strange objects.’ Crew, however, takes this idea a stage further not only by using the fictitious diary-like form (Messenger and Loos’ voices), but also by ensuring that there are no reliable narrators. Even the authoritative voice of the archaeologist, Dr Michaels, becomes questionable as the text progresses, in that she appears rather obsessive in her search for the ring. She seems also to make assumptions about Messenger which stray beyond what we would expect to be the boundaries of her role. Writing in 1996, Maria Nikolajeva points out that it is only recently that the fictitious diary form has entered the field of children’s/young adults’ literature and that it appears to be a good way of making the voice more authentic for young readers.

The crucial difference between an authentic autobiographical text and a fictitious one is determined by the dissimilarity between the mimetic and the semiotic process of writing.¹⁶

The former is mimetic; the modern or postmodern fictitious form is semiotic and the reader is encouraged to ‘decipher’ the text. I find the latter works well in Crew, who plays with the reader’s assumptions. It takes us some time to realise the full extent of Messenger’s inner disturbance; Kratzman and Loos are both highly ambivalent characters and even Dr Michaels displays some disturbing tendencies in the obsession with procuring the ring.

¹⁵ I faced a similar dilemma with my two historical time-periods. I was advised by my supervisor to write the main protagonist’s voice in as modern a way as possible, whilst avoiding any obvious anachronisms.

¹⁶ Maria Nikolajeva(1996), p. 104.

4.5 Radical Form 2: Jigsaw Puzzle and Collage

Crew's method in *Strange Objects* can be likened to a jigsaw puzzle, in that the narrative does not follow a simple linear or even circular pattern, which again is cited by Dresang as a kind of Radical Change Type One.¹⁷ This is particularly unusual within the time-distort genre, as this tends towards a circular pattern. Nikolajeva describes the jigsaw technique as 'somewhat daring and innovative' in children's literature; it also corresponds to Dresang's definition of 'multi-layered fiction,' and so we can identify it as radical in form by its non-linearity and complexity. Dresang particularly cites what she calls 'time switches,' in which the traditional form might allow the time-distort to take place and then be reversed; the radical form of the genre would 'emulate the hyper-textual world, in that they allow the reader to deviate from one story to another.'¹⁸ Crew's technique is to shift back and forth between the two time periods and allow the reader to draw parallels between the main characters and the plot lines. Crew uses the various voices and also the real and pseudo-documents as pieces of his jigsaw puzzle and asks the reader to draw conclusions from these fragments. At the end of the book, the reader is not given a full or clear picture of what really happened, especially to Steven Messenger. We know from the beginning of the book that Messenger has disappeared but a reader expecting the mystery to be 'solved' at the end will be disappointed. Other mysteries remain, including the truth about Charlie Sunrise's fatal injuries. It is a jigsaw puzzle which, on 'completion,' still has pieces missing or allows the readers to fill in their own assumptions.

Crew's technique also has elements of 'collage.' In looking at this device, Maria Nikolajeva cites the work of Aidan Chambers and Robert Cormier in the late 1970s, which seems to be similar to Crew's experimental form and may, given that around a decade passed between the works, have been an influence on him. Because of the work of Chambers and Cormier, I am not suggesting that Crew was the first to utilise these techniques, but I am suggesting both that they were uncommon in books for young people and also that he was radical in using

¹⁷ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 19.

¹⁸ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 117.

them in the time-distort genre. According to Nikolajeva, devices such as quoting from maps or guidebooks, newspapers or other ‘factual’ texts, and the utilisation of different typefaces, are ‘obviously modernistic and are comparable, for instance, to conceptualism in visual art,’ reflecting the chaos and looseness of modern life and particularly the confusion of an adolescent.¹⁹ Crew’s work echoes these techniques and concerns, but, as none of the above texts are time-distort novels, Crew may be seen as a pioneer within this genre. These techniques again tally with Dresang’s *Radical Change Type One: Changing Forms and Formats*. Here she looks at graphic books and ways in which the use of words and pictures reach a new level of synergy.

4.6 Radical Form 3: Open text

Several critics, including Nikolajeva and Dresang, have talked about the use of non-linear texts as innovative, and coupled with that is what I would term the ‘indeterminate conclusion,’ in which there is no traditional happy ending or even true closure, ‘happy’ or otherwise. Crew is scathing about ‘people who expect little bows to be tied at the end, so it all turns out happily.’²⁰ In *Strange Objects*, therefore, our expectations of people, time and place are all deliberately subverted and there is more than one mystery in the text – not only what happened in the past but also Steven’s disappearance and the circumstances of Charlie Sunrise’s death. This is a relatively recent development in style among children’s writers.²¹ It is safe to say the reader must reconsider events at the end of *Strange Objects*, which in its publication date precedes the Lowry work cited in Dresang (see footnote 21) by four years: in the last pages, for instance, an unexpected but key fact emerges about Steven’s father, which requires readers to re-assess Steven’s narrative and, crucially, there is no clear explanation of the youth’s disappearance.

¹⁹ Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 111.

²⁰ McKenna & Neilsen(1994), p. 16. Cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 65.

²¹ Dresang cites Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1994) as one of the best-known books with an unresolved ending (as opposed to a ‘to be continued’ ending, which is of course a different thing). ‘Truly unresolved endings remain unresolved, and force the reader to reconsider the meaning of the entire story.’ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 232.

Dresang also cites the use of story-telling devices which have previously been seen as ‘non-literary,’ such as those associated with the oral tradition. Crew employs these by the way in which the character Charlie Sunrise fills in part of the aboriginal history that readers need to understand if they are to find ways of putting the pieces of this textual puzzle together. Dresang suggests three ways in which native storytelling possesses characteristics which are similar to hypertext: the fluidity of the text, which can change from telling to telling or reading to reading; the lack of boundaries, allowing, for instance, gestures and digressions; and the opportunity for the listener or reader to construct or alter the text.²² It may, therefore, be a time-honoured form in itself, but it is radical when incorporated into written texts for children/young adults and contributes to the non-linearity of the text.²³ Charlie Sunrise is crucial to the plot in that he makes the link between Pelgrom and Messenger at the rock painting, saying: ‘See the ring. That’s you, the pale one who walks at night.’²⁴ Charlie is portrayed as a stable character who disturbs Steven by appearing to see through him.

4.7 Radical Form 4: Truth or fiction?

Like Yolen, Crew decided to take a horrific episode from history as the basis for this novel, but, rather than exploiting its more graphic or bloodthirsty elements, his concern as a writer is with the nature of history and historical inquiry. Throughout the story, several different characters gather stories from historical artefacts and have different motivations for doing so. Untold stories, such as those of the Aboriginal people and Ela’s own history, are also significant.

Whilst Crew’s use of diary-type form (with the characters of Loos and Messenger) initially encourages the reader to give the accounts a high degree of credibility, as the text progresses this is shown to be dangerous. The characters’ ‘inner thoughts’ are tinged with the knowledge that they will at some point be read by another and therefore both characters attempt to portray themselves in a

²² Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 233. Here Dresang is citing Manley, who was discussing Native American culture in particular. Kathleen Manley (1994), ‘Decreasing the Distance: Contemporary Native American Texts, Hypertext and the Concept of Audience’. *Southern Folklore* 51.

²³ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 233-4.

²⁴ Gary Crew (1998), *Strange Objects*. p. 186.

reasonably good light. Steven's insistence that he acquired the ring by accident, for instance, is highly dubious, while Loos would have hoped that, if he were rescued, he would not be punished by the authorities for any actions taken during his time with Pelgrom. We see similarities also between Loos and the character of Steven's schoolmate and neighbour, Nigel Kratzman, who gives rather incomplete and unsatisfactory accounts of their meeting with Charlie Sunrise, perhaps in an attempt to disassociate himself from Steven's actions.

Crew is also keen to alert the reader to the differences in the way historical accounts are interpreted, because of the dominant ideologies at the time of discovery. While history may strive for objectivity, its interpretation is affected by such things as the time, place and ethnicity of the historian. The different accounts present in *Strange Objects* constitute five separate sections: the news account (the press cuttings), the Messenger account, the 'professional' account (Dr Michaels, or factual textbooks cited in the novel), the Loos account (instalments from his journal) and the 'alternative' account (letters to the newspaper concerning the journals or else a note from Kratzman), according to McKenna and Pearce. This appears to be an attempt by Crew to 'decentre' history by making the reader look at it through the gaze of many different people, from those who we trust, such as the archaeologist, to those who may seem less important or reliable.

These attempts at decentring and at blending innovative fiction with apparently truthful history allow the reader an imaginative new insight into past events not possible within the academic discipline that history requires.²⁵

The effect of these devices is to make readers question the idea of history as objective fact. Whilst a key attraction of the time-distort genre for writers and readers is the suggestion that history can be more directly experienced, here all accounts are so unreliable that the reader is never quite certain what he, she or the characters in the book, really do experience.

At the time of publication, little fiction had previously been written (particularly for young readers) on Aboriginal culture and so at this level Crew

²⁵ McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 78.

can be seen, like Jane Yolen, to be venturing into new and uncharted content. The issue has long been a sensitive one, and it is one to which Crew said he would not wish to return because the Aboriginal experience was in ‘such an enormous state of flux [...] that I haven’t got a clue where it’s going.’²⁶ Yet, until the early 1990s, the relationship between indigenous peoples and whites was a recurring theme in Crew’s work. He researched Aboriginal culture, knowing that he would encounter criticism as a white writer for using this voice, but wishing to ensure that the voice was at least heard. In three novels, including *Strange Objects*, the black characters play a positive and significant role, reinforcing parts of the narrative, such as the story of Ela.²⁷ Crew described his task as a writer as re-energising ‘decayed or dying elements of culture’ by blending them with new influences.²⁸ He was careful, however, not to exploit Aboriginal stories, but to blend black and white storytelling in a way which he felt essential to emerging Australian culture.

Crew also subverts traditional readings of shipwreck stories, which in the past have often presented the protagonists as heroes and native populations as savages – the archetype being *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), although for later readers William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is more significant, even though it lacks traditional heroes.²⁹ A postcolonial reader would recognise the notion, which is very evident in Crew’s writing, of the white as invader. We know that even more recent writers have failed to recognise post-colonial sensitivities in spite of their original intentions.³⁰ Crew, however, is able to demonstrate great self-awareness as a writer. Loos and Pelgrom also fall victim to a shipwreck and they are living at a similar time to Defoe, but there is no heroism or glorified adventure here. The whites bring sickness and death and their ignorance of the landscape and people results in their oblivion.³¹

²⁶ McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 80.

²⁷ See also *The Inner Circle* (1986) and *No Such Country* (1991).

²⁸ McKenna & Neilsen (1994), p.16. Cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p .89.

²⁹ Crew taught this work to high school students and later hoped that *The Inner Circle* would fill a gap where there had been little written about the Australian experience and to which modern-day teenagers could relate.

³⁰ See Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2008), *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations*. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

³¹ McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 94.

4.8 Radical Form 5: The Use of Horror

We know that, whilst Gary Crew was reluctant to classify the novel, he admitted to its elements of horror. Whilst horror is not a new genre, the merging of genres which Crew has achieved here seems to be particularly modern. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, for example, credit the fluid boundaries between modern horror and realist fiction with an element of innovation:

Perhaps this generic fluidity is consonant with the more fluid conceptions of subjectivity in the postmodern world, and becomes a vehicle for introducing versions of subjectivication uncharacteristic of adolescent fiction in general.³²

In other words, this narrative hybridity allows authors like Crew to play with notions of what is real and what is not, adding to the ambiguity of the story. They go on to suggest that the uncanny disrupts our senses to a point where we stop thinking rationally and become prey to primitive superstitions and deep fears. This seems particularly pertinent to *Strange Objects*, in which the fears and superstitions of the whites around the native Aborigines seem to become more marked throughout the novel, both in the accounts from the past and in the accounts credited to Steven Messenger. Hybridising horror and other genres can result in an implicit conservatism, because the resulting texts tend to reaffirm dominant ideologies, according to Stephens.³³ This cannot, however, be said of *Strange Objects*, in which the combination of realism and horror add to the ambiguity of the story, or what Allan Lloyd Smith refers to as an ‘unbearable absence of meaning.’³⁴ Stephens’ and McCallum’s particular concern is to ascertain whether hybrid horror stories can have an Australian setting, given that they tend to draw upon internationally recognised features of the genre (such as a house with more than one storey, which is uncommon in Australia). To do that

³² John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2001), ‘There are Worse Things than Ghosts: Reworking Horror Chronotopes in Australian Children’s Fiction’, in *Mystery in Children’s Literature: From the Rational to the Supernatural*, in A.E. Gavin and C. Routledge, (eds.). (New York: Palgrave), pp. 165-183.

³³ See Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 174.

³⁴ Cited in Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 178

they examine the chronotopes of a number of examples, including *Dark House* (1995), an anthology of mystery stories for adolescents edited by Gary Crew, which the pair deem a good introduction to these more contemporary treatments of the genre.³⁵ The problem, they say, is that the ‘present day’ chronotope tends to be specifically North American:

There is no tradition of mystery or horror writing in Australian children’s literature, so there is still a tendency to carry over chronotopes from (mainly) American sources.³⁶

Crew’s use of time-distort in *Strange Objects*, however, allows him to create a horror setting from a real period of history; there is also a certain bleakness about the present-day setting. In my own use of the supernatural and the snake motif, I have included some elements of horror in my own time-distort fantasy, although the British Gothic horror chronotope is much more firmly established. Whilst many of the stories in *Dark House* tend to use elements of the North American horror chronotope, the same cannot be said of *Strange Objects*, which successfully creates what seems to be a very new Australian horror setting and would appear from Crew’s own writing journals to have been a deliberate choice. In fact, the work of establishing an Australian horror genre is still being carried out and *Strange Objects* seems to be highly radical in this regard and can therefore be credited with innovation within the existing time-distort genre.

4.9 Conclusion

Crew’s work demonstrates innovative propensities in several ways, not the least of which is the hybridity of the genre in which he has chosen to work. In spite of the author’s reluctance to classify it himself, and his aversion to fictionalised history, there are sufficient elements of the time-distort genre to place *Strange Objects* in this category, albeit as a highly unusual kind of time-distort work. Here the characters do not travel in time in the way we have understood the device from other works in the tradition. Arguably the journeys undertaken by both

³⁵ It should be noted that Crew wrote only one of the stories in the anthology.

³⁶ Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 174.

Messenger and Pelgrom, are entirely of the psyche. Crew's intention was to explore the mind of an isolated teenager and, by doing this through two disturbed characters, Pelgrom and Messenger, he has linked the two time periods. Crew's merging of real and imagined history gives the fictional elements extra authority and blurs the boundaries for the reader between what is real and what is imagined. This is a device I initially aimed to emulate in my own creative project, although I changed direction once I began writing it because I found the creation of faux documentation did not work well within the context of *The Serpent House*. *Strange Objects* makes readers consider the nature of history, in particular whose stories are told and how history is more than facts but a combination of things, including prevalent cultures.

Crew's work has influenced my own, in that he opened up for me as a writer the possibility of using polyphony and fictitious diary form, devices with which I experimented. Crew uses a number of experimental elements, including multiple and unheard (in the case of Charlie) voices and the collage and jigsaw puzzle devices. Again, this was something I found inspirational, even though my own attempt ended up as much less experimental. Crew disrupts conventional relations between past and present, truth and fiction. The voice of the Aboriginal Australian was innovative both because it had been so little heard in fiction before Crew began writing for young people and in its use of the oral storytelling form. Although Crew was not the first writer to utilise collage and jigsaw puzzle devices, by placing them in the children's time-distort genre, he opened new pathways for writers of juvenile fiction. It has also been argued that Crew has pioneered a specifically Australian horror novel, which had not been successfully attempted in the past. Crew has, therefore, combined a number of experimental forms to produce a radical and innovative time-distort novel.

CONCLUSION

In the Preface to this submission, I referred to the hybrid nature of the Creative Writing PhD and the challenge to the author of reflecting the relationship between the academic and creative components. To satisfy this requirement, the overall thesis offers a children's novel, a wide-ranging overview of the genre a literature review and two case studies. Together they show that this is a genre which has been partially misrepresented by critics, for the overview and case studies refute the standard claim that it is conservative at the levels of ideology, content and form. Demonstrably many, although not all, historical time-distort texts retain the stylistic and structural patterns common to others within the genre. However, this does not, as some critics suggest, restrict its creative potential. The overview and more detailed case studies reveal, for instance, how the genre has over time responded to the growing awareness of such cultural interests as child psychology, feminism, changing understanding of what history is.

As someone who is attempting to contribute to the genre, I have been interested to see that a number of recent works, most published while this project was being developed, have continued to introduce new elements into children's historical time-distort literature. Clearly this is a genre which requires additional and sustained academic study. Making the case, as this submission does, is timely in so far as historical fiction, both time-distort and realistic, is currently a dominant force in publishing for children and adults. It is a genre that is overdue for reappraisal.

The longer section of this submission is the children's historical time-distort novel, *The Serpent House*. Reading it in the light of the research component of this submission, which has periodically highlighted the interactions between the two, demonstrates how the research influenced and informed both the historical content and the creative decisions involved in its formation. Writing the novel within the parameters of the Creative Writing PhD, from a point of view of immersion in both primary and secondary texts, has necessarily deepened my creative practice. The result is a novel which, although firmly within the historical time-distort tradition, adds to the dialogue ongoing within the genre.

APPENDIX 1. Terminology

In this appendix I detail and define some of the terms which are used repeatedly throughout the submission. These form a separate appendix because the need for a definition of some concepts and phrases disrupts the flow of the writing and distracts both writer and reader from the overall points.

‘Time-distort’ fiction

Works of children’s fiction containing elements of history and the magical manipulation of time have been described by critics either as ‘time-slip’ or ‘time-travel.’ Technically, these may be seen to operate in a different manner. For instance, in Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906), a succession of historical figures briefly appear before two children in twentieth-century Sussex and tell them about different aspects of English history. Time travel, on the other hand, involves protagonists from the ‘present’ travelling to other times as when, in E. Nesbit’s *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), the child characters travel to different moments in the past, seeking the missing half of an amulet they have found in their own time.¹ In practice, however, the terms tend to be used interchangeably. For instance, the glossary in M.O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds’ *Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook* (2011) defines ‘time-slip fantasy’ as a subgenre that usually involves ‘a character from the present travelling to an earlier or later time, but sometimes characters from the past come to the present or future, and the movement may be in both directions’.² To avoid confusion, especially that arising in books such as Alison Uttley’s *A Traveller in Time* (1939) which employs both time slip and time travel, in this study the coinage ‘time-distort’ is used to describe any kind of movement by characters through time to different historical periods.

¹ See Jill Thomas (1999), ‘Time and Space are Only Forms of Thought’: An Exploration of Children’s Time-Travel Fiction with an Emphasis on Individual Time-Travel Texts with a Girl Protagonist. Unpublished M.A. dissertation. The University of Surrey (Roehampton).

² M.O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds (eds.) (2011), *Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 211-212. e

Historical Time-distort as a Genre

Several identifying conventions characterise time-distort novels:

- A deracinated child comes to stay in a new locality;
- A place or special object provides access to a time period from the past;
- A friendship or bond is formed with another child in the past;
- Connections are established between the past and someone still alive;
- The history accessed is that of an ordinary child;
- Experience of the time-distort journey is catalytic to growth, maturation or moving on.³

Identifying time-distort fiction as a genre is valuable because of the part genres play in exposing or producing social meanings and ideologies. According to Alison Waller in *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (2009), ‘Genre is inherently social and historical as well as aesthetic, and the process of any particular genre being recognised, organised and allowed to flourish owes much to ideological climates and dominant discourses.’⁴ In other words, tracing the way the time-distort genre has waxed and waned can provide insights into culture beyond those afforded by plot and language. In ‘The Irrelevance of Genre to Historical Books for Children’ (2010), Charles Butler begins to explore this question by suggesting that, within children’s literary studies, “generic borderlines have sometimes been drawn too solidly and sharply.”⁵ Drawing upon our awareness that historical fiction is always written through the prism of our present-day consciousness, the distinction between fantasy and realism in particular, Butler argues, can become a distraction. For the purposes of this submission, however, some attempt at definition of the works under scrutiny was necessary. Neither the category of historical novel nor that of fantasy fiction adequately encompassed time-distort literature. To

3A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature, (London: George Allen and Unwin); and Tess Cosslett (2002), “History from Below”: Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol.26 (The John Hopkins University Press), pp. 243-253. Not all features appear in every such novel.

⁴ Alison Waller (2009), *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*. (New York and London: Routledge), p. 12.

⁵ Charles Butler (2010), ‘The Irrelevance of Genre to Historical Books for Children’, *The National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature (NCRCL) inaugural conference* 8th May 2010, University of Roehampton, Surrey.

place it within the larger canon of historical fiction, as critics such as Suzanne Rahn and John Stephens choose to do, denies the elements of magic and particular emphasis on the malleability of time within the works. In the same way, placing it within the wider genre of fantasy fiction, as Maria Nikolajeva does, overlooks the meticulous historical research and realist detail present in some time-distort literature. Chris Clark (2002) puts forward the argument, from an educationalist's point of view, that historical time-fantasy's appeal to writers and readers continues because the combination of the fantastic and the historical produces something which is more than the sum of its parts, an argument with which, on the evidence of the primary texts, I concur and which is a further reason for my decision to place it within its own unique category.⁶

More recently, Alison Waller proposes a genre of 'fantastic realism,' which she defines as using a dominantly realist style and tone, with events being described 'as they really are', and yet with the intrusion into this realistic narrative, of an impossible event or situation.⁷ In her discussion of teenage/young adult fiction, Waller gives this genre wide boundaries: for her it includes not only novels with an element of time-slip or time-travel, but also haunting novels with a primary concern for the protagonist rather than the meanings of any ghostly events, tales of metamorphosis, witchcraft or the supernatural and what she terms 'speculative fantasy.'⁸ Waller is convincing, but the very broadness of her chosen boundaries must be a concern: time-distort fiction has many of its own discrete qualities unique to its narrative and form, and in some cases little in common with some of Waller's other suggested types of fantastic realism. My preference therefore remains for identifying time-distort fiction as a genre, with its own history and developmental timeline and a particular set of characteristics and concerns, some, but not all of which it shares with other

⁶ Chris Clark (2002) '*Historical Time-distort: a complex and unstable gestalt*'. Unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Surrey (Roehampton).

⁷ Alison Waller (2009), pp. 17-18.

⁸ Examples of 'haunting' novels include Gillian Cross's *The Dark Behind the Curtain* (1982), K.M.Peyton's *Unquiet Spirits* (1997) and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). Witchcraft narratives would include Marcus Sedgewick's *Witch Hill* (2001) and Celia Rees's *Witch Child* (2000); metamorphosis novels would range from Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (1967) to Melvin Burgess's *Lady: my life as a bitch* (2001). Under the definition of supernatural, Waller places David Almond's *Skellig* (1998) and Charles Butler's *Calypso Dreaming* (2002), whilst she defines speculative fantasy as that which uses a situation which the reader may not recognise, such as the future. Gillian Cross's *New World* (1994) and Alan Gibbons' *The Legendeer Trilogy* (2000-2001) are examples of this category.

genres and sub-genres of children's or young adults' literature. I am further aware of the argument that to identify and critique a particular genre of literature has its dangers, including pigeon-holing and over-prescription; yet it seems to me that such analysis is an essential part of the process, not least because of the interest for the critic when a text either conforms to or subverts a defined genre.⁹ As Alison Waller explains, modern genre theory recognises that

genres - as well as individual works or authors – play a part in exposing and producing social meanings and ideologies. Genre is inherently social and historical as well as aesthetic, and the process of any particular genre being recognised, organised and allowed to flourish owes much to ideological climates and dominant discourses.¹⁰

Such a theory was of particular interest as, over the course of my research, time-distort literature's status as the preferred method for writing children's historical fiction has altered. At the beginning of my research (2006), it had for some years been the most common genre adopted by writers and publishers of children's historical fiction and this had its particular sociological reasons, which had led to critics like John Stephens predicting the death of the non-fantasy historical novel. The research started, however, at a point of recovery for the latter. From the mid-2000s onwards historical fiction without a time-distort element has undergone a renaissance; nevertheless, that with a time-distort element continues to evolve and thrive as can be seen in Appendix 2. Overall, then, identifying time-distort as a genre facilitates critique and testing of how far a text conforms to, refreshes or subverts the genre, all of which are of interest to my analysis and my creative practice.

Chronotope

The concept of the chronotope has proved helpful in explaining the different time periods used by writers of time-distort fiction. The term 'chronotope' was originally coined by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1937) in the essay

⁹ For a further discussion on genre theory, see Lucie Armitt (2000), *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (London: Macmillan) and also, in relation to young adults' literature, Alison Waller (2009).

¹⁰ Alison Waller (2009), p. 12.

‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’.¹¹ It translates as “a unity of time and space” presented in a literary space. It was developed in relation to children’s fantasy literature by Maria Nikolajeva to distinguish between the ‘real’ world (the primary chronotope) and any other realm or parallel time (the secondary chronotope). Rather, however, than simply denoting either the time or the place of action, they are seen as mutually dependent and indivisible. For Nikolajeva, the concept proves invaluable in distinguishing, for example, the fairy tale from the fantasy genre, from “once upon a time” to a genre with links to reality and our own time, in which the secondary world has a time of its own. Nikolajeva chooses time-distort texts in order to illustrate how the term ‘chronotope’ can be employed to distinguish between a secondary world created in, say, C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books, and time-distort works, such as those of Edith Nesbit. Its usefulness as a concept may also be shown in discerning types of texts which are difficult to define using conventional categories, and it is apparent that time-distort works may be seen in this regard. In *The Serpent House*, two chronotopes from the past are employed: the Victorian and the medieval. This is an unusual use of the device as both primary and secondary chronotopes are set within the past rather than there being one that equates to the present of the time of writing.

¹¹ Published with three other essays by the author, as *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1982) [1975]

**APPENDIX 2: Exemplary and Influential Time-Distort Works - a
Timeline of Children’s Historical Time-Distort Fiction**

DATE	TITLE	INNOVATION/AWARDS
1906	Edith Nesbit’s <i>The Story of the Amulet</i> and Rudyard Kipling’s <i>Puck of Pook’s Hill</i>	The first historical ‘time-distort’ books for children; Nesbit’s work provides a ‘blueprint’ for many future authors in the genre.
1939	Alison Uttley’s <i>A Traveller in Time</i>	‘Unusual’ use of first-person narrator, dreams and autobiographical detail (Maria Nikolajeva (2000). p. 153); author influenced by J.W. Dunne’s ideas on time. Source: Darrell Schweitzer (1999), <i>The Fantastic Horizon: Essays and Reviews</i> .
1954	Lucy Boston’s <i>The Children of Green Knowe</i>	First of a series of six books in the <i>Green Knowe</i> series. <i>A Stranger at Green Knowe</i> (1961) wins the Carnegie Medal for Literature.
1958	Philippa Pearce’s <i>Tom’s Midnight Garden</i>	Wins the 1958 Carnegie Medal for Literature.
1965	William Mayne’s <i>Earthfasts</i>	Scientific explanations for time travel; group time travel. Winner of 1968 Lewis Carroll Shelf Award.
1969	Penelope Farmer’s <i>Charlotte Sometimes</i>	‘Complicated psychological quest’ and ‘sophisticated narrative structure’ (Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 184). A Horn Book Fanfare Best Book (1970).
1970 – 76	Penelope Lively’s <i>Astercote</i> (1970), <i>The Whispering Knights</i> (1971), <i>The Driftway</i> (1972), <i>The Ghost of Thomas Kempe</i> (1973), <i>The House in Norham Gardens</i> (1974), <i>A Stitch in Time</i> (1976)	Exploration of the role of memory, and layers of time. <i>The Ghost of Thomas Kempe</i> wins the 1973 Carnegie Medal; <i>A Stitch in Time</i> wins 1976 Whitbread Children’s Book Award.

1973	Alan Garner's <i>Red Shift</i>	'Multidimensional time travel novel' (Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 178), with open ending. Featured in <i>The Guardian's</i> 2009 list of 1,000 books everyone should read.
1978	Jill Paton Walsh's <i>A Chance Child</i>	Critically acclaimed for detailed historical research. A Horn Book Fanfare Best Book (1979) and 1998 Phoenix Award.
1980 – 88	Ruth Park's <i>Playing Beatie Bow</i> , Janet Lunn's <i>The Root Cellar</i> , Jane Yolen's <i>The Devil's Arithmetic</i>	Works begin to employ time-distort as a journey towards maturation and identity. <i>Playing Beatie Bow</i> wins 1982 International Board on Books for Young People Honour Diploma (Australia); <i>The Root Cellar</i> wins 1982 Canada Library Association Book of the Year for Children and 1988 California Young Reader Medal; <i>The Devil's Arithmetic</i> wins 1989 National Jewish Book Award.
1990	Gary Crew's <i>Strange Objects</i>	Blending of genres creating radically experimental form. Wins the 1998 Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year for Older Readers and 1991 Victorian Premier's Literary Award.
1991	Robert Westall's <i>The Kingdom by the Sea</i>	1991 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize winner.
1994 – 2007	Robert Swindell's <i>Timesnatch</i> , <i>Blitzed</i> and <i>In the Nick of Time</i>	Time-distort fiction used as platform for radical political ideology. <i>Blitzed</i> (2002) wins Red House Book of the year for Younger Readers.
1998	Susan Price's <i>The Sterkarm Handshake</i>	Winner of 1999 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.

1999	David Almond's <i>Kit's Wilderness</i>	Shortlisted for 2000 Carnegie Medal, winner of 1999 Nestlé Smarties Book Prize (Silver Award), shortlisted for 1999 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.
2000	Susan Cooper's <i>King of Shadows</i>	Winner of 2000 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.
2006 – 9	Linda Buckley Archer's <i>TimeQuake</i> trilogy	Twenty-first century science used for time-travel and examination of the ethics of time-distortion. <i>Gideon the Cutpurse</i> shortlisted for 2007 Branford Boase award.
2010	Ali Sparkes' <i>Frozen in Time</i> , K.A.S. Quinn's <i>The Queen Must Die</i> , Alex Scarrow's <i>TimeRiders</i> series, Kate Saunders' <i>Beswitched</i>	Genre continues to thrive. <i>Frozen in Time</i> wins Blue Peter Book of the year award.

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The Serpent House

A novel for children

18th January, 1899.

Tom, Lucy and I stare around at the place we thought was our home. The air still smells burned and the odd gasp of a breeze sends flakes of paper and dust fluttering around like stray moths. The death-quiet rings in our ears.

Tom pats the bag of money he's come to collect. "All here," he says. "That's the main thing. Now let's get out."

For a moment I can't move. How did it happen? This was my escape, my big adventure, Tom's dream, Lucy's place of safety. *Our home*. Once, I thought it was the most beautiful spot in the world. Now I think the taint of dark magic will never go away.

Lucy links Tom's arm with her left and my arm with her right. "Right you are, let's get away from here," she says, in that way of hers, that always sounds like she's about to break into a song. Her voice is music through the strange silence. The three of us turn our backs and start to march away, careful not to slip on the leftover scraps of snow.

My name is Annie Cotterill and I'm 12 years old. I'm heading for the train station with my brother Tom and his sweetheart, Lucy. Tom has his bag of money, Lucy has a bundle of clothes and I have something in my pocket that just might make my fortune. We're about to start a new life. Again.

Hexer Hall. November 27th, 1898: Advent Sunday.

Prophecies. I seem to be surrounded by them. Signs and portents. All things are coming together at last.

I have no traditional religious faith but I attend the church to keep up my social standing. This morning, the fresh scents from the wreaths and bundles of greenery decking the church masked the usual musty smell, although they did nothing to help the chill in the air. The ladies nod at me politely because they must; I own so much of the land around here. But my family's name is still not a good one, even after all these centuries. Bad reputations can last down many generations. Mr Pocklaw, the minister, wore purple robes.

He spoke of deliverance, the coming of the one who ends the dark times. For once, I paid attention. No! It's not that I have seen the light all of a sudden – it's more that revelations seem to be happening in my own life. At long last.

Afterwards, the coach rattled back to the hall and it was as we drove into the courtyard that I saw him. The winter sun was dazzling and I could only make him out in silhouette. His lean body, a young man not quite fully grown. That wild hair. My new gardener's boy, reputed to have a magic touch with plants. I approached him and he jumped to his feet and made what I took to be a clumsy sort of bow. He is completely untrained in how to address his betters, but this is of little importance. In his hands, he was twisting plants and stalks into some kind of ball shape. I asked him what he was doing and he told me he was making a tussie-mussie for his little sister, who is ill. He held it out for me to try its scent. It was eye-wateringly strong. Rosemary, mint and thyme, he explained. Something compelled me to ask him more about this sister. It seems they are orphans and since the mother's death the child has been unwell. He truly dotes on the girl and is heartbroken to have left her behind. And the picture he painted of her, with her cropped hair and her penchant for strange clothes, is so like the prediction that I almost gasped aloud. 'The lost and sorrowful child; the sometimes-boy and sometimes-girl, will make your journey, bring you knowledge.' For two long years I have lived with this strange prediction. I was filled with a wild impulse and told the lad that he must bring his sister to live with him. I have offered him the use of an old outhouse on the edge of the grounds. And I told him I'd heard of his reputation, that he could grow and tend what no one else could bring from the soil. He actually blushed, which made me smile. I explained how I needed his help in creating a healing garden in my grounds and that it would take his special talent to make it happen. He smiled so wide, his face a picture of such hope and gratitude, that I had to pull my cape around me to stop myself reaching out to him. "We will talk more of this," I promised. "As it is winter, you have less to do in the gardens than

usual. If you keep up your duties, you may work on preparing the cottage for you and your sister to live in. She may join you at Christmas, one month from now, and I will find work for her in the Hall. Ask my housekeeper if there is anything you need.” And I made my way across the courtyard and back here. I was shivering, my eyes full of tears, although it may have been the cold.

I believe I can ask the lad and his sister to do anything I want without question. I think my time is about to come.

25th December, 1898. Christmas Day.

I was expecting it to be the worst Christmas ever. In one way, it was. It’s hard to feel peace and goodwill and all that stuff when your mother is just two months dead. When she passed away, I was sent to live with my Aunt Catherine and my cousins, James and Hannah. The cottage was cold and they were colder. My aunt was not cruel. But she wasn’t kind. All the time, I missed my Mam and most of the time I missed Tom, my older brother and my best friend.

Tom’s 16 years old. Becoming a man. He has a special talent for growing things – you should’ve seen our vegetable patch back at home, it was fit for the queen. Soon after we came to live at my aunt’s, a very rich lady found Tom out. She asked him to plan her special new gardens. It was too far away for him to visit very often. Writing’s not his talent, although our mother taught us both, so I didn’t get letters from him. I was left behind here with no one to talk to. It was a hard eight weeks.

Late last night, I sat shivering at the kitchen table, scraping at some potatoes for the Christmas Day dinner. The knife was newly sharpened and I cut my fingers twice. Each time, Hannah spotted it and screamed at the pinkish cloud that stained the cold water, and each time Aunt Catherine cuffed me across the ear. She couldn’t understand why I was so clumsy, she said.

“Your mother had fingers so deft they could do anything,” she told me. It sounds stupid, but I hated the way she said “your mother,” through her pinched mouth. “Your *mither*.” As if she could hardly bear to squeeze out the words. I never called her “my mother.” Tom and I called her “me Mam.” It rolled off our tongues as if it was one word: Me-Mam.

I put up with “your mither” for weeks and suddenly – maybe because I was tired and my fingers were sore – something burst out of me. “She’s not my *mither*,” I found myself shouting. “She’s Me-Mam. Me-Mam!” I beat my fists on the table as the words drummed out of my mouth. “Me-Mam, Me-Mam, Me-Mam!” Hot tears burned the back of my eyes and I fought best I could to keep them in. Aunt Catherine picked up a wooden spoon and rapped my fingers, hard. She caught me twice – oh, the pain in my cold wet fingers! I snatched my hand away but I stopped talking. Aunt Catherine turned her back on me. Hannah and James were supposed to be placing the wooden figures in the crib in the corner, but they kept watching me and grinning.

“That’s you,” said James, waving one of the shepherd figures at me, one with his smooth round head bent, the better to look at the carved baby Jesus. “You’re a wooden-top.”

I was about to say something back and I would’ve surely got into more trouble. But then I heard footsteps coming up our path towards the door. I jumped up, hoping, hoping – and it was, it was my Tom, come back to see me for Christmas. His face and hands were pink and shiny with the cold. He seemed so much taller and broader than I remembered, even though it’s just a few weeks since I’ve seen him. His soft hair has grown down past his ears and it makes him look like a big, shaggy puppy dog. He laughed and hugged me. Now I felt those tears starting to come and this time I couldn’t stop them. My aunt stood up and greeted him, stiff and stern as usual. She’s never cared for Tom and since Mam’s death

he's talked back to her far too often. But – it was Christmas, so she tried to smile, a small crack that caused other tiny, angry lines around the edge of her mouth and her stony face.

“See what I have,” Tom grinned and plunged his hands into his bulging coat pockets. “Oranges!” yelled James and Hannah, lunging towards him. They made me think of the pigs running for their swill. Tom handed them one orange each. “From Lady Hexer's own storeroom.”

My aunt gave a tiny grunt. “I hope you had permission to take them, Tom Cotterill. I don't want any stolen fruit in this house, Christmas or no.”

“Of course I was allowed,” Tom replied, firmly, raising his eyebrows. I sighed to myself. They were squaring up like fighters already. “Lady Hexer told me to take some home for the children. In fact – she made a point of saying I had to give the biggest one to you, Annie.” He held out the beautiful, bright fruit, which seemed to light up the whole dull, cabbage-smelling kitchen. I took it and pressed it to my face, breathing in its wonderful smell. What a smell, a feast on its own. I held the globe-shape, warm from Tom's pocket, towards the candle light and watched how it made my fingers glow like flames around the fruit. Hannah looked put out. “Why should she get the biggest one?” she whined. “*I'm* the oldest.” Tom looked back at our aunt and added: “I would never steal, aunt. You ought to know that. And why would I need to? Lady Hexer's the most generous employer I have ever known.”

My aunt gave another small grunt. “So you say. Of course, I don't know much about this employer of yours, but I have heard strange stories about her, for all her great wealth. I don't know what kind of habits you have taken up since you went to work over there, but you will find we still go to the church service every Sunday. Tomorrow, too, with it being a holy day. If you want any dinner, you'll come to church with us.”

Tom looked at me for a moment, then back at his aunt. “Of course I’ll come, Aunt. I never said I wouldn’t. I want to walk with Annie and hold her hand. And after the service we’ll visit our mother’s grave.”

I smiled up at him. If only Tom was there all the time. He always stood up for himself so well. I could never think of clever or brave things to say to my aunt and cousins, not until it was too late.

Aunt served up some ham broth for supper and afterwards we were allowed to eat the oranges. Tom used his sharp little knife to cut mine into quarters. The sharp smell made my mouth feel suddenly parched, as if I would choke if I didn’t get a taste of that sunlit juice. I sucked the first chunk so happily it made a loud slurping noise. Tom and I giggled and Aunt told us not to be so disgusting.

Oh, the sweet and sour taste of it. You could close your eyes and imagine yourself in some faraway, picture-book country where there might be trees laden down with the fruit and brightly-coloured birds flapping around them. I used my teeth to wring out every last drop of liquid, sucked my sticky fingers and ran my tongue around my mouth to enjoy it all a little longer.

Later, Tom and I sat together on my small bed. “I got your letter,” he told me. “I like it that you send me your news. I’m sorry I don’t write back.” Tom’s proud of how clever I am. Mam always said it was because my father was a man of letters. I never really understood that, though. He never wrote any letters to me. Or to her.

Tom looked at me. He had worry in his eyes. “How have you been, Annie?” he asked. His voice was more gentle than any I’d heard lately. His eyes flicked up to my headscarf and back to my face. “I think about you all the time - how you’re left here with no one to care about you. It’s so miserable here. I don’t know how you put up with that woman.”

“Aunt Catherine? She’s worse than you, Tom. Because you argue with her. I don’t argue, I just do what she says,” I told him with a shrug. Then I added: “Well, usually. But I know she doesn’t care much for men. If I wasn’t her sister’s child – well. But I do miss you. And Mam.”

Tom squeezed my fingers and winced. “You and your cold hands. Is there no blood in them, you little boggle?” He’s always called me names like that. When I was born I was an ugly little thing, everyone says, with a cross red face and a nose like the cap of a mushroom. But Tom looked after me, from the start, Mam said. There’d been other babies – after Tom, before me – but none had lived very long. And Tom, at around six years old, had told our mother that I would be all right, because I was no human child, I was some sort of little goblin. And I’m no prettier now. ’Specially now.

“Anyway”, Tom went on. “I have a kind of a Christmas present for you, but it’s something to tell, not something to give. And you must wait till tomorrow.”

“Tell me now,” I demanded. “Please.”

Tom laughed. “No. All I will say is this – it will cheer up your Christmas Day. I know it will. I’ll tell all tomorrow after church.” I couldn’t imagine what could cheer up a Christmas Day without Mam. But I trusted Tom more than anything.

The Christmas morning mass seemed to go on forever and ever. It was a walk of almost two miles to the church and we shivered our way joylessly through the carols, bobbing between the unforgiving wooden benches and the damp-smelling kneelers. The priest droned like a fly woken up in mid-winter. When it ended, at last, Aunt Catherine, James and Hannah went on ahead of us, while Tom and I stood by our mother’s little headstone. It was the newest and cleanest in the churchyard. We hadn’t been able to buy it ourselves, of course, but the stonemason had had a soft spot for Tom. And everyone had loved our gentle Mam. So he carved the headstone out of kindness and Tom paid him in turnips and spuds. Aunt Catherine told us to say a prayer for our mother, but when we got

to the grave, neither of us knew what to say. The silence felt heavy, broken only by the birds cawing through the chilly air. It was so still, the air seemed stopped and weighed down with cold. I didn't really care. The cold felt right. On the day Mam died, there was the brightest blue October sky I had ever seen and it felt like an insult.

Tom looked at me. "Do you want to say a prayer, Annie?" he asked me, blowing on his fingers and shifting from foot to foot.

I shrugged. "I know I should," I said. "But if I'm being honest, I ran out of prayers after Mam died. I know I shouldn't say that, right here in a churchyard and just after mass on a Christmas Day and all that. But I prayed so hard that she'd get better, Tom, because that's what everyone told me to do. But she died after all, didn't she. I don't see what's left for me to say to that god."

Tom gave a small smile. "I know what you mean. So instead of a prayer, I'm going to tell you my news now. If Mam can hear us, I think it's something she'd like to know."

I found my heart had started to beat a little harder. "I've told you how good Lady Hexer is to me, Annie," Tom started.

I nodded.

"I've been so lucky," he said. "She's made me quite a favourite. She says I'm the only one who can help her set out her new gardens, which are going to have all sorts of strange plants and herbs. She has sat with me at her own grand table – you should see it, Annie, it's this long" – he waved his arm into the distance – "and she asked for my advice about it all. The plants. What should go where and whether some of the strange ones will grow. And we've talked. She asked me about my family and I told her all about you, Annie – and your –" he stopped and I could see him trying to find the right words – "your health."

I frowned and put my hand up to my head, wrapped up in its grubby woolly scarf. I didn't like the thought of many people knowing how, since our mother's death, my hair had fallen out in clumps, leaving me uglier and stranger-looking than ever. Tom was

beside himself with worry about it. Aunt Catherine said she didn't have the money to spend on quacks and medicines, so I would just have to put up with it, shameful though it was. Shameful to her, she meant.

“Just listen to this, Annie. The Lady has given me an old cottage in the grounds. It hadn't been lived in for a while and there were holes in the roof and all sorts of places where the rain and wind came in. But she sent one of her men to help me fix it up and now I have my own little home to live in. And she's said that I can bring you to live with me, Annie. To live with me!”

His words came out faster and faster as if they were running down a hill. “When I told Lady Hexer how much I missed you and how I worried about you, she said it simply wouldn't do. That's how she said it: *it simply will not do*. She said she would like to help. She seemed so – interested in you. So I'm to bring you to stay with me, where I'll be able to look after you and make sure you're healthy.

“You can do some work in the kitchens and some cleaning to earn your keep. But we'll be together and you'll be away from this miserable place. We'll be right beside the sea – the air smells so clean, Annie. When you take a deep breath, I swear it seems to wash out your insides. I will make sure you eat the best food we can grow. You will get better and those curls will grow back again faster than we know it.”

I couldn't remember when I had last seen him grin so widely. “What do you say, hobgoblin? Will you come?”

I jumped and threw my arms around his neck. I would have squealed if it hadn't been a churchyard and out of the corner of my eye I could see the dark shape of the minister locking up the church door. I squeezed Tom as hard as I could. “Oh, Tom,” I yelped. I could hardly speak at all because I found myself laughing and crying both at once. “You were right. This has been my best ever Christmas present.”

We knelt down and each gave the frosted headstone a quick kiss. “When we next come back to visit, we’ll bring a bunch of spring flowers,” Tom promised, to the stone and the earth. Out of nowhere, a bitter little breeze made us shudder. Then we began our walk back to our aunt’s house, faster and faster, giggling to think what our aunt and cousins would say when we told them our plans.

Aunt Catherine was awkward about it, as we’d guessed. “I promised my sister I’d look after Annie,” she said. She looked as if she was searching around in her mind to find a reason why I couldn’t go. To spoil everything. “I can hardly let her go off to somewhere I know nothing about. With a brother hardly more than a child himself.”

Tom hated that, of course. “I’m a working man now,” he said. “I have a home for my sister and a way she can earn her keep. You know I can take care of her, Aunt.”

“She’s too young to be working,” said Aunt Catherine. “Your mother would be furious. She wanted better for Annie. That’s why she took the time to teach her her letters. And you want to pull her down into the scullery again. Think how your mother would feel – little Annie skivvying -”

Our cousins sat watching, with their mouths open.

“She skivvies for you,” Tom replied and my aunt’s face went red-purple. “She’d do better to get paid for it. She’ll be in the house of a fine lady and yes, she can read and write. So she’ll do very well, I promise you that. What can you offer her that’s better?”

Aunt Catherine narrowed her eyes at Tom. They are blue like Mam’s but they are the wrong blue. “You think far too much of yourself,” she hissed. “Will you make sure she goes to church? Will you make sure she says her prayers? Or will this grand lady take care of that?”

Tom stood up tall like a hero from a storybook. “Maybe we will go to church sometime,” he said. “When we both forgive God for taking our Mam away.”

Our aunt and cousins drew in their breath and my aunt made a small, prayer-like gesture, as if to rid Tom's wicked words from the air.

"But for now, aunt," Tom went on, "I want to give Annie a chance of being happy. You're welcome to come and visit us, to make sure I'm looking after her as our Mam would want. But you won't stop Annie from coming with me."

My aunt turned away and instead of more angry words she slammed pots and plates about as loud as she could. James and Hannah kept out of her way. I was shaking. But when I caught Tom's eye I gave him the widest grin I dared.

Later, James pulled my ears and told me that I'd spoiled Christmas Day. Everyone was now so angry with us that we wanted to leave as soon as we could, the very next morning. It would be a long walk and the weather was bleak. I found I had a strange brew of feelings inside me. Both excited and afraid. I don't know where the *afraid* part came from. I knew that if Tom said things would be well, then surely they would. Yet there was a small part of me that was so fearful. I just didn't know what it feared.

December 27th, 1898.

We had such a long, hard journey. As we prepared to go, so early it was still black-dark, James and Hannah laughed at me and told me I was off to be a skivvy. "Got yer scrubbing brush, Annie? Got yer mop?" I was surprised when their mother told them to stop it, with real sharpness in her voice. And as I made for the door, Aunt Catherine suddenly grasped my hand and pressed two pennies into it. "Annie," she said. "Come back if ever you wish. I know this is not your home and I am not your mother. But there is always a place for you here. That's all."

I stared at her in surprise. Her face was hard, as usual. It didn't seem to match the words.

“She won’t need to come back here,” said Tom. Aunt Catherine looked at me and gave a little nod, then turned away. The door shut behind us and we left.

As we walked, it started to snow, nasty, spiteful globs of freezing wetness that spat in our eyes and soaked our clothes. After a few miles, my legs were aching with cold and weariness. I barely had any feeling in my feet. Tom picked me up and carried me on his back for a while, but I knew that was too hard on him. And then, suddenly, as it was beginning to get dark again in the late winter afternoon, a horse and trap came past and Tom flagged the driver down. He agreed to take us most of the way, which was a huge relief. I slept some of the journey, in spite of the bumps and jolts. When he set us down we only had a little over a mile left to walk, down towards the sea, which Tom said would be in sight if only it wasn’t so dark. But we could smell it. The air filled our lungs with salt and ice. It stopped snowing and though I could still barely feel my legs or my feet, soon we trudged into a long road which was the entrance to the Hexer Hall estate. It seemed to go on for many a step and to either side there were dark, dark gardens, all strange black shapes. And as we walked, with our path marked out only by the white of the snowfall, I came over with – what? A feeling I don’t know how to explain. I stopped and stood still, shivering, afraid – and my head swam.

“What’s wrong, Annie? We’re almost there,” Tom urged me on and I forced my legs to step one in front of the other, although it felt like a huge effort to do it. I couldn’t see a thing to either side of the pathway. It was all dense shrubs and trees. But I thought I could hear – things – I don’t know what – moving about, making dry, whispery noises. Did I hear someone give a little whimper, a sob? Or was that just me? “Tom, I’m scared,” I whispered to him. “I don’t know why, I just am.”

But then Tom said: “Look, Annie – see that little cottage?”

In the dark I could just make out a small stone building with a tiny light in the window. “Who’s in there?” I asked as we hurried towards it, forgetting my sick feeling of a moment ago. “Why is there a light?”

Tom pushed open the door, which smelled of fresh, new wood, and stood back for me to walk in first. And I thought for a moment I was asleep and in a dream. There was one little room with a small fire chuckling in a grate, a sweet scent of wood and coals. On a table was a candle in a glass jar and two plates set with big chunks of pie. There was bread and a jug of something. It felt like something from a fairy tale. The feeling of fear seemed to slide away to nothing.

“Where is this?” I breathed. “Whose house is this? Should we be in here?”

Tom laughed, setting down our bag and putting his arms round my shoulders. “This is our new home, Annie. Do you like it?”

“But – the fire – the food – who’s done all this?”

“That’ll be Lucy. She’s my friend who works in the big kitchens. I’d a feeling she would do something like this. She was longing to see you. You’ll meet her tomorrow, Annie, and I know you’ll like her. She’ll take care of you when you’re working in the Hall.”

I sat down by the fire and sighed as the warmth began to make my feet and fingers tingle and ache. The pain was sweet. Tom handed me the food and a drink, which turned out to be milk. My eyes started to close long before Tom blew out the tiny candle.

December 28th 1898

I can’t remember when I last slept so long and so well. I woke up warm and muddle-headed. My blankets felt heavy and after a few minutes I realised Tom must have placed his own bedclothes over mine. He wasn’t in the cottage. I could tell it must be quite late in the morning because there was brilliant white sunlight outside. I sat up, blinking at this

strange new place. It still felt unreal. The fire had gone out, but I pulled a blanket around me and went to the tin jug to splash some water on my face. Then I walked around the little room, my whole body still aching from yesterday's long trudge. There wasn't much here – a little table, new carved, and two wooden chairs, the fireplace with a pot strung over it and the bed. But I knew I loved it. Tom and I could be happy here, I thought.

There was a tapping at the door and I opened it a tiny crack. Outside was a girl of about seventeen, the strangest but the prettiest I'd ever seen. She was smiling so wide I couldn't help smiling straight back.

“Annie? Can I come in? I'm Lucy. Tom said I might bring you some breakfast.”

I held open the door. I'd never seen anyone like Lucy. She kept on smiling and her face was soft and round, pretty as a toffee apple. I couldn't take my eyes off the colour of her skin and her tight-curved hair, black as midnight. I wanted to reach out and touch her, make sure she was real. She handed me some bread, still warm, wrapped in a cloth. The smell made my stomach growl, so loud I had to excuse myself, and Lucy just laughed.

“Tom's told me so much about you,” she said. “I'm so glad he's brought you here.”

She gave me a long look and I wondered if she was thinking it strange that a boy as handsome as Tom could have such an ugly little sister. But then she shook her head and said: “Just look at you. You remind me of a wee doll.”

And I thought that was a nice thing to say and I've kept remembering it all day. It made me feel warm inside.

Lucy had a beautiful voice. Her words came out as if she was mixing a sweet and spicy pudding. “I love the way you talk,” I blurted out and she laughed.

“A Scottish accent. I can't believe you haven't heard one before. Lots of people talk like this around here,” she said. “We're right on the border, you see.”

Lucy had been brought up near Edinburgh, she said, and that was a place I'd heard about. She laughed again when I asked if everyone in Edinburgh looked like her. She told

me her father had sailed to Scotland from a land far over the sea. She told me the name of the country but I'd never heard of it, which made me feel a bit stupid. Lucy's never been to see her father's country, though.

"I wish I lived in Edinburgh," I said. "I wish I talked like that."

I suddenly thought my own voice sounded flat and rough compared with Lucy's music. "I love your voice too," Lucy told me. "And Tom's."

I guessed almost straight away that she was sweet on Tom. I liked that idea.

After we'd eaten and I'd dressed, Lucy offered to show me the Hall. We stepped out, my boots still damp and snow-stained, into a bright, white day. The cottage was well set back from the gardens – but as soon as I got into the Hall grounds, the strange feeling from last night came over me again. Sick dizziness, a feeling like I'm about to fall over. Was that a whispering in my ears? Or was something rustling somewhere nearby? I stopped walking and Lucy looked at me. Her eyes were all concern. "I expect you're still worn out. Such a long way you had to walk last night," she said, so kindly. "But look – just a few more steps and you'll see the big Hall. It's quite a sight, Annie."

So I forced my feet forwards again and as we rounded a corner, a strange, tall building reared up at us like a wild animal. We stopped to take it in. Hexer Hall was built from a pinkish-grey stone and all over the front of the building were elaborate carvings, which made it look as if the house was squinting and frowning at me. The sick feeling in my stomach grew stronger. I still thought I could hear that whispering, but it was too distant to make out words.

"What a place, eh?" laughed Lucy. Without meaning to, I clutched at her arm. She pointed to the carvings on the stonework. "Can you see what they are?"

I screwed up my eyes at them, wiping the sunlight-tears away.

“Snakes,” she explained. “The hall was rebuilt in the last few years, after Lord Hexer died. And everywhere you go there are these coiled-up snakes. They’re in the stonework, in the banisters, the tiles on the fireplaces. Absolutely everywhere.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why snakes?”

Lucy shrugged. “I’m not sure. Mrs McKinnon says the Lady came from a very old family before she married and that the snakes were part of their coat of arms. But no one really knows if that’s true or not.” She linked my arm and kept me walking towards the side of the hall and the kitchen door.

The kitchen was huge and warm as a hug. It felt like another safe place. No whispering noises, no dizzy feeling. I stared around at the enormous fire, the high shelves of plates and copper and the pans hanging from the ceiling, clanking gently in the draughts. Bright sprays of holly, ivy and sharp-scented eucalyptus were still hanging up, left over from Christmas. Two other women were there. One was Mrs McKinnon, the head cook and housekeeper, who said her name to me as if I was someone important and said how pleased she was that I had come. The other was a sharp-faced, fair-haired girl around the same age as Lucy, sitting bent over some sewing at the kitchen table. She looked up but did not smile.

“This is Becky,” Lucy said. “Becky, here’s Tom’s wee sister.”

Becky muttered something and bent her head down over her work. Lucy shrugged and shook her head. Then I was ordered to sit at the table while Mrs McKinnon served up a bowl of soup, all steam and heat.

As I ate it, quite greedily I think, I gazed around the kitchen. This one room was bigger than our entire old house. I hoped I wouldn’t be asked to fetch a plate from the dresser because I’d never be able to reach those high shelves. And I’d be terrified of dropping the pretty blue-patterned china. My favourite shelf was lined with jars of jams and preserves, all jewel-coloured. I tried to take in all their names. Raspberry, strawberry,

redcurrant, quince. Blackberry, loganberry, apricot, orange. I'll never want a row of fine silk dresses as much as I'd love my own kitchen shelf with all those pretty jars and their mouth-watering names.

"Becky is sewing your maid's dress," Lucy told me. "Tom told us how you like to wear strange clothes. Trousers and leggings and a skirt all at once. How does anyone tell if you're a boy or a girl? That's fine for playing back at home. But when you're working in this house, you'll have to wear a dress and an apron, like me. Becky sews better than any of us so she's altering one of my old dresses. It'll look perfect when she's finished, you'll see."

Becky looked up at me, with eyes pale as sea-glass. She put the end of her thread in her teeth and bit it sharply. "What about her head?" she asked Lucy. Then she turned her light gaze back to me. "You can't go round in that – whatever it is," she added, staring hard at my headscarf.

I clutched it without thinking. "I have to keep it on," I said.

Lucy gave me a troubled look. "Well, now. I'm sure Becky can make you a little cap. Becky, you can make a pretty white cap for Annie, can't you?"

Becky glared. "Why should I? Why should I be put to more work for someone who's lower than me? Why is everyone making this fuss over this little – this scruffy little –" I never got to hear what name she was going to call me because suddenly a bell jangled on the wall and everyone gave a jump. Becky leapt up and dropped her sewing on the table. She straightened her own dress and left the room in a flurry. "Lady Hexer," said Mrs McKinnon. "Calling for something. Becky likes to wait on the Lady herself, as much as possible. She is a hard worker, I'll give her that. But she hoped to bring her own little sister to work here and she can't understand why Tom was allowed and she was not. It's hard for her. But she'll get used to you, Annie, my pet."

But I wasn't too sure. I knew, from living with Aunt Catherine and my cousins, how it feels to stay somewhere you're not wanted. So I didn't think Becky would forgive me very readily. Truth be told, nor could I understand why this rich lady has singled out Tom and granted him such great favours.

A few minutes later, Becky opened the kitchen door and walked in with a slight pink-y flush to her cheeks. "Lady Hexer wishes to see you," she said in her thin voice. "I've said you're not fit to see anyone at the moment. That you're dressed in boys' rags and not washed. But she insists."

Both Lucy and Mrs McKinnon started to fuss around me like little pecking birds. "Is that dress ready?" Mrs McKinnon asked.

Becky just shrugged and pushed it across the table towards her. I found myself being hurriedly stripped of my outer clothes and the black dress being pulled down over my head. I tried to smooth out my headscarf but Becky's sharp fingers gave it a tug. "This won't do," she snapped and pulled it off my head. There was a moment's silence as everyone stared at my patchwork scalp. I felt my face go hot. Lucy gaped helplessly around for something to cover my head, but nothing showed itself.

"I'm not going up there like this," I said, firm as I could, though I heard my voice shake a little. "Give me my scarf back."

Becky looked at me with raised blonde eyebrows and then, without a word, she flicked the scarf onto the kitchen fire. It went straight to ash. Lucy gasped and Mrs McKinnon said sharply: "Becky! Really! There was no need for that. It – it wasn't kind."

"The thing was filthy," Becky said. She looked straight at me, with her water-coloured eyes. "It smelled," she added, flicking her fingers like she was trying to rid them of dirt.

I couldn't speak. My hands flew up to my head and I tried, hopelessly, to cover over the patchiest parts of my scalp, wishing I had a dozen more fingers. Lucy looked a little

tearful, but she said: “Annie, my love, you mustn’t keep the Lady waiting any longer. I am sure she will understand about your – appearance.” Then she said: “*I will take you upstairs.*” She gave a little shake of her head at Becky.

As I left the kitchen and went up a flight of back stone steps, with Lucy holding tightly to my hand, I heard the housekeeper begin to tell Becky off. We went through another heavy door and then we were in a wide, chilly hallway with a grey-green marble floor.

“Never mind about her,” said Lucy, very quietly. “Let me tell you something good. We get paid better here than anywhere I’ve ever worked. It’s because not everyone will work for Lady Hexer. Some people think she’s a bit odd. When the old Lord died and she started changing the hall, lots of servants left. She does have some funny ideas, I suppose. But not everyone will employ people who look like me. She’s the kindest person I’ve ever worked for, I promise. Now don’t be afraid.”

Lucy was gently pushing me towards a staircase with a wrought-iron banister that seemed to spiral upwards for miles. On the first steps, I began to get that strange, sickly feeling again and tried to say so, but Lucy hustled me up and up so fast I soon became out of breath. And then I was outside a tall door and Lucy was knocking on it. I felt a sudden sharp pain in my side and winced. Then another sharp jab in the shoulder. I realised what had happened – Becky had left pins in the dress. But it was too late to say anything, because Lucy was pushing open the door and steering me into a large, heavily-curtained room. I looked up to see a woman sitting on a couch, quite still. She looked like someone in a great painting, with her folds and folds of silky dress and her fine-china skin. She smiled faintly and beckoned me forward. Lucy nodded at me and I gave a sort of a bow, because I felt I should do something, but had no idea what. The Lady raised her eyebrows and asked Lucy to wait outside. Then she beckoned me again and I shuffled forward a bit

more. I found I was trembling hard. Well, I've never met anyone so wealthy or grand and I had no idea what to expect.

“And you are little Annie? Tom's sister?” she asked. Her voice was as cool and flowing as the silk of her skirts. I nodded. My throat felt as if it was closed up and I still felt faint.

“Child,” said Lady Hexer. “You seem afraid. Please don't be. I have been looking forward to meeting you.”

“Why?” I blurted out. Then I thought that it must have sounded very rude. “Madam,” I added, as bit of an afterthought.

Lady Hexer's eyes seemed to flicker with a tiny light. “You are a very sharp little girl. Sit,” she said, waving at a chair with her hand. I sat down quickly and winced as another pin scratched my backside.

“Tom has told me all about you,” Lady Hexer went on. “And about your unfortunate –” here she glanced at my bare head and I felt myself flushing again. “Your health problem. I would like to see if we can do anything to help. I have a – an interest in matters of health.”

I looked down at my hands and realised they were very grubby. I tried to hide them in a fold of the new dress. The Lady watched. “This is your new maid's outfit?” she asked. I nodded.

“Tom tells me that you are usually to be found in a strange mixture of clothes,” she went on. She leaned forward and looked at me more closely. “That often – it is hard for people to tell – whether you are a boy or a girl.”

I nodded again. It seemed like a funny thing to say. “People have said that. I don't really care though.” I paused. “Madam.”

“Well, now,” she went on, with another small smile. “I believe we can find a good use for you here. What do you think of the Hall?”

I didn’t know what to say. Was I really being asked for my thoughts by this grand lady? “I – er - I think it’s very strange,” I found myself saying. “But I haven’t been here very long.”

“Well. Quite,” the Lady nodded. I couldn’t tell anything from her face, which was beautiful in a way that I wasn’t used to. She looked more like a statue than a real person. “We will get to know each other better soon. Bring Lucy back in here, will you?”

Lucy came back in with a curtsy and took my hand.

“Make sure this child is well-fed when you take her downstairs,” Lady Hexer commanded. “She seems quite pale and light-headed. And tell Becky to finish off the dress properly. This poor girl is being tortured by pins.”

She turned to me. “You will begin working for me tomorrow morning at eight. Come up to this room and we will discuss what you are to do.”

I tried to curtsy with no idea how to do it, so I must have looked like a duck. Then we went out of the room.

It was as we were walking back down the wide stairs that the feeling of dizziness got worse, as if I’d breathed in some sort of poisonous gas. I stopped a few steps behind Lucy and clutched at one of the strangely-shaped iron decorations along the spiral banister. When I put my fingers around its snake-like curves, it felt cold as metal should. I stopped to take a breath and as I did so, I thought I felt the shape warm up and move – like a ripple – through my fingers. I tried to scream, but nothing came out.

Had I fainted? Everything seemed so dark. And even colder. Much colder. For a terrible moment I wondered if I’d suddenly died. But I could hear my own panicky breathing. As I blinked away the blackness, I saw I was no longer holding the

staircase. I was leaning against a stone wall in a corridor that I'd never seen before. I breathed in strange smells, of damp and cold and of something else much sweeter, something that I thought I knew but couldn't place. I took some steps forward on shivering legs. I could see a tiny glow of a light, much further along the passageway, so shakily I started to make my way towards it. And then I realised, in the gloom, that a shape was also making its way towards me. It was a small shape. A child, near to my age or a little younger. A girl, I made out, as she came closer. She was wearing a long plain shift dress and she was staring at me open-mouthed. She spoke, but I couldn't understand what she was saying and I tried to tell her this. She shook her head at me, as if she couldn't understand me either. She pointed towards my head and repeated her words again and this time I thought I caught one or two of the words. I think she was saying, although in the strangest way: "Where is your hood? Where is your hood?"

Her fingers seemed to reach out to me and they curled into strange, black shapes that I tried to push away. And then the light was almost blinding and I blinked again and again, my eyes sore and watering. When they cleared I was lying on Lady Hexer's stairs and Lucy was fanning me and Mrs McKinnon was trying to push a cup of water to my mouth. "She's coming round," I heard someone say. "Oh, Annie, pet! Are you all right?"

I sat up slowly. I had no idea what had just happened.

December 29th 1898

They made me have a rest today. My strange fainting fit caused a fair old panic in the household. Lucy and Mrs McKinnon took me back to the little cottage and there they built up a fire and nagged me to eat all sorts of broth and bread and cake until I thought my belly

would burst. When Tom came back from the gardens they scolded him and told him he had to take better care of me. When they'd gone, he put a strong arm around my shoulders.

“Annie, I'm so ashamed. I can't bear it that I might have made you more ill,” he told me.

I elbowed him gently. “Of course you haven't. It's just – ”

I thought about telling him that parts of the house and grounds made me so afraid I felt sick. But I just couldn't bring myself to do it. And I couldn't explain what happened on the stairs. So I said: “Lucy says I'm probably still tired from the journey here. That's all. I'm told I have to rest.”

Rest was a new idea to me, though. We spent many months looking after Mam when she was ill. Then, when I moved into Aunt Catherine's house, she made certain I earned my keep. So after sleeping for longer than usual this morning, I felt restless. I found my comfy old trousers and woollens and went out to find where Tom was working in the garden. The grounds were too big for my head to take in. They were like a dozen different gardens, but all part of the same one. There was a woodland, with tall, bare trees that looked as if a thousand witches had left their broomsticks there. Beyond this was a grander part, where great hedges had been cut into tall, twisted shapes, all wearing hoods of snow. In the centre of this was a fountain – completely still and frozen. I couldn't help running my fingers down this strange, still, once-water, but they almost stuck to it and I had to blow on them to stop the ice-burn. I felt like the Snow Queen wandering through her castle grounds. There was also a huge building made entirely of panes of glass, like a grand palace on its own, but with only plants living in it. I felt like I'd walked for miles before I found Tom, in a wide, bare patch of ground. He was walking around with a ball of string and wooden pegs, marking something out. He looked pleased to see me.

“This is the Lady’s new garden,” he told me. “I’m in charge of it. It needs to be planned out in a special way and then we’ll try to grow plants for medicine. It’ll be the only one of its kind. Imagine that, Annie!”

He told me how it would be marked out with hedges of green box and something with a silver leaf called cotton lavender. Then he listed all sorts of flowers and herbs, some of which I’d heard of before and some of which sounded as strange as a foreign language. As he described the plants and how they could be used to heal all sorts of illnesses, he waved his hands and his eyes lit up. I thought how happy he seemed, happier than he’d ever been, since before Mam got ill. This made me feel good too. Tom’s chatter seemed to warm up the frozen air and fire up the pale, weak sun.

“If I had had some of these medicines when Mam was ill,” he told me, “who knows how I could have helped her?”

I linked his arm. How firm and manly it suddenly was!

“You tried,” I reminded him. “You really did your best. You fed her as well as you could, until she wasn’t able to eat.”

Tom frowned around at the hard earth, where scraps of unmelted snow lay like torn-up pages from a storybook. “But I know so much more now. Lady Hexer gave me a book all about healing plants. I looked at it last night while you slept, until the candle gave out. I couldn’t read all the words but I knew some of the pictures. Some of the plants we had around us could have helped her, Annie. Borage and mallow and violets. They work for coughs and bad chests. We had them growing so near us and I never knew to try them out. I wish I could go back a few months, Annie, and have that time over again.”

I put my arms around his waist and squeezed. “There’s no point in thinking like that, Tom.”

“No,” he agreed. “But I still have a chance to make you better, Annie. You’ll see what magic I’ll grow here. I think plants have the answer to everything, if we know what to do with them.” I laughed at him. But of course I believed him.

December 30th 1898

Today I had to report to Lady Hexer first thing. Tom walked me across the breezy blue-blackness of the early morning grounds and Lucy met me at the huge kitchen door. I thought I heard the creepy whispering sound again as I walked, just like on the first night I came here, and it gave me a chill inside, but I still didn’t want to tell Tom about it. I hoped it would soon just go away, perhaps when I got used to the Hexer estate. There were some places where the whispering was stronger than others, where the dry, eerie sound made my skin pinch and prickle with fear. But I made myself keep walking. This was something I could force myself to do, like when I walked behind Mam’s coffin even though my legs didn’t want to. If I keep going, I told myself, there are other places where the horrible sounds and feelings simply seemed to stop, like inside our cottage and in the warm kitchen of Hexer Hall, which I’d already grown to love.

As I went through the door, the breeze made the hanging pans chime like bells and I was aware of Becky glancing up at me without a smile. Lucy rushed over to give me a soft hug. Mrs McKinnon produced a spotless white cap and fussed around me, trying to fix it into place on my head and clicking her tongue when she couldn’t find enough hair to grip the pins. I noticed there was a strange, bad feeling in the air, hovering around like the lingering smells from breakfast. At first I thought it was because I was there, needling Becky with my presence. But then Lucy blurted out: “Why did she have to come today? Fancy making wee Annie go up there with that old witch! I hate to think about it!”

I stared at her. “Do you mean Lady Hexer?”

She shook her head and sighed. Mrs McKinnon looked at me. “Lady Hexer has a regular visitor and – well – none of us have really taken to her. Not that it’s our place to comment on the Lady’s company. But she is a strange one, this Miss Haggstone.”

“Strange?” Lucy snorted. “She gives me the creeps. I don’t like even being in the same room as her. And I don’t know what they get up to with those cards and all that jiggery-pokery, but it makes me shiver.”

Becky chipped in. “The last time I went in there the room was all dark. The curtains were drawn, in the middle of the day. And they had some sort of a black bowl on the table and they were staring into it.” She looked straight at me and I could tell she was enjoying herself. “Witchcraft, I thought it was. Perhaps they need you to practise their spells on.”

Lucy shifted from foot to foot. “Stop it, Becky. Don’t make things worse.” She took my hand and squeezed it. Her brown hand was warm and softer than you’d expect. It didn’t feel like a hand that had already carried buckets of coal around the huge house, cleaned out grates, made fires and served breakfast, all before eight o’clock this morning.

“Look, of course she isn’t a witch, there’s no such thing. She just – looks a bit strange and –”

“Smells a bit strange,” added Becky.

Mrs McKinnon glared at her. “You think everything smells strange,” she said, in her voice which could cut like scissors. “Your nose is wasted here. You should be making perfumes in Paris or some such thing.” She turned back to me. “She looks unusual, Annie, this Miss Haggstone. And when she’s here Lady Hexer seems to be - well, things are different. Let’s hope she isn’t staying too long this time.”

It was time for me to head up the back stairs towards Lady Hexer’s rooms. Lucy walked me up but had to leave me at the door to see to all her other work. Birds to pluck and herbs to chop and spices to grind, she told me. When I stepped inside, just as Becky had said, the heavy curtains were drawn, leaving the room very gloomy with just small

slices of daylight slipping in at the edges of the tall windows. Two figures sat at the long, polished table. One was Lady Hexer, of course, who told me warmly to come in. The other was at the head of the table, with a large old book in front of her. Lady Hexer beckoned me forward and I realised that Becky had also spoke the truth when she'd said Miss Haggstone smelled funny. As I came closer to her, I caught the mixed scents of sweat and gin, not very well-hidden under some heavy, spiced perfume. Like the others, I found myself afraid of her, for a reason I couldn't work out.

She moved her wide head slowly to look at me. As I got used to the half-darkness, I took in a plump, middle-aged woman with grey hair piled on top of her head. Her eyes were lined - not just with deep wrinkles but also with some sort of inky black paint. She also seemed to have painted over her eyebrows in the same ink, giving her a fierce expression without even trying. She was covered in swathes of different shawls and scarves, although without the daylight I couldn't make out their colours. She gave me a slow smile, not a welcoming one, and her fleshy lips seemed to strain to do it. "This is the child?" she asked, her voice deep as a man's and with a strange accent as if she had come from another world altogether.

Lady Hexer, who looked to me like the very picture of grace and beauty next to this ugly old crone, gave a brief nod. "Annie, my dear," she said, silkily. "Come and say good morning to Miss Haggstone, my very good friend and confidante." (It sounded like this: *con-fee-dawnte*). "She has been looking forward to meeting you."

"Why?" I wanted to blurt out again, but my throat was stopped up with nerves and anyway, I guessed that was not the way to speak to a lady in front of guests. So I stayed silent, hearing my own heart beat like a door banging in the wind.

Lady Hexer turned to her guest. "Annie is, of course, still unused to the house and to myself. But I see signs of great intelligence, given her low background. And I have told

you of the – *incident* – on the staircase. I feel sure that already the girl is responding to the atmosphere of the house and that she will be able to use the symbols.”

I stared at Lady Hexer. What was she talking about? Was she talking about me? What was *atmosphere*? What were *symbols*?

Miss Haggstone narrowed her eyes at me, still with that false smile on her lips. “Let’s see, shall we?” she said, in her low voice. “Let’s have a little – experiment.”

I thought a tiny frown crossed Lady Hexer’s face, but she turned to me. “Annie,” she said, and her voice sounded as if it was stroking me. “I know your brother is a very talented young gardener. I also think you are a child with great potential. Do you know what that means? It means I think you could become something very special. I believe that, with training, you could become my own personal assistant.”

The Haggstone woman made a noise that I thought was a grunting laugh, but she was only clearing her throat.

“What I want you to do, my dear is – is –” the Lady glanced around – “is to show me where you can see a serpent, somewhere in this room.”

I looked at her for a moment, wondering if I’d understood her right. It seemed a daft thing to ask. But she gave me a little nod, in the direction of the large stone fireplace. It was built so that it looked almost like another room, a kind of cave. A small fire burned in a metal basket. As I got nearer, still blinking in the dimness, I could see carvings of coiled-up snakes in the thick tiles all round the hearth. I went closer, shivering in spite of the heat from the fire, and then in my head I began to hear the whispering sounds again, getting louder and louder. I shook my head to try and rid myself of the noise. I reached out, unable to stop my arm trembling, and pointed to one of the snake pictures on the tiles.

“That’s right,” said Lady Hexer and I knew, somehow, that I was supposed to go a little nearer. I put my finger in the groove of the carving and without quite knowing why, traced it around the serpent’s coils. And that’s when it happened again.

There was a moment or more of total blackness. My head spun, like when Tom used to lift me and swing me round and round in the air, when I was very small. I opened my eyes and recognised the same freezing stone corridor from the other day. My fingers were no longer touching the thickly painted tiles, but raw, sandy stone. It was still dark, but ahead of me was the set of steps leading to the archway. Even though I truly didn't want to be here, I started towards its light. Then I heard soft steps heading my way. Without knowing why, I ducked into the side of the arch. A man's figure came towards me and I squinted at it, trying to understand why it looked so strangely formed. The figure wasn't very tall, for a man, and he had something bulky around his neck – like a thickly-wound scarf or a bunched-up cloak. It wasn't light enough to tell. Scurrying a few paces behind him, carrying a plate and a jug, was the girl I met last time. She spotted me and her eyes widened. She gave me a brief nod and the pair disappeared through the arch as if they'd been swallowed. I glanced around it at their back views and could swear that the thing around the man's neck moved, on its own. It made me jump, but I thought it must have been a trick of the light. I waited for a few minutes, pressed against the rough stone wall, trying to work out what had happened. Had I fallen into some kind of cellar under the Hall? But how could that happen twice, in two different parts of the house? It hurt my head trying to work it out. After a short while, the girl put her head back around the arch, as I'd thought she might. Again, she gabbled at me in something like, but not quite, ordinary words. I shook my head at her. She looked cross for a moment and then beckoned me to follow her. We scuttled along the narrow corridor and I kept close on her tail as she turned down two more passageways, each as dark as the first. Every minute or so, I heard voices and – once or twice – the sound of someone crying. It didn't seem to bother the child at all. She was a skinny little thing but she moved fast

as a rat. I thought to myself that I'd never find my own way back. The girl pulled back a heavy cloth over an opening and I followed her into a tiny cell-like room, where a thick candle burned in a heavy jar. I stared around. There was a mat of some kind on the floor, which had the look of somewhere to sleep. A shelf cut in the stone wall held a few things – a pot, another candle, a bundle of cloth. She started speaking again, this time more slowly, and my ears caught the odd word. I had to concentrate really hard to make it out. After a few moments, her strange language started forming in my ears, like when someone plays you a tune a few times until you know how it goes.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “Where have you been hiding? What is that on your head? Where is your hood?”

I couldn't help grinning at her pale, fierce face.

“Which question do you want me to answer first?” I asked.

She stared at me, trying to work out what I've said. Then she started to laugh too.

“This is going to sound strange,” I told her. “But I've no idea how I got here. What is this place?”

“Hospital, you fool,” she said, shaking her head at my stupidity. I caught the words “lazar-house.” She glanced up at my head. “You – you are sick.”

“Oh, no,” I say. “I'm not ill.”

I fingered the white maid's cap and decided I would trust this girl. “My hair is – well, some of my hair came out, but I'm not actually ill, not so that I need to be in a hospital.”

The girl sighed and her eyes were all pity, the way people used to look at me when I told them Mam would get better. She just shook her head again.

“What’s a lazar-house?” I asked. “I don’t even know how I got here. One minute I was in the Hall and the next minute I was here. That’s what happened the other day, too.”

It was clear she didn’t understand. But then she gave me a big grin and said: “Bet you’re hungry. I have food.” She rubbed her skinny tummy and pointed to her mouth.

I shook my head and tried to tell her I’d done nothing but eat for the last two days. And that I didn’t need to stay here, I just needed to get back to my brother and Hexer Hall. I didn’t say what I was thinking, which is that I wouldn’t dream of taking food from someone who looked as if she needed it so much herself. She reminded me of a sad little chicken who used to peck around for scraps in our yard back home. I’m small and skinny too – but I felt big and clumsy next to this waif of a child.

She shrugged again. I could tell she hadn’t grasped most of my words. “Hexer Hall?” she repeated. She looked around and opened her arms. “Not here.” Then she pointed at me: “What’s your name?” Then pointed to herself. “I’m Meg.”

I smiled at her. “Annie.”

She smiled back. I held out my hand but she gave me an odd look and shrank back a little. Just then, somewhere in the distance, I heard a voice call: “Annie!” and I jumped. “Who was that?” I put my hand to my ear.

Meg listened for a moment and shook her head. She started miming with her hands, pulling at her skirts and acting as if she was going to sleep.

“I don’t need a bed, I’m not staying,” I tried to explain, again, although Meg kept waving her hands for me to shut up.

“Annie, you must stay. But listen.” She glanced at her makeshift doorway and lowered her voice. I strained to make out her words, which sometimes sounded like

she was talking through deep water. “The doctor. I’m helping him. Maybe, Annie, he will cure you! Stay,” she said again, waving her arm at the ground, then placing her hands on the side of her head to show she wanted me to sleep here. She gave me her widest smile yet.

“Was that the doctor, who was walking with you in the corridor?” I asked, pointing and miming. Meg nodded. “Doctor,” she said.

“What was he wearing around his neck?” I asked her. “I couldn’t tell in the dark. It looked like some great thick roll of cloth or something.”

Meg gave a little shiver. “Melusina.”

I repeated the strange name. “What is Melusina?”

“The master’s serpent,” Meg told me. “He carries her round his neck.”

I gulped. I’d never seen a real snake – only pictures of them – but they scared the wits out of me. At home, we had a big book – an Alphabet of Animals. I loved all the pictures in this book except S for Snake – I was so scared of it when I was younger that Tom ended up folding down the page so I wouldn’t get upset. “He carries a snake around with him?” I repeated, patting my shoulders to show Meg what I meant. “But – won’t it bite?” I made my fingers into fangs.

Meg shook her head. She pulled a face, to show me that she wasn’t keen on the beast either. She chattered at me and from the words I picked up, I gathered the thing was very handy for catching mice and rats. Give me a cat any day, I thought, shuddering.

Meg’s words floated at me and sometimes I caught them, sometimes not. She told me that the doctor was kind to her and that she stayed at the hospital because her father was ill. Or maybe already dead, I couldn’t quite work out which. She did jobs for the doctor, she said.

I was about to ask more questions but then I heard a voice again, calling my name, more urgently this time. “Someone’s calling for me,” I said. It came again, louder: “Annie! Annie! Come back!” I poked my head out of the cloth covering the entrance to Meg’s cubby-hole and seemed to fall, the blackness coming over me like a dark hood. I heard voices saying my name over and over and some sort of puffs of air being blown at my face.

Colours were swimming about in front of my eyes. I could see greens, blues, pinks. They began, very slowly, to form shapes. For a moment I thought it was the snake coming towards me and tried to bat it away with my hand. Then I realised it wasn’t the snake – it was leaves. Deep-green leaves against a pink and blue sky. The sky was shining like it had been varnished. There was a figure – like a goddess – smiling at me. Suddenly I felt my fingers against carpet; I was lying on the floor of Lady Hexer’s drawing room. She was kneeling beside me, fanning me and looking pale and frightened. I blinked and started to sit up, noticing a huge pot with an aspidistra plant right next to me, with scenes from old stories painted on it. The words underneath read: Goddess of Spring. At least I hadn’t gone completely mad and started seeing things, I thought. Lady Hexer gave out a long breath.

“Child!” she said, softly. “I began to think you would never come back to us.”

Behind her I was aware of the dark figure of Miss Haggstone and as my eyes made her out more clearly, she gave me a look of surprise, mingled, I thought, with something else. She wasn’t pleased with me, this much I knew. Lady Hexer led me by the hand to a kind of one-sided sofa that was covered in a stiff, silken material, deep red. She made me sit and handed me a glass of water. I sipped it carefully, the glass feeling heavy, my fingers trembling and slippery with sweat.

“Where did I go?” I asked her. She looked at me carefully, as if she was unsure how to answer. “Go?” she asked.

“You said you didn’t think I would come back,” I said.

She thought again, for a moment. “Why, I rather meant – that you were not conscious. But perhaps – well, now, Annie – perhaps it did not seem that way to you. Can you tell me what you think happened?”

I wondered how to explain this, without sounding as if I belonged in the madhouse.

“It felt like I fell,” I began. “But I ended up somewhere else. Not in this room. I think maybe it was somewhere under the ground. Is there – a hospital near here?”

The Lady stared at me, right into my face. Her eyes seemed full of a strange fire. “A hospital, my dear? What kind of hospital?”

I frowned. “I don’t know, I didn’t understand. What’s a – a lazar-house?” Lady Hexer looked as if a bolt of lightning had gone right through her elegant body. She grabbed both my hands. “Is that where you went, Annie? To a lazar-house?” She shook my hands hard in her need to hear my reply.

“That’s where the girl said I was. But I don’t know what it is.”

“Haven’t you read your scriptures, girl?” came the low voice of Miss Haggstone. “Do you remember a story about someone called Lazarus?”

I thought for a moment. “Did he come back from the dead? In a Bible story?”

“Right,” answered Miss Haggstone, shifting her bulk around in her chair and looking at me very strangely.

“You mean, the people in the hospital came back from the dead?” I asked, feeling properly fuddled.

“They didn’t come back from the dead, my dear,” said Lady Hexer. Her voice had a little tremble to it, like a strange musical note. “But they were as good as dead, or that is how people thought of them. Lepers, Annie. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Lepers? That terrible illness, like in the Bible? I’ve heard of it, but -”

Lady Hexer nodded. “It seems you dreamed of a leper hospital, Annie. Am I right?”

“No one told me there was a leper hospital around here,” I said.

“There isn’t,” said Lady Hexer. “But there used to be. Hundreds of years ago. It used to be right here, where the Hall is now.”

“Well, it’s still here,” I insisted.

Lady Hexer shook her head. “This is very hard for you to understand, Annie. What you have just done is something quite extraordinary. In your head you have seen the past. You have glimpsed what was here, once, but isn’t any more.”

I almost laughed at her. “That’s not possible,” I said. Then I remembered who I was talking to and added: “Madam.”

The Lady gave me a smile. “Not impossible. It just takes a special kind of person. You, Annie. I knew you were the one.”

I shook my head. “No, it *is* still here, the place where I went. It was solid stone. I touched the wall. I talked to a girl who stays there. I saw the - erm – the doctor. They were real.”

At the mention of the doctor, the Lady sat forward and again squeezed my fingers hard. “You saw a doctor? Tell me, Annie, tell me all about him.”

I told her I’d only caught a glance of him, walking through a doorway wearing a huge kind of a snake around his neck. At this point, Lady Hexer let go of me and sat back, heavily, onto a chair. She picked up the fan and started flapping it against her face, which was white as swans’ feathers. She muttered, as if to herself: “It’s true. It’s true. It is happening, just as it was foretold. It is all becoming –”

At this point, Miss Haggstone shambled out of her chair and waddled towards me like a great over-fed turkey. Her wraps and shawls rustled and crackled. She leaned down and stared into my face with her bulgy, reddened eyes.

“You had better not be telling stories, girl,” she hissed. Her breath was sour and I held mine so as not to breathe it in. “I’m not sure if I believe this tale of stones and snakes. If this is an invention then you will be sorry, girl, and so will your brother.”

I was too afraid to hold her gaze and stared at my shivering hands in my lap. “It’s not a story,” I mumbled. “It’s what I saw. That’s all.”

“Leave her, Agatha, don’t frighten her,” came Lady Hexer’s voice. “There is no other way she could have described these things. I need the child now. We will work together.”

She came over to me and actually knelt down beside the stiff sofa. It made me blush and squirm, to see her down in this position, with me sitting like a queen on the chair. “My dear. What has happened to you today is of immense importance. You have seen into the very history of this house. You are, as I said, an exceptional child. You will not be wasted on cleaning and household duties – your role will be to help me in my research. Together, Annie, we will discover great, important things that will help the whole world - what do you think of that?”

I stared at her face, which was white and bright as a winter star. Miss Haggstone made her small snorting noise in the background. And suddenly, and for no reason that I can explain, I started to cry. The full feeling in my throat and the heat on my face seemed to make me melt. The crying turned into hard, deep sobs. I had no idea what had happened to me. I didn’t understand what I was expected to do.

December 31st, 1898. New Year’s Eve. Hexer Hall.

The final day of the year, leading to the last year of the century. I think I am allowed to feel a sense of history taking place! The predictions about the child have proved so accurate that it is quite unnerving. She has travelled back in time to my ancestor’s hospital and has even conversed with some servant girl. Some child who has in fact been dead for centuries. Quite, quite astonishing. More thrilling than I can possibly convey in

words. I believe that things will now move quite fast. The only problem is that the poor child is quite overwhelmed by the experience. I have had to tell her that she is having some special kind of dream. I was most reluctant to send her back to the hut in the grounds, where she stays with her brother, but it would have seemed odd to do otherwise. I thought the housemaid was going to collapse with shock when I insisted on sending a large food hamper and warm bedding to the cottage. I have given Annie the strictest instructions that she is to tell no one, not even the brother, what she has seen and done. I didn't have to make any threats, in spite of Haggstone's advice – the girl is aware of how much her brother needs his position and that they are being treated in a way which is far above their station. I will now oversee Annie's journeys and she will bring me back, at long, long last, the book of cures. My long-dead ancestor's secret knowledge will not be lost in time. I will dispel the disgrace that has shadowed my family over the centuries. The doctor's genius will live again.

December 31st 1898.

Tom woke me this morning by bouncing around like a big overgrown baby and clattering the pots. He said he was making breakfast. I said it sounded more like he was trying to wake the dead. Then I realised what words had just come out of my mouth and I shuddered.

“New Year's Eve, Annie,” he told me. “The end of a terrible year and the start of a new one. Here we are with more food than our stomachs can take and a warm fire and a home of our own. We've hit luck, Annie, at last. And we deserve it.”

I couldn't help smiling at him. He set two eggs to boil in the pot over the fire and broke off chunks of a loaf of bread. He patted the little table and I went to sit at it. Lady

Hexer and the horrible Haggstone woman told me not to tell Tom what happened yesterday. It was hard. I always tell Tom everything. I'd almost blurted it out last night when he'd asked me what I'd done all day. But then again, I wasn't sure if he would understand. He might start to worry that my brains had started falling out along with my hair. There'd been more dark strands lining my white cap when I took it off last night.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked me, in a softer voice. "Lucy was so worried about the way you fainted again. But Lady Hexer says you're to do no more cleaning and hard work! She's going to take you on as a pupil and teach you things. I can hardly believe it. Think how proud Mam would be. Hey!"

His face turned into one huge, glowing grin. "Why don't you write to Aunt Catherine and tell her? That'd show her how wrong she was! And it'll knock the smug smiles off James and Hannah's faces too, eh, Annie?"

I said I would. I started planning a letter telling Aunt Catherine that I was to be taken on as the Lady's special pupil. But it felt like I wasn't telling the truth. It's a strange thing that missing out something important can feel just as bad as telling an outright lie. It felt like I was lying to Tom too. I hated that.

Again, I was supposed to spend the day resting, but I followed Tom around the silvery, frozen garden, pestering him as he marked out plots for planting in the spring. There were other gardeners there, some much older men. Somehow Tom had become their boss and they had to do what he told them. I thought they gave him some funny old looks. After all, he was young for such a task – but they were civil enough when they talked to him. At dusk, Lucy caught up with us. We saw her scurrying along the whitened paths wrapped in a cloak and carrying a lantern, her breath like tiny ghosts on the winter air. "Hogmanay, Annie! Hogmanay, Tom! Come along to the kitchen after we've served Lady Hexer's supper and we'll all have a feast to celebrate!"

And so we did. The kitchen was golden and warm and scented as a bowl of chicken stew. It was crowded, as all the servants had got together for the party. I tried to take no notice of the way people glanced up at my head whenever they talked to me. Lucy spotted it and squeezed my arm. "People look at me funny too," she said. "It happens to anyone who looks a bit different. You get so used to it, you end up taking no notice at all."

Lady Hexer, as Tom said, was generous to her workers. The long pale table in the centre of the kitchen was laden with so much food you'd have thought it might collapse. There was a strong-tasting soup which made my eyes water. Lucy said it had a bit too much garlic in it. And there was hodge-podge, so hot it burned my mouth, chunks of veal and ham pie in pastry thicker than the sole of my boots, and cold chicken patties with glistening bowls of pickles and chutneys. There was an orange batter pudding which tasted like something out of a dream. A dream of Christmas Eve and summer too. I thought Tom was going to scrape the bottom of the pudding bowl until he remembered his manners. I was too full even to taste the sponge cakes and seed cakes. Best of all, though, there was a fruity cake in pastry that Lucy said was called 'black bun', that she used to eat at home. She'd made it herself for the first time, she said. I said I thought black bun was a poor name for such a wonderful thing. Just one mouthful tasted like all the riches of the East.

We waited until the big hall clock chimed midnight and everyone cheered. They sent a muscley, black-haired farrier out to knock on the kitchen door and come back in bearing coal, salt and whisky. I'd never heard of this before. First-footing, Lucy told me: the first man through the door will bring good luck for the year, as long as he's the right kind of person. I laughed at that, it seemed such a daft idea. Someone played a fiddle and someone else beat time with the spoons and even though we were all a bit squashed, we managed to dance. As I sat down and got my breath back, I thought back to the chilly quiet of Aunt Catherine's house. She didn't believe in celebrating New Year's Eve - she said it was for pagans. James and Hannah would be in their beds now as if it was any other night. And

here were Tom and I partying like royalty. Tom looked as if he would burst with happiness as he danced Lucy round and round the table. She somehow kept her eyes fixed on his, in spite of all the bobbing about. So, I thought. Whatever happens, I have to keep this happiness for Tom. Even if it means I have to do things that sound strange and dark.

January 1st, 1899. New Year's Day.

Tom and I both had today off as a holiday, which was just as well. We woke up late and bleary-eyed after all the partying. It was a grey, chilly morning and Tom heaped coals onto the fire from the big bucket Lady Hexer had sent us. I jumped about to keep warm while I waited for the flames to lick their way through the coals. Then I cooked some sausages. I couldn't believe how my stomach was rumbling with hunger, after all I'd had to eat the night before. Tom rubbed his head and groaned. "That's the last time I drink punch," he said. "My head feels like it's full of mud."

Lucy had warned me not to drink the punch so I just laughed at him. "What shall we do today?"

Tom grinned. "Lucy and I have planned a picnic. We thought we'd walk to the sea."

I stared out of the tiny window. "In this weather? It's freezing."

But soon afterwards, Lucy arrived, with a basket and a woollen hat and heavy cape for me, and we headed off through the woodlands and out of the estate. We followed a steep and sandy pathway towards the shore, long grasses whipping at our limbs. Then we saw it. I'd never been this close to the sea before and it took my breath away –and I mean really! I found myself panting and my eyes smarting in the strong breeze. The sea here was grey as washing water and it roared and leapt at me like an angry old wolf. But I thought it was the best smell in the world. I stood for a few minutes, just staring. It went on forever and ever. The thundering waves made me gasp and just when I thought I'd seen the biggest crash possible, there it came again. "This'll wake me up all right," Tom laughed. We found

a spot in a sand dune that had some shelter from the winds, blinking the sand from our eyes, and settled down to enjoy the view. I had no idea the world was so big. Lucy snuggled up close to Tom, wiping wiry black curls like fronds of seaweed out of her eyes. Lucy has the kind of hair that makes you want to twirl your fingers around in it. “So, Annie,” she said, squeezing my hand. “Lord, those fingers are cold! How do you like your new home? We can’t believe how Lady Hexer’s taken to you.”

I shrugged. “She’s strange,” I said. “I don’t know what I mean, really, but she is. She makes me do -” I stopped.

They both stared at me for a moment. Then Tom shook his head. “You know what’s strange? People being good to us. You’re used to that old misery, Aunt Catherine, and being in the wrong all the time. So now when someone says you’re clever and wants to help you, you don’t understand it.”

Lucy nodded. I guessed Tom was probably right about that.

January 2nd, 1899.

I had to report to Lady Hexer again today. The Haggstone woman was still there, glowering at me like some evil old pet cat. Lady Hexer was all gentle words and smiles. “My dear,” she said, beckoning me to sit with her up at the polished table. “I have used the change of year to think long and hard about your future. I feel that I am –” she spoke slowly, as if she was thinking hard about every word – “extremely fortunate, I mean lucky, in finding two young people with such talent. Your brother Tom is to transform my gardens into something which has never been seen before. And you, my dear – you are to work with me. We will learn and experiment together. We will uncover secrets and knowledge that no one has dared to dream – not for centuries. And when you are not carrying out my – special duties, I will have a tutor come to give you lessons.

“I know what it’s like, Annie, to be a clever girl. No one takes any notice of you. Well – I am taking notice of you. I will make sure you reach the height of your talents. We are of different ranks, you and I, but I feel we have something in common. You and Tom will want for nothing.” She looked at me hard, waiting for me to answer in some way.

I swallowed. Her words felt as if they were coming from behind some veil, where their real meaning was hiding. “Do you mean,” I asked, slowly, “that you want me to go back to that hospital again? I mean – to dream about it. Or whatever it was I did.” Miss Haggstone made a clicking sound with her fat tongue. “You are too direct, child!” she snapped.

But Lady Hexer waved her hand. I didn’t know what to say so I gave a small shrug, staring at my blurred reflection in the glossy surface of the table.

“I will answer you honestly,” Lady Hexer went on. “Yes, Annie, I want you to make your clever little mind go back to that hospital. Do you understand what I mean? This house, Annie, was built on the site of that hospital. Although it was destroyed long ago, I think something of it is still here in some way, if we could only find it. When I was a child, I could sense its presence. But at that time, I didn’t understand what I was seeing in my mind – not until I was much older and found out the history of my family. Even when I married, I refused to leave this house. My late husband allowed me to redesign it as I wished. Now, I believe we have the right conditions – and you are the right person – to find out more about the past. I think you can actually see it, Annie!”

I could hear the excitement in her voice but I couldn’t look at her face. I didn’t want her to read my terror. “Well, Annie? I know you have questions. Ask!”

I thought. There were so many, it was hard to know where to start. “Why do you want me to do this?” I began.

Lady Hexer thought for a long moment then took a deep breath. She spoke to me with her eyes closed, the lids and lashes trembling slightly, like butterflies on a flower.

“The hospital, Annie, was run by an ancestor of mine. I believe him to have been a wonderfully clever man – a genius. He wrote a book – of – ” another long pause – “cures. Cures. This book was lost somewhere after the hospital was closed. What I want you to do, Annie, is find out about his work and then fetch this knowledge back to me. I am trusting you with something I have longed for all my life – to bring this wonderful work from the past, so that we can put it to use today. What an honour, Annie, isn’t it?”

I nodded, carefully. It did sound like an important task – a noble one. But it still felt as if that unseen curtain was blocking out some piece of truth behind her words. I thought again. “If I can do it – if I can find out what’s in this old book - what will you do with it?”

“Why – I will use it to cure the terrible illnesses of the world! Leprosy, Annie – a terrible affliction that we think cannot be helped. Across the Empire, people are dying of it and it is the most hideous way to die. But I believe that my ancestor, the doctor, had begun to find a cure even for this, thanks to his experiments. And if he could cure that dreaded condition, then surely he could cure almost anything! Typhoid! Smallpox! Cholera! Tuberculosis!”

I flinched at that last word. *Me Mam*. I tried to keep my mind on what the Lady was saying.

“Imagine, Annie, if you and I were able to bring this knowledge over the centuries and use it today. We would become legends, Annie! Don’t you want that? We would surely be able to cure your own sad condition, too,” she added, giving my patchy head a sorrowful look.

“I don’t know,” I said, truthfully. “Will the doctor let me see the book, if I ask for it?”

“Let’s think about that later,” said Lady Hexer. “For now, I just want you to make visits - like you did the other day. I mean, in your head, of course - and find out everything you can. Will you do that? Your rewards will be – great.”

Miss Haggstone coughed. “Lady Hexer,” she muttered. “I am not sure –”

The Lady held up her hand and Haggstone was silenced. “I chose Annie on the basis of your own predictions, Agatha. Now they are coming good, you seem to be unsure, but I think we should proceed. Immediately. Annie?”

“If I see all these things inside my head,” I asked Lady Hexer, “Just like a dream – then how do the people there see me?”

“What a clever question, Annie!” Lady Hexer breathed. “You are so intelligent. So quick!”

I waited.

“Why, Annie,” smiled Lady Hexer. “Who can truly explain what happens in dreams?”

I didn’t think this was much of an answer. I looked up at the Lady and asked her one of the biggest questions that had been turning over and over inside me. “If I keep going to this hospital,” I said, trying to keep my nerve, “will I get ill too? Will I catch the disease?”

I thought her face made a slight tremor, or it could have been a little shadow, a change in the light. But she looked me in the eyes and said, with a smile: “Why, no, Annie! Of course not! How could you catch an illness from people who no longer – fully – exist? I know it is hard for you to understand, but you are making a journey of the mind - not a journey of the body.”

I frowned. “But I feel like I am really there. The place feels real enough to touch, anyway. Why shouldn’t the illness be real?”

Lady Hexer gave a small laugh. “No, Annie, I do not think you need concern yourself with that. I think you will be safe.”

I glanced between Lady Hexer and Miss Haggstone and thought I caught a look pass between them. Like one of them had thrown a ball to the other one and I’d just missed seeing it go.

“Now then, Annie,” continued the Lady. “Shall we go on another little - how shall we say - journey?”

I wanted to repeat the word “we” as a question, but didn’t dare. I knew full well she just meant me.

She nodded at the fireplace with its sculpted tiles. Heavily, I got up and went towards the hearth, where the low fire crackled and gently spat. The designs were in light-ish colours, of mainly blues, greens and whites, so you had to look closely to see that the circles were actually coiled-up snakes. With my skin crawling, I held out my arm and placed my finger in the same coiled snake as before and traced its shape around and around.

It was daylight but still bitterly, bone-achingly cold. In this light I could see that the walls were of a pale, honey-coloured stone. This hospital must be newly-built. I could see no one, but I heard voices from further down the narrow passageway, and I followed them. I felt safer in the light and I hoped to find Meg. The thick walls were entirely plain. The first room I came to had a door of heavy wood, which was wide open. I peered around and saw a set of four beds, all with people lying across them. There was a terrible stench, reminding me of the room at the back of the church where Mam had lain before her funeral. A smell of death. The woman on the nearest bed turned slowly towards me and my hand flew to my mouth to stop myself from screaming. Her face was covered in livid sores and swellings. The skin was bulging, lurid-coloured, the lumps and crevices like a cauliflower painted red-purple and forced on top of her usual features. She faced my direction and her glazed eyes didn’t seem to see me, yet she heard me. She raised an arm towards me, covered in lizard-skin, and I saw that her fingers were swollen and clumped together like fungus on the branch of a tree. For a moment I stared as if I couldn’t move. I backed out of the

door, cold but sweating. I'd never seen anything so horrible. I started to run, glancing back along the passageway as if the poor woman might somehow be chasing me. I flew round a corner and right into someone – a slight figure who I knocked to the ground as easily as a rag doll. It was Meg. I stopped and held out my hand to help her up, but she backed away from it and crossly dusted herself down.

“You ran away again,” she scolded me, when she was on her feet. She had to say it a few times before my ears got used to the strange sounds she made.

The memory of the woman on the bed returned and I felt my stomach lurch. I clapped my hand over my mouth, afraid I was about to be sick.

“Oh,” said Meg. She looked sorry for shouting at me. She pulled her sleeve down to cover her fingers before placing her hand on my arm.

“I'm not dirty,” I snapped as we walk.

“Unclean,” Meg said, leading me towards a large door. Somehow, I heard that very clearly and it hurt.

We walked through the door and out into a small cobbled courtyard patched with snow. Around it was a handful of small cottage-like buildings and what looked like a tiny chapel. I smelled frost mixed with animal dung and saw that the buildings backed onto a field where pigs and chickens were scattered about. We passed two or three people walking across the courtyard. One man sat on a bench, studying what looked like a prayer book, his long sleeves covering his entire hands. He had red marks on his face, but nothing like as bad as the woman on the bed. It struck me that they were all dressed alike, in plain, russet-coloured tunics with hoods. Meg led me into one of the small buildings and into a kind of store room. A flat-faced woman sat at a table, sewing. She looked up at us.

“Meg,” she nodded.

“Mary, this is Annie. She’s new. She needs clothes and a bed.” The woman raised her eyebrows at me. “Got your fee?”

Meg glanced sideways at me and said: “I gave it to the master. He knows Annie’s family.”

I said nothing, but felt myself blush at the lie. The woman gave another short nod, got up and dragged a heavy pile of the russet-coloured cloth from a low shelf. She pulled out a length of it and held it against me. I noticed she kept herself an arm’s distance away.

Meg tried to explain that patients from the hospital have to wear this tunic and hood, so that the townspeople could keep away from them.

I followed her into a second building. There were more rooms with beds in, but they were empty. Meg pointed to a small wooden bed in the corner. “You can sleep – here.”

Then she led me to a larger, square room full of people sitting at tables, eating some sort of mess from heavy bowls. Some of them looked up at me. I glanced around them, trying not to stare. There were men along one long table, women and some young children at another, all clad in their uniform and hoods. Some of them had trouble eating because their fingers were swollen and bunched up. Lots of food was being spilled. Some had swellings on their faces, but not all of them. My eyes fixed on a man whose skin was lined and folded so that he looked a bit like a lion – only not fierce, just sad. Others had clusters of smaller spots or patches of red, shiny skin. I turned away.

Meg looked at me crossly and snapped something like: “Get used to it.” She pointed to the food but I shook my head. “I couldn’t eat here,” I said, shuddering. “These people are – so -”

“These people,” Meg hissed, pointing at me, “are like you. Do you understand? Just like you. They’re ill. That’s what this illness does to them. That’s what it might do to you. It’s a good job some of us will work here and help them out.”

I shook my head again, furiously, screwing up my eyes. “No,” I said. “I don’t have this illness, Meg. These people are lepers, aren’t they? I’m not. I’ve just lost some of my hair.”

Meg glared at me. “If these patients weren’t wearing their hoods, then you’d see that many of them have lost their hair too. It’s part of the illness. That’s what I keep telling you. Annie – you have to stay here, because you can’t go round giving this sickness to everyone you meet. Do you understand?”

“I don’t know how you can stand to look at them,” I found myself saying, even though it made me feel bad to admit it.

“My father had this illness.” Meg looked at the floor. “I stayed with him here till he died. He tried to pretend he wasn’t ill, too, for a long time. Shall I tell you how I knew for certain he had the leprosy? I took him a meal while he was sitting dozing in his chair. I touched his hand to wake him up. He didn’t feel it. That’s what happens, Annie. You lose the feeling in your hands and feet. Then you cut them and burn them without realising what you’re doing.

“I watched him while he turned from my father into someone I barely knew. In the end he looked like some creature from the depths of hell. But I stayed with him, Annie, and put balm on his sores and fed him when his hands wouldn’t work and when he couldn’t tell if he was burning his mouth or not.” Meg turned her eyes back to me. “Everyone should have someone who will do that for them.”

I stared at her, my insides churning with shame. “I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

Meg shrugged. “Not many people understand. You have to have lived with it. Watched someone die of it. Everyone thought I would have caught it from my dad,

but somehow I didn't. I think I was meant to stay here and take care of the other patients, because I don't mind it. Not many people will work here."

I shook my head yet again, dumbly. I suddenly realised how well we'd understood each other, just for a few moments. But then I couldn't find words to say back. She blinked a few times. I held out my hand but she didn't take it.

"You won't touch me," I said, pushing my hand towards her.

It was Meg's turn to look shame-faced. "I shouldn't," she said. "In case you pass it on. I do all I can, but I try not to touch the patients on their skin. Not since my father. I couldn't help it with him. But I'm not taking a chance for anybody else."

I didn't argue. I took a deep breath and said: "Tell me some more about the doctor."

She brightened. "I'm his special helper. I'm the only one who knows all about his work. But I'm not allowed to tell. He's sailed to some strange parts of the world with the trade ships and brought back things you would never dream, all to help his medicines. He's seen cities where the streets are made of water. He's been to places where the sun is so hot it's burned the skin of everyone who lives there, brown as a nut. I bet you can't believe that, but he swears it's true."

I thought about Lucy. "What were these places called?" I asked.

Meg couldn't remember. She dropped her voice.

"The patients here don't know it, but they're testing the medicines out. And one day he will cure someone, I know it, and then we'll get rid of this sickness. And I will have helped him do it!"

"What sort of medicines does he make?" I asked.

Meg shifted from one foot to another. "I shouldn't say. You'll be afraid. But you're not as clever as the doctor and neither am I, so we have to trust him." She

looked at my hair. “I might ask him for something to make your hair grow,” she said, all importantly. “Would you like that?”

I thought for a moment. “Yes, please.”

She looked delighted. “Promise you won’t run away again, then,” she said, getting up. “I’ll see if I can find him right now. If he’s not busy.”

Meg scuttled out of the room. I waited a moment and then started to follow her at a distance, across the cobbled yard and into the first hospital building. I shadowed her along the narrow passageways until she disappeared through the dark archway. I walked towards it myself and then found myself stopped dead with fear, as if I were about to step off a cliff. I heard the whispering sound and, again, the moans from the sickrooms. I tried not to think about the woman on the bed and way she lifted her arm towards me. I wanted to make myself step through the archway, but my feet didn’t want to work again.

I looked up at the pale stone of the ceiling, took a deep breath and forced myself up the shallow steps. A new smell hit me, like damp, musky earth. Just around the corner, a man walked towards me and my eyes were drawn, right away, to the thing around his neck. A thick, brown-patterned snake-like creature. Bigger than I’ve ever imagined real snakes to be, with a sturdy head and a flicking tongue. It curled around the man’s shoulders like a hideous shawl, its coils constantly shifting. This thing, I realised after a moment or two, was more than just a snake. It had what looked like little horns on its head and its scales glittered and changed colours as I watched. The man had one hand held up to his shoulder, to keep the thing steady. I was rooted to the stone step, like a little animal caught by the beast’s glinting eyes. It was looking right at me. A hot, sick feeling gushed through me and as I stared, the creature poked its head towards me and opened its mouth. Its forked tongue darted in and out like a lash. I caught a glimpse of small, white teeth. I tried to scream.

Dizzying darkness, for a moment, and then I could see the fuzzy shape of the snake, fading from brown to a paler olive-green. I was trying to scream and scream, but nothing was coming out, the way it doesn't in bad dreams. My eyes weren't working properly. Was the thing getting fatter? Was that reddish colour the inside of its terrible mouth? I groaned and strained to see properly. My arm hit out – and touched softness. I was lying on Lady Hexer's carpet. A velvety cushion, patterned with green leaves and deep-pink flowers, was next to my head. When I tried to sit up this time, my brain whirled and I blacked out completely. I came round to a sharp scent being waved under my nose. Lady Hexer was clutching a tiny bottle of smelling salts. "All right, Annie?" she asked me, her voice sounding as if it came from somewhere along a tunnel. I shook my head, breathing in gulps, my limbs all feeling like air, as if they were not quite all there.

She helped me onto the sofa. "Tell me everything, Annie! You were there for almost two hours! What did you see?"

As best I could I told all the details of my dream of the hospital, though my head still felt light and my thoughts were hard to grasp. Lady Hexer turned to Haggstone, looking like she'd won a victory. "I think we can agree this account is real," she said. "The child is not capable of inventing this sort of detail. We have already made a huge breakthrough, Annie! Your childish sensitivity means you can see things that happened in the past! This is more exciting than you can possibly know. And before we let the world in on our secret, we will show how it can be used to the good."

I didn't have to look at Haggstone to feel her frowning at me.

Lady Hexer peered at my face. "You are very pale, Annie. How are you feeling?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to tell her how sick I felt inside and how it all felt so wrong, because I couldn't find words that made sense. Eventually I blurted: "I was

frightened! I was terrified! The snake-thing was so – so – and the people who were ill – they looked -” I ran out of words and just hung my head, trying my utmost not to cry.

Lady Hexer gave me a little smile and took my hand. Her smooth fingers felt comforting. If I’d thought Lucy’s hands were soft, then these were rose petals.

“It must have been very strange indeed, Annie,” she said. Her voice was velvet. “You have been so brave. So very brave. I am so proud of you, Annie.”

I swallowed and nodded. I couldn’t help enjoying this praise.

Lady Hexer got up and went for the servants’ bell. “I am going to fetch us some sweet tea, Annie, and then we will talk a little more. We need to decide what to do next.”

At the sound of a knock on the door, I turned, hoping to see Lucy. But it was Becky who brought in the tea tray. She looked no more pleased to see me. “Shall Annie bring the tray back down, Madam?” she asked, with frost in her voice. Lady Hexer gave her a sharp look. “No, Becky, Annie is staying here with me for a while.”

Becky hung about for a moment. Then she burst out: “Ma’am, there is something I would like to ask you, please.” (She calls Lady Hexer “Marm,” but Mrs McKinnon told me it’s spelled “Ma’am” and it’s short for Madam).

Lady Hexer gave her a short nod. She began pouring tea into a china cup that looked too thin to hold hot water.

Becky flushed. “Please, ma’am, it’s a private matter.”

Lady Hexer sighed, stood up and nodded for Becky to follow her out on to the landing. She left the door open just a little. I listened, wondering if Becky was going to complain about me and my special treatment. But she didn’t. Instead, she told Lady Hexer that her own younger sister was still looking for work and asked if there was anything for her here.

“I’m afraid there is nothing at the moment, Becky, but I will bear your sister in mind if any of my girls move on,” Lady Hexer said.

I breathed out. I didn't want another Becky around. One was bad enough. Then I glanced guiltily around at Miss Haggstone. I guessed she'd also been listening, just as closely as I had. Her eyes flickered from the door to me.

"You're a lucky girl," she said, in a low voice. "I hope you realise how lucky. It's not everyone who goes for a nap on their mistress's hearthrug and wakes up a heroine. But I haven't fallen in love with you yet. What Lady Hexer does is of importance to me. I'm watching you, miss." I didn't know what to say to that, but it scared me. It was like a threat but not like a threat.

I spent the afternoon in Lady Hexer's room. She kept talking excitedly about the "great discoveries" we were to make together. She showed me a story book called *The Time Machine* by a Mr Wells. It's about someone who can travel through time. She has loaned it to me but it's hard to read. Lady Hexer laughed that we would write our own story and it would beat the book into a cocked hat, because it would be true. Again, she warned me not to tell anyone else about what she calls "the experiment."

"Not even Tom?" I pleaded.

"I'm afraid not, my dear," she replied. "He is unlikely to understand it. He may worry about it and want you to stop, and then where would we be? Without your help in finding the book, I can't even proceed with my new garden. Tom's special project." She gave a little shrug.

She didn't let me go until almost four o'clock, when it was dark outside. A sleeting rain rattled the long windows of the drawing room. As I started down the stairs, I heard Miss Haggstone's voice muttering and I caught the words "the girl." I crept back up to listen at the door.

"But people will become suspicious!" I heard Lady Hexer whisper. "The brother quite dotes on her. He may start asking difficult questions."

“This is your life’s work, Lady Hexer!” came Haggstone’s voice. “Take my advice. Keep her closer.”

The sounds dropped, too low for me to hear. I slunk back down the back stairs to the kitchen. As I turned the heavy door handle, I heard Becky’s thin slice of a voice. “And all sitting around like the three witches,” she was saying, with a pretend laugh. “Fat witch, skinny witch and titchy witch.”

I stepped into the kitchen and Lucy and Mrs McKinnon both turned. “Annie!” said Lucy. “We were wondering what on earth you were getting up to, up there all day with the Lady and old Rag-face.”

I glared at Becky. “Putting a curse on you,” I snapped at her. “And your little sister.” Straight away I felt sorry about those last words. Becky narrowed her eyes at me but she said nothing.

“Now, now,” said Mrs McKinnon. “I have all sorts of nice things for you to take home to Tom. There’s plenty food left over from the New Year’s party, although, I’m afraid, none of the pudding he liked so much.”

“You’ll have to get the recipe, Lucy,” said Becky, making Lucy squirm. “Tom won’t love you if you can’t cook. He’s got high standards now. Though not as high as Little Lady Annie’s.”

Mrs McKinnon clicked her tongue. “What is the matter with everyone today? There’s enough poison around for a barrel of snakes.”

My skin prickled again. The kitchen was one of the few places around the hall where I thought I was safe from paintings and carvings of serpents. But here the monsters were again, somehow, in the air.

January 3rd, 1899.

The sight of the dragon-serpent creature will not leave my head. Every time I think of the thing I feel like being sick. Last night I even dreamed about it. Its horrid head was moving from side to side and fixing me with its mean eyes – and I woke up sweating and crying out. I tried to tell Tom that I'd had a nightmare about a snake.

“Where on earth has that come from?” he asked, half-laughing and offering me his shirt sleeve to wipe away the tears. After that I was almost afraid to close my eyes, so I barely slept, just clutched my thin pillow and shook, maybe with the cold, maybe out of fear.

As I walked across the grounds to the Hall early this morning, I saw a coach being trundled out across the cobbles. It was getting ready for a journey. The squat figure of Miss Haggstone was bossing a servant as to where he should put her trunk. I tried to disappear into the dark of the morning and slip past without being seen. But she swung round as if she could scent me. She beckoned me and I trudged over in her direction. Apart from anything else, it was shiveringly cold so I couldn't wait to get inside the hall to the bright kitchen, or even the stiff, quiet warmth of Lady Hexer's rooms. “Here, girl,” the old woman grunted, making a rough gesture with her pudgy hands. I bobbed her my usual makeshift curtsy. Not that she deserved it.

“I have business in Edinburgh for a few days,” she told me. She was speaking in her usual quiet rumble, so that only I could hear her. “But I want you to know that I'm having you watched. Oh, yes. Lady Hexer may fall for your fantastic stories, but I don't believe a word of it.”

I was as angry as I was scared. “I wouldn't know how to make that stuff up,” I said. “I just say what I see.”

Haggstone gave her pig-like snort. “Everyone in the village has heard the stories about the old hospital. Oh, you're clever, I'll give you that, cleverer than you look. Patch-

headed little piece that you are. But I've got my eye on you – yes, even while I'm away. Not everyone's in thrall to you, don't think so for a minute.”

“I don't know what you mean,” I blurted out. “You told Lady Hexer to find someone like me! I'm just doing what I'm told!”

“I didn't want you, you stupid girl,” hissed Haggstone. “I had someone else in mind. I still have. Lady Hexer got carried away with some romantic ideas about you and your long-haired brother. She couldn't be patient. But I will get back in charge of this whole thing. So don't get too comfortable, miss. You won't be here much longer.”

I found myself going hot and red-checked, even though I'd done nothing wrong. I stared miserably at the damp ground, my eyes on my shabby boots. I didn't know what to say. I still didn't understand why this woman hated me so much.

I made my way upstairs to the strange, dead air of Lady Hexer's rooms. “Annie!” she cried, when I entered the drawing room, as if I was her long-lost daughter. “How are you feeling? How did you sleep? A good rest, I hope, like I told you?”

She patted the space at the table beside her and her delicate jet bracelet made a light, clattering noise. There was a sudden movement beside the window and Becky emerged from behind the curtain, armed with a pile of dusting cloths and a tin of polish which gave off a faint smell like honey.

“Must you do this now, Becky?” asked Lady Hexer.

“I'm afraid so, Madam,” said Becky, pleasantly. “That bit of winter sun the other day has been showing up all the dust. I won't get in the way of your – er – studies.” It didn't take much of a brain to see who Miss Haggstone's spy was likely to be.

Lady Hexer and I looked at each other. There was a kind of understanding between us. We were not going to talk where Becky could listen. “Very well, carry on,” said Lady Hexer, quite firmly. “As a matter of fact, you won't get in our way. I was about to show young Annie something.” She stood up and it struck me how very tall she was, how

narrow. "Come with me," she said. I turned to look at Becky on my way out of the room. She looked furious. I enjoyed that. I couldn't resist sticking my tongue out at her, behind Lady Hexer's back, of course.

I followed Lady Hexer a little way along the landing. It was silent apart from the odd creak of the floorboards. She turned the handle into a small bedchamber. The first thing I noticed was the sweet, clean smell of lavender. I saw a bunch of it hanging above the little bed. The room was one of the prettiest I had ever seen. The paper on the walls had patterns of birds and flowers, in soft shades of silvery-grey. A kind of flimsy white lace fluttered over the windows like a hundred night-moths. The silky, padded bedspread matched the walls. There was a little dressing table and above it, an oval mirror. I stepped inside the room, noticing its chill, wondering what it was that Lady Hexer wanted to show me.

"Is this your room?" I asked her.

She smiled. "No, dear, not my own room. But do you like it?"

"It's very pretty," I said. "Like a princess's room or something."

"I wondered if you would like this – to be your room," Lady Hexer said, softly.

I didn't really understand. How could this be my room? I lived with Tom. Housemaids like me didn't have rooms like this, anyway, where ever they lived.

Lady Hexer put her hands on my shoulders and steered me a little further in. I found myself standing in front of the mirror. I tried to look down. I hate looking at myself. The maid's cap barely covered the pinkish patches on my scalp. It was pinned at a silly angle, the only way Mrs McKinnon could get it to stay on. Lady Hexer stood behind me. Her own reflection was so much more beautiful, but she was looking at me. Her hair was the glossiest black I'd ever seen, even on a horse after grooming. A thick, coiled ringlet trailed over one shoulder. I imagined how sleek it would feel in my fingers, like a ribbon. Her face looked as if it had been carefully carved, from white-polished wood. Her face never moved much, that was something I noticed about her. I couldn't imagine her throwing her head

back to laugh like Lucy, or screaming wide-eyed like Becky when she saw a mouse. You had to watch her very carefully to see how she was feeling.

“What I am suggesting, Annie,” Lady Hexer said, “is that you move into the Hall. At least whilst we are doing our - experiments. I am greatly concerned for your health, for one thing, and I do not think that sleeping in that draughty old cottage can be good for you.”

I opened my mouth to argue but she held up her hand. There was something about those long, pale fingers that made you know you should obey her, in spite of the way they seemed so thin and barely-there.

“Yes, of course, I know that Tom does his best, but he is still a young boy. You need to be fit and strong if you are to do our special work. I can see how your mind’s journeys back to the past use up your energy. This way I can make sure that you are warm and dry and that you are eating properly.”

“I don’t –” I started, but she spoke over me, with that unbending note to her voice that I’d heard before. “Also. There is another reason, Annie.” She paused and gave a deep sigh. “This will probably sound strange.”

I shrugged. “Nothing much sounds strange to me after the last few days,” I said. Her eyes gave off that little flicker that happened when I said something that amused her.

“I suppose so. Well, Annie, what we are doing - it is quite momentous. I am sure you understand that. I think we are going to have to get to know each other very well. And we are going to have to learn to trust each other, trust each other utterly. I believe that if you were to live here with me then we could begin to form that friendship.”

I stared into the mirror again. How odd we looked – this scrap-headed, plain, grubby little girl and the stately figure standing over her like a winter tree. And the keen, almost hungry look on the Lady’s face. It was hard to turn her down. It was also hard to turn down the thought of sleeping in this beautiful bed with its cover like a dove’s wing and the white, white sheets underneath. I’m not very proud of this. But sleeping on my own, too, instead

of top-to-toe with Tom. What a luxury! I'd miss the way he's always warm, but I wouldn't miss the stink of his feet. Outside the window I could see the grounds and beyond them, the sea. It looked from here like a thin grey pencil line. And all that sky. That would be my view. Mine. As if I was a great Lady too.

She was watching me carefully as I gazed around the room. I could tell she was finding it hard to wait for my reply.

"Annie," she said, after a few minutes. "What is it you want, most in all the world? Tell me."

I sighed. There was no point in answering that question. The thing I wanted wasn't possible.

"Is it for your hair to grow? To be beautiful? To be rich?"

I shook my head. I had to fight a thick lump forming in my throat.

Lady Hexer tightened her grip on my shoulders, just a little. "Tell me what it is, then," she whispered. "Trust me with that wish. What is it you want, more than anything at all?"

The faces in the mirror blurred. My voice came out like the peep of a bird. "Me Mam."

There was a silence, just for a second or two. "I'm sorry, Annie, I didn't quite understand what you said."

"Me Mam. I want me Mam."

Silence again. For once, Lady Hexer didn't know what to say, and a small, nasty part of me was glad. I didn't want her to come out with some creamy dribble of words that sounded wonderful but didn't change a thing, like pouring sauce on to an empty plate.

Then she gave a heavy sigh. "Oh, Annie. You have asked for probably the only thing I can't give you. Poor Annie. I'm so sorry."

I didn't reply.

“Shall I tell you my most secret wish, Annie? It may interest you, just a little. I always wanted a daughter. I wanted to be a mother – a *mam*.” She couldn’t say it properly, the word *mam*. It came out like she’d said it down her nose, and it sounded like “mem.”

She gave me a sad smile and added: “It never happened.”

She left that hanging in the air between us for a moment.

A clock chimed faintly in the distance and I blinked.

“Lunch, I would say,” Lady Hexer said, all brisk again. “Let’s go to my drawing room and see what delights the kitchen can send up for us.”

We sat at the long table together. Much more than the food, I enjoyed the taste of Becky’s pained face as she served us. I knew she’d had to help make this lunch. It must have killed her to give it to me, on Lady Hexer’s grand gilt-edged plates. She clattered the bowls and plates down, as slowly and noisily as she could get away with it. Then she moved over to the hearth and started fiddling with the grate.

Lady Hexer looked over at her. “That will do, Becky. I am not going to eat my lunch with you cleaning around us. I insist that you go back downstairs and find some other duties there. I don’t want to see you here again this afternoon.”

Becky left, with a scalded face. I couldn’t help a grin.

“Tom would be hurt,” I said, then. Lady Hexer raised her brows.

I went on. “If I moved in here, Tom would be upset. He’s worked so hard on the cottage. And he wants to look after me. He thinks it’s his duty. I don’t think I could tell him I was coming to live in here.”

Lady Hexer nodded. “What if I were to explain things to him – that it was just for a short while, until you are back to full health?” she asked.

I thought this over for a moment. This didn’t feel so bad.

“You liked that room, didn’t you, Annie?” Lady Hexer added, leaning towards me like we were two girls sharing a little secret. “If there were just you to think about, you would have said yes, wouldn’t you?”

I hung my head. “Probably.”

“Well, then. Let’s think of how we can make it possible,” said Lady Hexer. She sounded pleased as Punch. “I feel sure that we can get Tom to see the sense of it. I shall speak to him myself. This afternoon.”

January 5th, 1899.

I turned into a new hobby of Lady Hexer’s. Of course, she told Tom that I should move into the Hall, only for the time being, till my health improved. He could hardly say no to her. The dove grey and lavender princess-room was mine. First, I had to be made to look more like a lady. I had to sit in a steaming tin bath and scrub the muck from my fingernails and feet. Mrs McKinnon was called up to take my measurements. She cluck-clucked a lot about how I was all skin and bone. She’d pass out if she saw Meg, I thought. Then she was sent out to the dressmaker in the village to order me some new clothes. I found all this very strange. I couldn’t see what it had to do with helping Lady Hexer find out about her ancestors or find cures for illnesses. In fact, we didn’t do any of that dreaming stuff for a while. Just a lot of dress fitting and shoe buying and fussing. Mrs McKinnon looked at me differently, too. Not so kindly. It was like a line had been suddenly drawn between us and she had to be careful how she spoke to me. As if I was someone important, not just one of her own staff of maids. But I suppose I did look very different. I had a long, soft, blue dress. It had a matching silk scarf which wraps around my head, making me look like an exotic princess from *The Arabian Nights*. (This is another book Lady Hexer gave me.) I loved this. And what I wore underneath – well, I’m not sure if it’s proper to write about it at all. But when I walked about, I rustled with secret snowy-white flounces and laces that

only I knew were there! When I walked, I felt like some exotic fluffy bird wagging my tail-feathers. I used to laugh at silly dressy-uppy girls. But it only took a few frills and bows for me to think that old me was some other person altogether.

I'd never before had a room that is just my own. It's what Mam would have called a mixed blessing. The first night I spent in it, I couldn't wait to get into my own new bed with its stiff, snowy sheets. Except that when I got into it, I almost howled with the cold. It was like plunging into an ice-cold bath of water. I shivered so hard I made the bed rattle. And it didn't warm up all night. I slept so little, I got up and stood at the window watching the white moon, wondering if I should brave walking across those eerie grounds to the cottage to find Tom. I imagined curling in beside his always-warm back, as he snored like a gruff old bear asleep for the winter, and making him jump with my cold feet.

When I woke up in the pale winter morning, I spotted, out of the corner of my eye, what I thought was a dark stain on the ice-clean pillow. It was a clump of my hair. Hair I could ill afford to lose. I scooped the baby-soft strands up with my fingers and ran to the window, pushing it open. Then I scattered the hair out into the icy morning air. I went over to the mirror and stared. I looked just the same, almost. It's hard to tell which part of my poor scalp's given up more hair. I ran my fingers over it. It felt like some baby animal, like a new-born mouse, waiting for its fur to grow. I was annoyed with myself for caring how I looked. Secretly, I wished I had Lady Hexer's shiny tendrils to comb and adorn and curl around my finger.

I told Lady Hexer about the cold and the next night, when I got into bed, I found someone had placed a large, hot stone wrapped in a cloth in the bed. This warmed it up good and proper. I slept a lot better after that.

Lady Hexer said if I liked, I could go to church, as it was a Sunday. Then she laughed when she saw my face. She leaned towards me and said in a half-whisper: "I don't enjoy it either, Annie. So dull. I only go because I feel I ought."

“Aunt Catherine used to make me go all the time,” I told her. “But it was too late for prayers to help me, wasn’t it? Mam was already dead.”

Lady Hexer patted my hand. My pale, clean, little hand. “Quite so,” she said, softly. “In this house you are a young lady of independent thought.” She did use long words, but I was starting to learn them.

“Does that mean I don’t have to go to church?”

“Exactly that. As long as you have good reasons for what you do, I will respect your decisions.”

In other words, I could do what I wanted. It was hard to get used to that idea, but it sounded fine to me.

I also had a velvet-trimmed coat and hat, the warmest things I’ve ever worn. When Lady Hexer’s coach rattled off into the grey January morning, I put this outfit on and went out to the gardens looking for Tom. I hadn’t seen him for two days and I can’t say how much I missed him. I had to wander through the gardens for ages, as usual. There was a cruel wind wrestling the bare trees. The sky was the sad colour of the old scarf I used to tie around my head. The earth had that strange, dead smell, of old leaves or something. A bit like someone’s wee’ed. I made my way to that huge glasshouse. It’s as big as a mansion and decorated with snow like a white-trimmed wedding cake. I found Tom inside there, amongst those special plants that need to be kept warm. He was leaning on a wooden bench and frowning over the huge book that Lady Hexer had given him. He looked delighted to see me. But he shrank back when I tried to give him a hug. “Hey, you’ll get that posh coat all covered with muck,” he said, keeping me at arm’s length.

“I don’t care about that,” I said, punching him. “Anyway, it’s a dark colour, it won’t show up.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, Lady Annie, how are you? And what have you done with my boggle-faced sister?”

I smiled, without really wanting to. “I’m bored. I’ve done nothing but try on clothes and I feel like I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“I can hardly just march up to the Lady’s grand rooms and demand to see you,” he said, with a laugh. I jumped up and sat on the slatted bench, loosening my coat buttons.

“It’s too warm in here,” I grumbled.

“It’s supposed to be. These plants are used to the sun.” Tom pointed out the palms and the trailing vines and fruit trees. “Figs, peaches, apricots,” he started listing. “Plums, nectarines. Even grapes, Annie.”

I’d heard some of this before and there wasn’t much to see on the branches at this time of year. They just looked like a load of old twigs to me. But it felt so safe to be with Tom that I didn’t stop him. I like it when he gets all excited about bits of leaves and buds and sticks.

“What were you looking at?” I asked him.

His frown came back. “There are some strange plants appearing in the new garden,” he said, scratching at his thatch of hair. “For one thing, it’s far too early for anything to be growing, so that’s got me baffled. You see how cold it is out there. Nothing much should be coming up in January, whatever’s been planted in the past. And for another thing, I can’t put a name to some of them. I was trying to see if they were in this book. I just came in here to look at the pages out of the wind.”

“Show me,” I begged. We went out into the chill and walked across to the new garden. I saw what he meant. There were clumps of shoots – complete with new green leaves – sprouting from the hard ground, which only days ago had been completely bare. Tom bent down and rubbed at some of the long, wrinkly leaves, picked one off and sniffed at it. “Very, very strange,” he said. “I have no idea what this is.”

I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the wind. For some reason, I knew he shouldn’t have torn off the leaf. “Careful,” I told him. “It might be poisonous or

something.”

Tom took no notice. “That –” he pointed out another clump of a duller green – “looks a bit like hellebore. You know, Annie, those Lenten rose things. With the leaves that can make your skin itch. But I thought the ground was thoroughly dug over, so I don’t know where it’s come from. And look at that spiky thing. It’s quite pretty but it shouldn’t be here.”

I shrugged. I took the first odd-looking leaf from him in my gloved hand and turned it over and over. It looked like an old green rag to me. Tom went on muttering about the spiky shoots that had found their way out of the frost-covered soil. But I was beginning to feel very dizzy. Dizzy in a way that I knew. I started backing away from the plot. “I need to go inside,” I said, panicking. I couldn’t fall asleep and start dreaming of the hospital here, in front of Tom. It was supposed to be a secret. And what would happen if Lady Hexer wasn’t here to wake me up? Would I ever come round? I kept staggering backwards. I could feel a strong pulling feeling, dragging me back towards the strange plants. Tom’s voice, asking what was wrong, seemed like it was a long way in the distance.

I opened my eyes and looked straight into the glistening, dark eyes of the doctor. I jumped and gave a little cry. He stared at me with a truly terrifying look on his face. It was a mixture of interest and fear, like I was a strange wild animal and he didn’t know whether to trap me or kill me.

“Well, well, now,” he murmured. “Look here. Our little demon is back.” I was suddenly aware of Meg bobbing around behind him, her hands held at her mouth in shock.

Wild thoughts scampered through my mind like mice. If I was dreaming about the hospital, were Meg and the doctor dreaming about me? It didn’t make sense. Meg stared at me as if I were a ghost. Which in some ways I was. And that must be just

how I looked to them. As far as Meg and the doctor could see, I'd disappeared in front of their eyes. And now I was back, like a spirit out of the air. I wasn't sure how much time had passed in the hospital since I was last here. Or dreamed I was here. If it was the same as my time, it had been days. Where was I all that time? Where were they?

The doctor held out his hand to me and I noticed it tremble. This nobleman, this wise doctor, was afraid of me. This made me want to laugh, just for a second. He touched me lightly on the sleeve, as if he thought I might crumble away into nothing again. Then, like a schoolboy carrying out a dare, he touched me again, harder, grabbing my sleeve and feeling the material, squeezing it through his none-too-clean fingers. His eyes went into slits.

"As real as you or I, Meg," he grunted. "Yet able to disappear into the air. What is this little hobgoblin you've brought me, eh, Meg?"

Hobgoblin. The name made me want to smile again.

"That's what my brother calls me, too," I blurted out.

"Brother? Is he here too?" the doctor asked, glancing around.

"No," I laughed. "Only me."

"And are you?" asked the doctor. "A hobgoblin? Or something worse?" I smiled and shook my head. "Just a girl, sir. Just a girl who – " I thought quickly – "who wants to learn about your work."

This didn't flatter him in the way I'd hoped. His straggling eyebrows knitted together across his thin face.

"Why?" he asked. "Who has sent you?"

Now I wasn't sure how far to go. But I'd started. "A – a relative of yours, sir. My own employer. Perhaps we could share our knowledge. Your medicines and my – er – talents."

“And what are those talents, exactly?” The doctor glowered at me.

I swallowed. “Well, sir, as you see, I can disappear. And that is – just the start of my powers. I could show you more, but – in return – I wish to know more about the marvellous medical work you are carrying out.” I was amazed at how I could lie, straight-faced, and talk as if I was reading one of Lady Hexer’s books. The doctor stared harder. He was torn between his interest as a scientist and his sheer outrage at the nerve of this child.

“My work is very – secret,” he said, warily. “Meg is aware of some of it, but only as my helper. I am not yet ready to share my experiments with anyone. Especially not with a creature that just jumps out of nowhere. How do I know you won’t steal my life’s work and turn into nothing again?”

“You don’t,” I admitted. “But perhaps we can agree that I’m of interest to you. Perhaps you would let me help Meg? As an extra servant?”

The doctor thought. At this point I suddenly wondered, with a tremor, where the snake was just then. I hoped I hadn’t just set myself up to take the thing for its daily exercise or buff its hideous scales. The doctor made a *hmming*-ing sound and turned to Meg. I looked her in the eye for the first time. I was ashamed that she tried to help me and I didn’t tell her anything like the truth. The look on her face told me she was thinking the same thing.

“Master, I don’t trust this girl,” Meg said. “She has the sickness but she won’t stay in the hospital. She’s too quick at slipping away. Also –” she gave me a cross look – “You don’t need another helper. I work hard for you. She would just get in the way.”

The doctor looked surprised at Meg’s outburst. “She has the sickness?” he repeated. “How does it show itself?”

“Look under that headpiece,” Meg said. Before I could stop him, the doctor snatched the velvet hat from my head and saw my scalp.

“Ah,” he said. He fingered the threads of my hair, making me wince. I hated anyone even looking, never mind feeling it. The bald bits of leathery-pink scalp felt disgusting even to me, let alone anyone else.

“What else?” he asked me. “Do you have swellings? Any lumps and bumps? Can you feel heat and cold?”

“Yes, I feel heat and cold. For one thing, it’s cold in the rest of the hospital but it’s sweltering hot in here. And no, I don’t have any lumps,” I snapped. “I don’t have this sickness. I just lost some hair. It’s ugly, but I’m not ill. I’m not one of your patients.”

The doctor turned towards Meg and they began mumbling together. It was hard enough to understand them at the best of times, never mind when they were speaking so quietly. Half the time with Meg I only recognised the odd word, although the longer I spent with her, the more my ears seemed to grow used to this foreign way of talking. A bit like the way your eyes get used to the dark and start to see things after a while. I gave up trying to listen in and started looking around the tiny room. Everywhere there were thick, mottled jars and pots, with scrawled labels that were too hard to read in the dim light. I noticed the doctor picking one of them up and placing it behind some others. If he was trying to hide it, he didn’t do a very good job. There were huge, heavily-bound books and piles of thick, yellow-brown paper covered in tables and drawings. Some of the drawings and scribblings were plants and flowers, I noticed. Tom would be interested, I thought, if only I could tell him. I was glad I couldn’t see the foul snake-thing anywhere. I unbuttoned my coat, because it was so warm. I was starting to sweat, although there was only a small fire in the hearth. Most of the heat seemed to be coming from a larger fire in the dark room next

to this one. I could just glimpse it through a doorway. All I could make out was the orange light given off by the fire, dancing on the stone floor. The earthy smell coming from this next room was very strong and wafts of steam floated around it, sneaking past the door like a thief's fingers.

I leaned over to see further in, when the doctor suddenly said: "Very well, then, creature. You can help Meg with her duties as long as you stay away from my writings and my medicines. And in return, we will see if we can cure this strange baldness which is so unbecoming in a girl - if, as you say, it's not part of the leprosy. I take it you are a girl?"

I nodded, then snatched up the hat and pushed it firmly back on my head. Everyone seemed to want to cure my baldness much more than I did. It's an odd thing. If you look strange, everyone else feels funny about it. I supposed I would rather look like everyone else, truth be told. I just hated it when people poked and prodded and inspected my hair as if they were looking for lice or something. Aunt Catherine used to do that.

"Don't do anything unless you're told to, either by me or Meg," the doctor added. "And don't touch my potions. You can start by helping her clean the glass tanks." He got up and walked out, muttering something about a meeting with important men from the parish. I was left with Meg.

"I'm sorry," I said, quickly. "I couldn't help those times when I disappeared. I didn't mean to frighten you. But I do keep telling you I shouldn't be a patient here." Meg still looked like she didn't trust me. "So what are you doing here? Why would you come to this place if you didn't have to? No one from the town even comes into the grounds. When the patients go to the church, they have to stay outside and look through a hole in the wall. When they go into town to beg money, they have to ring a clapper to warn people not to come too close. Everyone's afraid of us. Why not you?"

I sighed. "It's really hard to explain. I am afraid. But I do want to help and learn. And you're the only friend I have here."

Meg said nothing.

"What are the glass tanks for?" I asked. Then wished I hadn't.

Meg beckoned me into the steamy little cell next to the doctor's room. There was, as I'd thought, a huge fire and over it was a large iron pot of water, giving off the steam in warm huffs like dragon's breath. Now the heat was just too much so I took off my heavy coat altogether, wrinkling my nose at the strong musky smell. I noticed Meg looking at the coat with interest as I folded it and laid it on a wooden bench. Then I peered around to see that the room was full of large, thickened glass bowls that had some sort of greenery in them. I went up to one and pressed my face to it. I jumped back with a scream as something threw itself at the inside of the glass with a smack and gave out a vicious-sounding hiss. It was another snake-like thing – a long black creature. "Not more snakes," I asked, weakly. "Or whatever they are." A sick feeling came over me like a wave of warm water through my stomach. I couldn't move. I didn't want to go any nearer to any of the glass cages. I felt like the horrid beasts would see me moving and jump out at me. They were the worst things I've ever seen.

Meg looked a bit pleased that I was scared, for a change. Even more scared than she was of me. "Yes. Snakes. Serpents and dragons and all manner of creatures." Her face looks smug. "Twelve of them, at the moment. All different kinds. Hey –do you want to see a real mermaid?"

"A mermaid?" That sounded a bit nicer. Only Meg led me to one of the tanks and I found out I was wrong. I thought I was going to see a beautiful, fishtailed woman with long hair. What I saw swimming around in a little tank was a dark little

thing, half-fish, but with an evil monkey-like head, that turned and snapped at us as we stared.

“These things have come from all across the seas,” said Meg. “The master has collected them. But they take a lot of looking after. That’s why it’s so warm in here. They die if it’s cold. We have to clean some of their glass cages and then we feed them.”

“Clean their – what - but they could bite us and –” I couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t even stand the thought of going near their mouths. Those little tongues. Those fangs. The horns and claws and slime of them all.

Meg grinned. “I don’t go near the very bad ones unless the doctor’s with me. He can charm them and they go all floppy. But some of them will just let you lift them into another tank while you clean theirs out. And then we give them their dinner.” She pointed to a barrel in the corner of the room.

“Snake food?” I asked, with the sour taste of vomit at the back of my throat.

“Mice, mainly. Some rats. Just drop them in by their tails and try not to get bitten. By either the rats or the snakes, I mean.”

“The rats and mice are still alive?” I asked, still feeling like retching.

“Some of them. That’s how they like them,” Meg explained. Then, as I took a step or two backwards, she gave me a wicked little grin. “Watch where you’re going,” she said. “I’d look behind before I went any further.”

I glanced behind me and at first I couldn’t see what she was talking about. Then I suddenly spotted a movement on the floor. It was something I’d thought, without really looking at it, was a rolled-up carpet or rug. It took my eyes a few seconds to realise what it was - the biggest snake you can possibly imagine. Or was it a snake? In the dim light it seemed brownish and patterned a bit like Melusina. But this thing was many feet long and its body was thicker than Tom’s. Wicked-looking

horns stuck out of its head and some of its yellow fangs stuck out of its mouth as if it was ready to eat anything in sight. I let out a moan and clapped my hand to my mouth.

“That,” said Meg, “is Melusina’s mum. We call her Bess. She’s quite old and the biggest thing you ever saw. The master’s had her for years. She had her baby just after he brought her to England.”

“Baby?” I repeated, horror-struck. “Some baby. Babies are supposed to be little and helpless.” Sweat dripped off my face and my hands were so sticky I had to wipe them on my dress. I was still trying to stop myself being sick.

“Look, don’t panic,” said Meg. “Bess just lies around most of the time. She’s fine as long as we don’t let her get hungry. Speaking of which, I ought to get on with giving the things their dinner.”

Dinner! For the snakes and the rest of the foul collection of creatures, dinner was the sort of thing that would make the rest of us sick. Sad little dead mice and great big grey, wriggling rats. Even a stinking dead pigeon which Meg said had gone bad and couldn’t be eaten otherwise. She wrapped a cloth around her hands and arms before getting on with the job. I wanted to help but I just couldn’t make myself go near the creatures. Panic came over my body like a great wave from the sea. I was scared I might pass out with the sheer horror of it. The hissing and the movement of the things as they writhed in Meg’s hands was one of the worst, most disgusting things I’ve ever seen. I shook and cried like a baby. When I saw how their necks bulged with the shape of their food I thought I really might bring my breakfast up, right there on the floor. All I could do is sit down and cover my head with my arms. I pleaded with Meg to tell me when it was finished and they were all safely back in their tanks. I know she thought me stupid. I couldn’t do anything else. I was also

terrified she might bring one of the snakes close to me, so all the time I trembled and rocked back and forward on the floor, sobbing whenever something brushed past me.

After what seemed like an age Meg said she'd finished.

"A fat lot of help you're going to be," she grumbled. "Going on like that. Baby."

"Can we just get away from this room?" I begged. When I stood up my knees were knocking and my legs didn't want to carry me. Meg took pity on me and I followed her, still shaking, along the stone passageway and out into the cobbled, dung-smelling courtyard. I breathed out hard in the icy air, my body still sticky with sweat and fear. "I'll do anything – absolutely anything – except go near those things," I told Meg.

"But you're supposed to be helping me. That's one of my jobs," said Meg, stubbornly. "If I can do it, you can. Those creatures are important to the doctor's work."

"How?" I ask.

Meg shook her head. She was going to take a long time to trust me, I could see. Then I had a bright idea. "Meg, would you like to have my coat? You liked it, didn't you?"

I watched her face as she thought about it. I could see that she wanted to say yes. But then she shook her head again. "I can't."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because if you have the leprosy I might catch it," she said.

I frowned. "I'm sure you can't catch it from a coat," I said. "Could you? Anyway, for goodness' sake, Meg. I don't have leprosy. Really."

Meg thought a bit longer. "It's a funny shape," she said.

"It's just a different fashion," I smiled. "In fact, you'll be in fashion a long time before anyone else. Even the finest ladies."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Meg. “You use stupid words. But I’ll think about it. I like the soft stuff it’s made from and it looks warm. I’ll ask the doctor if I can have it without catching anything.”

I sighed. Meg offered to get me some bread and cheese and now that my stomach had calmed down from the sight of the reptiles, I did feel a little hungry. I sat in the courtyard while she went to find the food. It was a small, busy little place, still with patches of hardened snow here and there. The odd pig and goat wandered across the cobbles. I noticed the whole place was encircled by stone walls and a heavy iron gate. I walked over to it and peered out onto white snowy fields. In the distance there was the sea. The same sea that I looked at from my new bedroom window, I thought. The sky – the same sky, too -was turning deep winter pink. Smoke puffed out from some of the buildings and greyed the air. Suddenly I thought I could hear an animal whine. After a few moments, though, I realised it was some kind of musical instrument. A reedy pipe, playing a simple tune. I listened hard as Meg came running towards me, a dry-looking hunk of bread in her hands. Her eyes were bright.

“Can you hear it? Players, Annie! Oh, I love to hear music!”

The sounds grew louder. Pipes and a flutey whistle and drum. We saw a small group of brightly cloaked figures making their way towards the gates. They stopped a little way from the hospital gate. I watched Meg start to clap along with the tune, a short, bright refrain like a child’s skipping song. The instruments sounded strange – slightly off-key – but very merry. The tune seemed to get into my blood and I wanted to clap along too, tapping my feet on the frosty ground. One of two other patients in the courtyard wandered nearer to the gates.

“The players won’t come inside,” Meg said, though I’d already guessed that much. “But I hope they play a while.” She leaned towards the gates and shouted: “Play a dance! A dance!”

I caught the eye of a young man with the flute-like thing. He had dark hair and eyes and an infectious grin, making me think of a young fox. He stepped a little nearer and I thought he didn't look much older than me. "A dance for the lady in blue!" he announced, with a sweeping bow. Meg and I both giggled. The players struck up another tune, which I thought I'd heard before somewhere. As Meg started to dance, hopping around from foot to foot, I realise it was a Christmas carol, but played faster and more cheerfully than I'd ever heard it. I started to dance too. I just couldn't help it.

There were more patients in the yard now, drawn out by the music. Some of them couldn't walk well but they stayed in the courtyard, swaying and grinning. I even noticed the doctor standing by a door, clad in a thick black fur-collared cloak and a round flat hat, wearing half a smile on his haggard face. No serpent. I suppose it was too cold for the horrid thing. The patients who could move around were limping gingerly, most not quite in time with the music. But Meg and I stole the show. We jumped and skipped around, getting hot and pink in the face. Some people formed a rough circle around us as we danced, laughing and clapping. The music got faster and faster. I held out my hands. After pausing for a beat, Meg grabbed them and we swung each other around and around, with all the others laughing at us. Then Meg slipped on an icy patch and I tried to stop her falling and we both skidded across the cobbles and landed in a heap, laughing like idiots. The musicians stopped to laugh too. As the patients clapped the players, the dark-haired young man held out his hand towards us. "And applause for our wonderful dancers!" he shouted. "What grace! What elegance!"

Everyone laughed again. Meg made a terrible face at them. "Shut up and keep playing," she shouted, grinning.

“Meg,” I hissed, going red. I turned to the band. “That was wonderful,” I said. “Thank you.”

The young man bowed again. “We played the town this afternoon and made good money,” he said. “It’s a good act of charity to come here and play for you poor lost men and women.”

“Oh,” I said. Charity. That didn’t feel so good. The young man saw my smile fade. “What is your name?” he asked me.

“Annie,” I replied.

“Then this is a song for Annie,” he declared and in a loud, clear voice he began to sing a ballad. I didn’t catch all the words, of course, but it was a sad, pretty tune. Some kind of a love song. I smiled at him, twirling the end of the ribbon on my hat as I listened.

When the players came to the end of their songs, the doctor walked to the gates and thanked them, wishing them goodwill for the season. I watched them as they made their way across the smooth, white fields, their black shapes getting smaller and smaller against the red, fevered sky. I wondered about the Christmas carol and turned to Meg, frowning. “What date is it?” I asked her.

“St Stephen’s Day, of course,” she said. “We saw the townsmen ride past this morning, hunting the wren.”

“A little wren? How cruel,” I said.

Meg gave me one of her looks, as if I was quite mad. “It’s just a bird. It’s for luck,” she said, with a shrug.

“So is today before or after Christmas?” I asked Meg.

Now she looked at me with a shocked face. “Christmas was yesterday,” she said. “Didn’t you know? I don’t know of many days, but I know that one.”

“Where I’m from, Christmas was a few days ago,” I told her.

Meg shook her head, not understanding. I couldn't blame her for that.

"The parish brought us extra meat and ale and stuff," Meg told me. "They really did their duty. We had quite a feast. You should've been here."

She broke off some of the forgotten bread and handed it to me as we make our way back into the hospital. It was the driest I'd ever tasted, but I didn't want to be rude.

"Will the players come back?" I found myself asking.

"Maybe," Meg answered. "Or else the mummers. Last year they did a play outside the gates. We had cakes."

She was in a chattier mood now, so I ask where the big snake-creature might be.

"In the doctor's study. It doesn't go outside in the winter," Meg told me. "It stays in the study at night too. Those rooms are kept warm all the time."

"Why does the doctor need the snakes and things?" I asked again.

"They're more than just snakes," said Meg. "They're magical creatures. He's trying out different kinds of cures. Sometimes he uses the animals. Their skin or hair or spit or that sort of thing."

"Has he cured anyone yet?" I asked, as we walked towards the archway.

"Not the worst cases," Meg admitted. "He's made a medicine that can help. Mary's bad skin all went away, but then no one would give her work so she came back here anyway. And he will find a way to cure the leprosy, I know it. He is so clever. I don't think he'll make any more mistakes."

I glanced at her. "Mistakes?" I repeated. "What kind of - ?"

But we could see the doctor slowly coming towards us - with the wretched Melusina around his shoulders. I stopped talking and froze in my steps.

"It's all right, come on," said Meg, tugging my sleeve. But I found I couldn't go any nearer to the thing.

The doctor came closer. “Ah,” he said to me, with a leery grin. “Afraid of my little Melusina, eh? That’s a good thing. It might keep your nose out of my books. She guards them for me, you now.”

I stood still as a tombstone. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the snake, but I was also too afraid to close my eyes, in case he pushed the thing at me. “I just don’t like snakes,” I said, through gritted teeth, willing him to go away, go away, go away.

The doctor took a step closer. I knew without really looking that he was lifting the beast’s head and pointing it at me. “Take a good look at this one, Melusina,” he said, in the sort of soft tones that some people might use to train a puppy. “She’s a trickster. She disappears into nothing and pops up again when you don’t expect it. But you would spot her anywhere, wouldn’t you, my pet? You could catch her as fast you can catch a rat, eh?”

The huge, muscley thing kept me in its black gaze. I could tell its coils were stronger than any man’s arms. I tried to make myself stare it out, but I was too repulsed and I couldn’t meet its eyes. Its forked tongue, which was much thicker than I’d ever imagined a snake’s tongue to be, flicked rapidly in and out of its mouth. Coiled around the doctor’s other shoulder, its tail end moved slowly, like a bell rope, as if helping it think. I took a step or two backwards.

The thing was hovering above me. I thought it was flailing its tail, or was it its tongue? It was just a vague, shapeless thing. Its brownish patterns flickered around in front of my eyes. Was it actually talking to me? No. Oh lord, the relief - it was Tom’s voice I could hear. He was saying something about how I’d been fine one moment and then keeled over the next. And there was Lucy, fussing and flapping. It took me a few minutes to realise I was back in our little cottage, lying on the bed. I thought I heard Lucy tell Tom that it might be “something like your own funny turn.”

I sat up. Lucy's worried face lit up. "There she is!" she exclaimed, her lovely voice all relief. "Oh, Annie! How you scared us!" She handed me a cup of water and I was really glad of it. My mouth felt dry as sandstone.

"What happened, my hen?" Lucy asked, stroking my forehead. "Was it the cold? Are you hungry?"

I shook my head. I hated keeping this thing a secret. "I get these – funny dreams sometimes," I said. I was bursting to say more.

Tom shifted about. "We didn't want to get help from the Hall in case you got in trouble for coming to see me," he admitted. "Maybe you oughtn't to have come outside in this cold."

I frowned at him, looking for signs of any illness on his rosy face, but couldn't see anything different. "What was that about you being ill?" I asked.

I spotted Tom giving Lucy a glance. Then he shrugged. "Nothing, nothing at all. The cold got to me the other day, that's all. Went to my head for a moment. But it's nothing to worry about. You know me, Annie, as fit and healthy as it's possible to be."

Lucy bit her lip. "But this cold is very bad indeed. The mercury's dropped further than anyone can remember around here. There've been people dying in the village, just from the chill. You should be more careful, Annie."

"I'm not an invalid," I told them, doing my best to give them a grin. "It wasn't the cold, it was – oh, I don't know. But I'm used to this weather. I won't get into trouble. Nor will you."

I was sure of that, too. Lady Hexer would be pleased to hear everything I had learned. I was getting the feeling that she would indulge me almost anything – at least as long as she needed me to do her strange duties.

There was a nasty surprise waiting for me, however, when I got back to the Hall, Lucy clutching my hand all the way. I tried to ask her about Tom and what had made him

ill. But she kept shifting the talk in all sorts of other directions. Then I saw that Lady Hexer's carriage stood in the courtyard, the horse puffing out huge steamy breaths, and her footman was heaving down a heavy old bag that I recognised. It belonged to Miss Haggstone. "She must be back," I said, out loud.

"Old Miss Rag-a-Bones? Yes, she arrived around lunchtime," said Lucy. "With all sorts of bags and boxes that had to be taken up to her room. I think she's planning to stay a while."

I groaned.

Lucy looked surprised. "Is she so bad?" she asked. "I mean – I know she's a bit strange and a wee bit short-tempered, but –"

I sighed. "She doesn't like me, Lucy. I don't know why."

"Ach!" Lucy gave me a gentle poke in the ribs. "Who wouldn't like you!"

I put my head around the drawing room door nervously, expecting to see Haggstone glaring at me along the table. But only Lady Hexer was there. She looked up from her book. "Been out for a walk, Annie? Isn't it rather too cold for that?"

"More than a walk, Lady Hexer," I said. I settled myself beside her on her stiff sofa and told her about my latest journey into the past. I made sure to talk about it as if it really happened – as if I'd travelled to the hospital rather than saw it in my head. I noticed she didn't argue with this. "Lady Hexer," I said, taking a deep breath.

"I don't think I imagine any of these things. When I think about the hospital, I can feel things and touch things. It's too real to be just in my mind."

Lady Hexer looked hard at me, directly in the eyes. It was hard to look back at her without blinking, but I set my mind to do it. "I really go there, don't I?" I went on. "You said we had to trust each other. Please tell me the truth."

"Well, Annie, I –" her voice shook a little. "I didn't want to frighten you. But you are too clever to be fobbed off. Yes, incredible as it seems – I think you really go to the old

hospital that has not been here for hundreds of years. I think you can travel through time, Annie.”

I swallowed. It made my head reel, even though I’d guessed at it for a few days.

“Now, Annie – tell me again all that you’ve done today,” Lady Hexer breathed.

She was very excited about it all. Full of questions. She got me to draw a picture of the hospital and its grounds. I hummed the tune the players had made. And she laughed when I told her I’d almost bartered my new coat. “Good thinking, Annie!” she said, warmly. “I knew you were smart. A coat can be replaced, but this knowledge – it’s priceless. Now – you must start trying to get close to those books of the doctor’s. I need to know what he has written in there. His writings are the key to everything, Annie.”

I winced. “The thing is, Lady Hexer – the snakes. More than snakes, they’re all sorts of magical creatures. More like dragons, some of them. I’m more afraid of them than I can tell you. That doctor says the big serpent guards his books. I don’t think I dare go near it.”

“Hmph. Then perhaps we should find someone who will have a bit more nerve,” said a low rumble of a voice. We both turned to see Miss Haggstone standing in the doorway, her wide girth filling up a fair part of it.

I looked to Lady Hexer for support and she sighed. “Agatha. Welcome back,” she said, standing up. “Come and sit with us. We are getting closer to our prize, I feel. Annie is a natural time-traveller. Yes, Agatha, she has worked out what’s happening. And she is also quite the little detective. She will bring us back this book of cures soon, I know it.”

She took my hand and pressed it. “Perhaps he told you about the snakes to scare you, my dear. Perhaps they are not left guarding the books at all. Let’s not worry about that now.” She shook my fingers, gently. “Now go and warm up those hands, child!”

I could feel Haggstone watching me as I stood with my back to her, holding my hands up to the fire. Lady Hexer was retelling my latest journey, in a voice that was

musical with excitement, like a flute trilling up and down a scale. Haggstone didn't say much at first.

Then she said: "So the child claims to have been able to get to the past without the help of our magical symbols? This latest escapade happened out in the garden, she says?" Lady Hexer paused, but only for a heartbeat. "Why – Agatha – there are symbols throughout the gardens. The topiary, for a start –"

"Indeed," said Haggstone. "But the girl says she was nowhere near those shapes. She says she was in the bare ground that has yet to be planted up with anything."

I turned towards them and saw Lady Hexer looking at me with a slight frown. "But that's right, Annie, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right." I gave Haggstone a glare. "I didn't want it to happen then. I was with Tom and he's not supposed to know."

"What did you touch, Annie?" Lady Hexer asked, urgently. "What could have been the key?"

I thought about it. "I didn't touch anything – oh! Wait a minute! There was the leaf." Haggstone gave her pig-like grunt. "A leaf! Really!"

"No, listen," I said, ignoring the woman and looking directly at Lady Hexer. "Tom found a strange plant that he couldn't name. He couldn't understand how it had got there in the first place. He picked a leaf and I took it from him. It was only a minute or so afterwards that I went – back."

"Annie! Can you face going back out in the cold? We must look at this plant while there is still a little daylight." Lady Hexer's face had a pale, excited glow. Miss Haggstone said she wouldn't join us, but would settle back into her room. We got our coats, hats and gloves back on and hurried down the wide staircase.

We marched briskly through the grounds until we reached the new garden plot. There really wasn't much light left, but I still was able to find the clumps of greenery.

They seemed even thicker than they had this morning. I pointed, but I didn't want to pick one up. Lady Hexer looked around and breathed out as if she had just seen something like a miracle. "Why – I believe it is – but surely not –"

"What is it?" I demanded. "Tell me. Is it something poisonous?"

"I believe it to be a mandrake plant," said Lady Hexer, bustling me back in the direction of the Hall. "They are unusual in this part of the world and rather difficult to grow. Yes, my dear, they are poisonous, but they are also highly magical. Tom is right to wonder where it has sprung from. I can only imagine it is a sign that we are making true and deep connections with the past."

"Tom touched it too," I told her.

Lady Hexer took no notice of this.

Back at the Hall, Lady Hexer took me into a room I hadn't visited before. There were so many rooms, I couldn't understand how she used them all. This one was a library. The door was a little stiff and as we went inside, I was struck by how strangely silent it was, as if a conversation had suddenly stopped. But of course there was no one in there. Just shelves and shelves of books, stacked so high that it made me almost lose my balance as I looked up at them. I couldn't see how it would be possible to find the book you wanted among so many, but Lady Hexer had no trouble. Most of the books dated back to before she was born, she told me. They were old and very valuable. She placed a heavy volume on the table and it coughed up a little cloud of dust as she set it down. The pages were stiff with age, and some of them had mouldy spots on them. They smelled sad and frail. I didn't want to touch the things in case the pages crumbled into pieces. But Lady Hexer found the page she wanted and showed me a drawing of the strange plant we'd found in the garden. Next to the drawing were the words *Mandragora officinalis* and a whole screed of words. They were in an old-fashioned script that I struggled to read.

“One of the most magical plants in the world. And that’s not all,” Lady Hexer went on. “It was hard to tell in the poor light, but I believe I spotted something else.”

She showed me another page and I recognised the clump of spiky blue-ish fronds. “Viperine,” she said, with a glint in her eye. “A kind of borage. Named after a snake, of course.”

“Why do you think they’re coming up?” I asked. “Tom says he hasn’t planted anything there. And he says it’s too cold for anything to grow yet.”

Lady Hexer closed her eyes and gave a long sigh, like I might do after a spoonful of cream. “Oh, Annie. I think it can only mean one thing. You went to the past and made a link. Now the past is coming to us, with these signs. Magical, healing plants are springing up from our bare earth. It surely means we are on the right track. Our medicines are coming to us, without us even trying. All we have to do, Annie –” she opened her eyes and looked at me fiercely, but happily – “is find the way to use them. That means the book, Annie! The time has come for you to bring me that book.”

I was about to remind her of the snakes, especially the big one that looked more like a dragon. But then we became aware of a noise. There was shouting and the sound of running footsteps. Then a frantic knocking on the library door. Lady Hexer swung it open to find Lucy there, pale and out of breath. “Oh, ma’am – please come quick! It’s Miss Haggstone, ma’am. She’s – she’s – well, you’d better come along and see. I didn’t know what to do.

We all hurried back up the stairs and along the landing towards Miss Haggstone’s room. We could hear terrible sounds coming from it - low groans and a second, shrill, grating voice, sounding like a much younger girl. Lady Hexer flung open the door. The first thing that hit us was a terrible stink. It smelled a bit to me as if someone had peed on the carpet, although I didn’t think even horrid Miss Haggstone would do that. And there was another smell mixed with it, a sickly one, and on top of that the powerful, dizzying

scent of whatever perfume Haggstone was burning in a bowl on the floor. A wooden desk was rocking violently back and forward. No one was pushing it. The whole room was very dark, with just a tiny candle lit in the corner, in a red-coloured glass. We could just see the figure of Miss Haggstone sitting in an armchair – but not sitting still. She was rolling around as if in great pain and making low moans. It made me think of a cow about to have a calf. But what was really shocking – what made Lady Hexer step back and made Lucy and I scream and clutch each other - was that there was some sort of white-ish, ghostly figure hovering above her. I couldn't make it out very well, but that made it even more terrifying. You might be thinking that I'd already met ghosts, in a way, at the leper hospital. But they were just like ordinary people, as alive as I am. They hadn't been like this. This half-there, fluttering spectre, floating above Miss Haggstone and wailing, high-pitched, somewhere between a girl and an animal. All my skin felt pricked and sweaty. Lucy clapped her hand over her mouth and turned away. "Get some lamps," I whispered to her. "And get some help. Tom - or one of the stable lads - or someone." She hurried off.

Then the horrible ghost-like thing suddenly shrieked: "*Liar! Fraud! Deceiver!*"

I was shaking so hard I couldn't speak. I knew this thing was talking about me. I knew it, somehow, even though I hadn't told any lies. Lady Hexer held out her arm to stop me going further into the room – not that I wanted to.

Part of the fluttering rag seemed to form a stiff arm and it held it out. Its too-long finger pointed straight at me. I could feel its anger and hatred, as surely as if it had picked me up and shaken me. It went on: "*The wicked girl must leave this house! She is making a mockery of my life and my death!*"

Lady Hexer spoke in a voice that sounded in command, in spite of its tiny tremble. "What are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

The high-pitched voice cracked. "*Get-rid-of-the-girl! She is lying and lying again. I am the spirit of Jenny who died of the leprosy here many centuries ago. This girl is a*

fraud! She is a deceiver! She invents tales of a hospital and of the people who died with me - but she is a liar!"

No one spoke and for a second or two the only sound was the banging of the wooden desk as it rocked back and forward as if it was alive. I was shaking as hard as if someone had hold of my shoulders and was pulling me back and forward. I couldn't even bear to look at the ghost girl. Then Lady Hexer said, her voice like an icicle: "I believe Annie to be telling the truth. You are a thing I can barely see. How do I know that you are to be trusted?"

The spectre let out an ear-splitting scream, making both Lady Hexer and I jump back. "*Your true messenger is still to come! Get rid of this deceiver!*" it yelled again. I was sobbing with terror.

Heavy footsteps came running along the hallway towards us. I turned to see Mrs McKinnon with a grim face, carrying a bright lamp. She was followed by two stocky lads from the stables. But just as Mrs McKinnon pushed past me into the bedroom, the tiny red light went out, everything went black as the grave and the ghost-shape completely disappeared. Mrs McKinnon marched right in and held up the lamp, so that we could see Miss Haggstone panting and sweating in the chair, as if she had just run a mile. The desk had stopped rocking. But as for the ghost-girl – it was like she'd never been there.

Haggstone looked around with wide open eyes. "What happened?" she asked. "I was sitting here asking for guidance from the spirits – and then I must have passed out."

Mrs McKinnon sniffed in disgust and ordered the stable lads to search the room. They looked behind Haggstone's chair and under her desk. She didn't get up, but leaned forwards and they shook out the cushion from her chair. They opened her wardrobe door and glanced in, but there was nothing more than a few of her smelly shawls hanging up. They picked up books and vases and turned them over. There was nothing unusual to see. In the lamplight – apart from the stench that hung around – it was like any ordinary room.

Lady Hexer stared hard at Miss Haggstone for a moment. Then she said, in a flat sort of voice: “Agatha. I really think you ought to rest.” Then she put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me forcefully out and along the hallway.

I glanced up at her two or three times as we swept along the carpeted floor. But I couldn’t read her face. I still had this strange feeling of shame, even though I knew I had done nothing wrong. Mrs McKinnon caught up with us. She just looked angry.

“Ma’am, what happened? Lucy came running down with the most terrible tale and she was too afraid to come back up again. And that wretched Becky was nowhere to be found, so I came up myself. Are you quite well? And Annie? May I fetch you a drink?”

Lady Hexer stopped dead and I came to an unexpected halt too and stumbled. She didn’t look at me but her face was almost as white as the ghost we’d just seen. “I will go to my room, Mrs McKinnon, and you may bring me a glass of brandy. Take Annie to the kitchen and give her some hot milk. Then I think she may prefer to spend the night in the cottage with her brother. I think she would prefer the company, after our – ordeal.”

I stared at her. Was I was being sent away? I couldn’t speak.

Mrs McKinnon held my hand as we went down to the kitchen. She sat me at the big table and patted my shoulder.

“Where’s Lucy?” I asked.

“I’ve sent her to wash her face,” said Mrs McKinnon, with a little cough. “Whatever went on up there, she found it very upsetting.”

She put some milk in a pan to warm and as she did so, the kitchen door opened and Becky came in. Mrs McKinnon rounded on her. “Where do you think you’ve been? I called and called for you. You were wanted upstairs.”

“Oh,” said Becky, round-eyed. “I was making up the fire in the drawing room and I got my pinny all covered in coal dust. I had to find a clean one.” She looked at me then back at Mrs McKinnon, who was tut-tutting about all the extra washing that would have to

be done. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Never you mind,” snapped Mrs McKinnon as she put the cup of warm milk on the table in front of me. Then she left the room to take Lady Hexer’s brandy upstairs. Becky sat down and smiled at me, but not in a nice way. She stuck her finger slowly and deliberately up her nostril, pulled it out and stuck it into my cup of milk. She stirred it around, still smiling at me, then took it out and licked it. I was about to say something when Lucy came in, her face still a sickly colour. When she saw me, she cried: “Oh, Annie!” and I stood up and hugged her tight. She sat at the table and, waving her hands and rolling her lovely brown eyes, Lucy recounted everything she’d seen.

“A ghost? I don’t believe you,” smirked Becky. “You’re just trying to frighten me.”

“She’s not,” I said, hot with fury. “Look at the state of her. How can you think it’s a trick?”

Becky gave me that nasty smile again. “You haven’t drunk your milk, Annie. Mrs McKinnon will be cross.”

That was enough for me. I picked up the cup and threw the milk at her, right in her face, just as Mrs McKinnon came back into the kitchen. Both she and Lucy gaped at me.

“I will not have this behaviour in my kitchen!” Mrs McKinnon shouted. Becky leaped up, wiping her face with her hands. She started to yell about how I was totally mad and had just attacked her with a cup of scalding hot milk.

Lucy tried to defend me. “Annie is really, really upset, Becky,” she said, putting an arm around my shoulders. “And it wasn’t hot. Only warm.”

“I don’t care!” interrupted Mrs McKinnon. “Becky, go and get cleaned up. Again. And Lucy, take Annie back to the cottage. Lady Hexer says she is to stay there tonight. And Annie, I expect to see you a changed person by tomorrow.” She handed me my hat and coat.

But I was burning inside with rage. The hot tears that I was blinking back felt like scalding spurts from a pot about to over-boil. I wasn't just angry at Becky, but at all the events of the evening. I was angry with Miss Haggstone for whatever had happened in her room. I still didn't know what to make of it. But I was even angrier with Lady Hexer. It felt like she hadn't believed me. She'd trusted some wailing bundle of dead rags over me. After all I'd put myself through - for her. As Lucy and I crunched over the frosty, black gardens towards the little cottage, holding on to each other against the cold and so that we wouldn't slip, I made up my mind. I would tell Tom I didn't want to stay here anymore. We would both be able to find work somewhere else, I decided. Surely, when he heard about tonight's horrors, he would agree with me.

But as we came nearer to the cottage, we could hear raised voices. One of them was Tom's. He was arguing with someone. Lucy and I glanced at each other. We both knew Tom almost never lost his temper. As we got nearer, we heard two of the other gardeners talking at once. They were saying something about evil plants covering the garden and men falling ill after touching them. Tom was saying it was nothing to do with him. But the others were shouting him down. He turned as he saw us. "Annie! Lucy! What's happened? You haven't got this sickness too, have you? Come inside." He ushered us into the cottage and told the men they'd have to talk about it all in the morning. He slammed the door on them. One of them kicked it hard - but then they left.

We were all worn out. I sat down and started to cry again. Lucy tried to explain what had happened in the Hall, but Tom seemed to find it hard to take in. "Ghosts and banshees and all that silly stuff," he snorted. "It must have been some sort of trick."

"Tom," I tried to explain. "I'm telling you. I couldn't understand what I was seeing with my own two eyes. And when Mrs McKinnon brought the lamp in, everything disappeared. The ghost got snuffed out. There was nothing to be found."

Lucy shuddered. "She must have been doing a séance," she said. "When you try to

bring back the spirits of the dead. I heard about one in Edinburgh once. A lady saw her dead baby, floating around the room, and –”

“This is just rubbish,” Tom cut across her, rather sharply. “All of these things are done with tricks. People see what they want to see.”

“But Tom,” I said. “None of us wanted to see anything like that. It was horrible. Like a really bad nightmare.”

“Well. I won’t let any wailing witches or ghoulish ghosts in here,” Tom said, with a weak grin. I knew he was trying to sound braver than he felt. “Let’s try to get some sleep. Tomorrow I’m going to get rid of all these strange weeds and plants that’re taking over the gardens. None of the other lads will touch them, they think they’re poisonous or some such thing. More superstition and daftness, if you ask me. Although I still can’t, for the life of me, think where they’re coming from.”

January 6th, 1899.

I didn’t have a good night. Tom was restless and the fluttering ghost girl, with her terrible screams, came back to haunt my dreams. But I must have fallen into a heavier sleep in the early hours. When I woke up, although it wasn’t quite light, Tom had gone out. I knew he’d gone to start work on the gardens. I hated thinking of him out there on his own in the cold, with no one to help him and everyone thinking he had done something wrong. I wonder if there are many worse feelings than people blaming you for something you haven’t done. I thought perhaps I could spend my day helping Tom. I could pull up weeds as good as any gardener’s boy. I didn’t want to dress up in Lady Hexer’s fine clothes any more. So I rooted under the little bed and there were my old trousers and woollens, a little smellier and more ragged than I’d realised, but comfy once I had them on. Also, I decided, I could talk to Tom about getting away from here.

He wasn't too far away. He was working feverishly, trying to rip plants up from the ground. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw how the greenery had sprouted in thick clumps over every visible patch of hard soil. This had happened in just a day, in what everyone says is one of the coldest weeks in living memory. But Tom wasn't doing very well. I could see that as he pulled the plants up, tiny tendrils were creeping up from the ground straight afterwards, like little fingers. It was like they wouldn't die. They seemed to be spreading thicker and faster than a man could pull them out, as if the earth was infected.

"Tom," I said, shivering, because my old clothes also weren't as warm as I'd remembered. "I don't think this is working."

Tom stood upright, his usually rosy face grey and sweating. He took some deep breaths.

"Tom, I think this is a waste of time. As fast as you pull up these plants, they take root again and go back to the earth."

He let out a sigh. "You're right. But I don't know what else to do. I have to put the garden right. Everyone thinks I've planted poisonous seeds."

"I want to help," I told him. "And Tom – I think we need to go –"

But I didn't get any further. Tom's face brightened as he saw Lucy heading across the garden towards him. "Oh, my goodness," she said, staring around at the grounds. "So this is what everyone is talking about. All these weeds and things! Although I don't see how they could have made Joe's wife and child sick."

Tom shrugged. "I don't even know if they are weeds," he began, but Lucy carried on. "You know Joe, Tom – he's one of the stable men. His wee girl and his wife are very ill. They're saying it's all to do with the things growing in the gardens, but I don't know."

I stared down at the grey, hard soil and poked at it with the end of my boot. If these plants are somehow linked to the old hospital, could they bring some kinds of sickness

with them, I wondered. There was no point in trying to explain this to Tom or Lucy – but Lady Hexer might listen. If she still believed a word I said.

Lucy rubbed her eyes. She noticed me looking at her. “I didn’t have a very good night. I share a room with Becky, you know, and she kept teasing me about the ghost. She thinks it’s funny.”

“I hate her,” I said, fiercely.

Lucy shook her head. “She was only fooling about. She’s no idea how scared we were. She even made a silly fake ghost out of her white pinnies and waved it at me in the dark. I jumped out of my skin! I thought the ghostie-thing had followed me into my room.”

I remembered something from the night before. “Was one of the pinnies covered in coal dust?” I asked.

Lucy frowned. “No, they were both very clean. Becky’s a bit fussy about how she looks. She has a special old pinny she keeps just for cleaning out the grates.”

I thought about this.

January 6th 1899.

After the disturbing events of last night, I am in a state of great turmoil. I do not know who to believe, what is true or what is invented – and why. I know I was hasty in sending young Annie away for the night and I fear she may have been very hurt. I cannot bring myself to believe the child is false. I sent her to her brother more for her own comfort and safety than anything else. And yet - the terrible warnings of the spectre in Agatha’s room. I can hardly ignore what I saw; what we all saw. I know Annie is a very clever child. Indeed, in spite of her background, her little rebellious streak reminds me of myself as a girl. Yes, I admit, I have allowed myself to become quite fond of her. I thought that perhaps, when my

need for her was done, I may pay for her to go to a good school. But then – what if she is making up stories? What if she is even shrewder than I imagined? Agatha seems to think so. I have worked with Agatha for three years, preparing the Hall with all the right magical symbols for my purpose, and of course I have grown to put my total trust in her - so perhaps I should listen to her judgements, rather my own more sentimental feelings.

And now a new element has come into play. This morning, Haggstone came into the drawing room, followed by the maid Becky and another small girl. This girl, it turns out, is Becky's younger sister and has come to pay a visit. But, according to Agatha, it is this girl who may be my true envoy. She claims to fulfil everything in the prediction, including the strange lines about being neither a boy nor a girl. I especially asked about this part, as Annie, with her cropped hair and her boy's clothes, seemed to fit the part so well. Becky told me, with her usual perfect little curtsy, that when Jeannie was a young child she couldn't say her name for a long time and had called herself Jon. The whole family had used this name and so people often thought the little child was a boy, not a girl.

I looked at this tiny, trembling little waif, with her wispy blonde hair, who was chewing her lower lip and blushing at being the centre of so much attention.

“And do you believe she will be able to - ?” I asked Haggstone. I couldn't finish the sentence as I wasn't sure how much Becky or her sister knew of our experiments.

“Indeed. She already has,” Agatha told me. “Jeannie, tell the Lady what happened to you on the staircase this morning.”

Jeannie went pinker than ever. “I – went- to- an-old-hospital,” she said. She has a voice as thin and flat as the plucking of a violin string. “I- saw- a- doctor. He-was- carrying-a big-book.”

I questioned her a little but she couldn't give me much detail, in spite of much prompting from Agatha and Becky. “She is ever so shy, ma'am,” Becky explained, and

Agatha followed with: "It was a very brief experiment. We did not want to overwhelm the child on this first attempt. But it was successful, nevertheless. I feel this girl is the one you should proceed with. She is more trustworthy than the bald brat."

"Agatha," I said, rather sharply. I still feel desperately sorry for Annie's condition and I'm considering asking my own doctor to look at her hair.

But now I don't know which way to go. This little fair-headed waif does not ring true to me. Yet Annie seemed as true as the day – and she may be a liar. Inside myself, I am very fearful. I feel that everyone around me is speaking with forked tongues.

January 6th.

Lucy was staring at me, those round brown eyes even wider than usual. I almost felt guilty about what I was saying. Lucy's one of those kind-hearted people who thinks the best about everyone. I felt as if I was somehow dirtying her with my charges against Becky. But I had a fury racing through my blood like a poison. I could almost taste it, like I'd eaten raw meat. Like I'd swallowed a dagger.

"I'm telling you, Lucy. That Becky was working with the Haggstone woman. She was waving some old sheet around and pretending it was a ghost. That's why Mrs McKinnon couldn't find her. She claimed she was changing her pinny but she couldn't have been. It's all to get rid of me."

"But why would they want to do that?" asked Lucy, bewildered.

I shook my head. "I can't answer that one," I said, still hot and red with temper. "But I know it's true. Haggstone has always wanted rid of me and Becky was her ideal helper. We need to let Lady Hexer know the whole thing was some sort of trick."

"Oh, Annie," said Lucy. "I don't know what to think. I don't want that ghost to be real. But I can't imagine Becky would be so wicked. And anyway – why didn't the men find her in Miss Haggstone's room? There was nothing that would point to a trick. I can't

see how she would do it, Annie.”

I thought about this for a few moments. “If I could get into her room,” I said, with Lucy shaking her head at me and saying: “Oh no, no, no.” “Just listen,” I said. “If I could get into Haggstone’s room and have a good look around – I bet I could find her out. Lucy – are there any times of the day when she’s away from her room for a while?”

“Well, lunchtime,” Lucy admitted, without really wanting to. “She has a very good appetite and always gets through three courses. With second helpings, sometimes. But, no, Annie – really – you mustn’t think of it. If she was to find you! You would both be sent away, for sure. You and Tom.” She looked wistfully over to Tom, who was still furiously hacking and dragging at the greenery, barely noticing us anymore.

I had to do it. I knew it was a terrible risk. If I was discovered – well, so be it. So I headed back to the cottage where I changed into the maid’s dress and cap. Lady Hexer hadn’t said I couldn’t go back to work, after all. This seemed to be the best way of being able to wander around the house without having to answer any questions. When I told Tom I was going to work in the kitchen, he barely glanced up at me. I put a hand on his sweating shoulder for a moment but he shook it away. He was desperate to keep on clearing the ground. I wanted to tell him the plants may be magic ones from the past, but I didn’t think he was in the mood to listen. I made my way across the gardens. The air was so thick with cold, I couldn’t even smell the sea. I kept my breaths small so I didn’t take too much of this bitter cold inside my body. The spiral-shaped hedges were still white with frost and looked more like twisted bones than shrubs. The sky was grey-white as an old bandage, covering whatever ailing sun there may have been up there. I couldn’t see a single patch of real brightness.

There was a little door that led straight onto the back stairs without going through the kitchen. I could smell the lunch cooking. It gave me a sharp hunger pain deep in my stomach. I could hear the bustle and clatter from behind the kitchen door. I heard one of

the Hall's clocks strike noon. I'd timed it just right. I crept up the stairs and along the quiet, chilly hallway. I listened at Haggstone's bedroom door for a moment, then carefully turned the handle. The door was locked! I cursed under my breath and slipped back down the stairs into the busy kitchen. Mrs McKinnon - red in the face, because the kitchen was so warm and steamy – looked surprised to see me, but not angry. In fact, when I told her I thought I ought to earn my keep today, she seemed quite pleased. She set me to stirring a vat of creamy sauce meant for a fruit pie, while she took a tureen of soup up the stairs. Lucy and I were alone.

“Lucy,” I hissed. “Haggstone's door is locked. Who would have a key?”

Lucy's eyes popped. “Oh, no, Annie, this is getting worse. You mustn't think of going into her room if it's locked. It will truly look as if you are – I don't know – stealing or something. Forget this idea. Please.”

“Do you have a key?” I demanded. She shook her head determinedly.

“Becky then,” I suggested. I knew Becky cleaned the bedrooms, as a rule. Lucy said nothing.

“Where does she keep them?” I asked. “Does she keep her keys with her?”

“I mustn't say,” said Lucy, looking tearful. “You'll only get yourself into deep trouble, Annie. I can't help you do that.”

I glared around the room. I felt like a mad, angry animal and I wouldn't be stopped. I spotted a set of large hooks on the side of a wooden dresser. A bunch of keys hung from it. I looked back at Lucy and knew just from the look on her face they were the ones I needed. It was lucky Lucy was such an open book, I thought.

I didn't have as much time left as I'd hoped, so I ran over to the keys and snatched them all before Lucy could stop me. “Tell Mrs McKinnon – that I felt unwell,” I said, pulling my arm away from her as she tried to hold me back.

Back up the servants' stairs and along the hallway. All was still quiet. It took me a few tries, but I found a key that turned in Haggstone's lock and I went inside, closing the door quietly behind me and locking it from the inside.

The sickly smell from last night still hung around, just faintly. I stared around the room. It was much grander than the room Lady Hexer had given me. It still gave me an uneasy feeling. I think it was a mixture of fears – what if that ghost had been real, what if it jumped out on me? And I'd be in such trouble if I was caught. Not much of the grey daylight came in through the windows, which had heavy, embroidered drapes in deep green and gold. It had a large, carved wardrobe in a dark wood, the writing desk and of course Miss Haggstone's chair. There was an ornate vase with some dried flowers in it, the penny-shaped ones. "Honesty plants," I thought to myself. "About the only kind of honesty I will find around that old fraud."

The problem was, I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Like the men last night, I turned over papers and ornaments, pointlessly, finding nothing. I opened the wardrobe – it made a terrible creak – and put my hands inside, feeling around. I couldn't find anything other than Haggstone's old shawls and a couple of dresses. I took a deep breath, trying to think straight in spite of the way I was sweating and trembling. What had happened that couldn't be explained – and how could I find a way of explaining it?

The desk, for one thing. It'd rocked back and forward, as if someone was pushing it, but all on its own. I bent down and inspected it closely. That's when I found some fine black wires – thin as silk threads – tied around the legs. I let out a "ha!" before I could stop myself. I gathered them up. They were strong and wouldn't be snapped, so I had to lift the desk legs one by one and slip the wires off, into the pocket of my pinny.

Then there was the terrible wailing ghost-girl and the way she had disappeared into nothing. I was sure, if I looked hard enough, I would find some raggy old sheets that had played the part of old Jenny. If I could find out how Becky helped with the trick, all the

better. I spotted a large carpet bag and was about to open it when I heard a rustling outside the door. Someone put a key in the lock and it began turning with a click that shot fear straight through me. I darted for the wardrobe and jumped inside, pulling its door almost closed just as the bedroom door opened. Then I sat in the dark, shivering, as Miss Haggstone's heavy tread made its way across the carpet. If she'd spotted my movement, she'd be on me like a cat on a baby bird. She was definitely heading for the wardrobe. I was aware of her shadow just outside it. But then she pushed the wardrobe door fully shut, with a smart clack. Oh, lord, I thought: I'm not sure if I can get out again, now that it's properly closed. Then I heard her chair creak gently as she lowered her great backside onto it and sighed. Full of Lady Hexer's food, I thought, calling her a rude name in my head that I won't repeat. But I'm not pretending I was feeling brave at this point. I could barely breathe for fear. What if she decided to have a nap? I'd be stuck inside the wardrobe for hours. I'd be missed shortly – and so would all the keys. I heard Haggstone give a satisfied grunt and creakily settle into the chair. She *is* going to sleep, I thought, with a silent groan. I'm stuck.

Then there was a tap on the bedroom door. Haggstone coughed and said crossly: “Come in.”

I heard Becky's voice. “Ma'am, I thought you ought to know. Some of the keys have gone missing from the kitchen. The key for this room was among them. Mrs McKinnon is looking for them now – but I can't help thinking that little patch-head has got them. She might be planning to come in here – and – well – look around.”

“Really?” Haggstone sounded interested. “The bold little thing. Well – if she comes in here she'll be very sorry. I'll have her in the courts for thieving. That'll get rid of her all together. How's your young sister?”

“Jeannie's still very afraid, Miss Haggstone. I've told her that all she needs to do is play some pretending games and say what you tell her. But perhaps you could teach her a

little more? She finds all this stuff about the old hospital very hard. She's only seven, ma'am."

I listened to this with my mouth open, my breathing as shallow and silent as I could make it. What was this? Becky's sister was taking my place - as Becky had always wanted. And Haggstone was feeding her the stories about the hospital. For a moment, I forgot how angry I was with Lady Hexer. In fact, I almost felt sorry for her. She was being conned by this smelly old trickster. And spiteful Becky. I struggled to stay still and silent, the heavy keys ready to clink and give me away at my slightest twitch.

"Yes, yes, girl, we will go through the story again in the morning," Haggstone rumbled on. "The thing she needs to remember is to keep talking about the book. Lady Hexer is desperate to get her hands on an old book of medicines. If she thinks your sister will get it for her, then the Lady will keep going along with it all.

"We need each other, Becky. You want to have your sister stay here with you. And I want to stay here too. Lady Hexer's generosity has become - well - very important to me. Vital, you might say. I have given up all my other card readings and psychic work for her, but she has rewarded me well. I can't afford to lose my place with her."

I heard her make a slurping sound. Becky must have brought Haggstone some kind of drink. "What have you done with the - er - gown?"

"It's safely under my bed, for the moment, ma'am," Becky answered. "There's to be a bonfire this afternoon, to burn the holly and ivy for Twelfth Night. I'll wrap the cloth up in some rags and drop it on there. No one will think anything about it."

"Good," said Haggstone. "You're a smart one." She took another loud slurp of her drink.

"Well, Miss Haggstone. Now that you know to be on your guard -"

“Yes, girl, thank you for that.”

There was a pause. Then I heard Haggstone clink a coin onto the desk and add, grumpily: “There you are.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Becky replied, more brightly. I heard her leave. Then – oh, thank heavens! – I heard Haggstone get up and mutter to herself about going to the lavatory. She went out and I waited for the sound of her key in the lock. I breathed out hard and moved my stiff legs from their painful, crouching position. I leaned on the side of the wardrobe with my hand, which was damp with sweat, but it slipped along the inside of the wood. I almost fell – and part of the wardrobe side folded in alongside itself. With a little gasp, I examined it. A slender girl, such as myself, or indeed Becky, could easily slip in or out of the wardrobe this secret way and hide behind it. And that, I knew, was how the ghost-girl had disappeared so quickly. The men had looked inside the wardrobe. But not behind it.

I hurtled down the back stairs, clutching the bundle of keys tightly to stop their jangling, and almost ran right into Lucy. “There you are! I’ve been so worried,” she gasped. “Mrs McKinnon is having a fit about the missing keys. Give them to me and I’ll slip them down behind the dresser and make out they just got knocked down. And, Annie – run off back home, pet, before anyone spots you in here.”

Quickly, I handed her the keys and she put them in her apron.

“Lucy, I need to go to your room now,” I told her. “No – don’t ask why. Just tell me where it is.” Lucy pointed further up the back staircase. “Right at the very top, at the end of the passageway,” she said. “But, Annie –”

I waved at her and ran up the chilly back stone steps that led to the very top of the house. They seemed to keep going for ever. I pushed open the uneven door to the maids’ tiny quarters. There were just two small beds, a wooden shelf with a washing bowl and water jug. The floorboards were almost bare, apart from a rag-rug. Under each bed was a

bag. I pulled one out and rifled through it quickly, before deciding the few clothes in there probably belonged to Lucy. But then I put my hand in the bag under the second bed and pulled out a dirty, yellow-white cloth. It had the same stink as Haggstone's room.

Something fell out of the cloth and clattered to the floor, making me jump. It was a kind of plaster mask, very badly-made - black holes for eyes, a bulbous nose and a gash of a mouth. I stared at it. This must have been under the cloth, forming the fake ghost's face. It was quite a scary-looking thing, though, so I bundled it back into the cloth and ran back down the stairs. I had my proof and I couldn't wait to show it off.

I panted along the hallway and burst through the doors of Lady Hexer's drawing room. She turned with a jump as I ran in and she didn't look pleased. "Lady Hexer!" I gasped. "Lady Hexer! I'm sorry to run in like this but it's important. I've found it out. That ghost girl was a fake. Miss Haggstone set up the whole thing and Becky helped her." Lady Hexer stood up as I waved the shroud-like cloth and the mask as if they were trophies.

I don't know exactly what I expected her to say, I hadn't really thought too far ahead. But I'd expected she'd be pleased. Pleased that I was not a liar. Pleased, for goodness' sake, that there was no real ghost-girl haunting her house. Pleased that I had shown her how clever I was, like she'd always said. "Quite the little detective," she'd called me once. But she didn't look at all pleased. If anything, she looked absolutely furious.

"How *dare* you," she shouted at me. "How dare you come running into my room as if you belonged here? How dare you raise your voice to me and make accusations about my trusted friends and staff?"

"But -" I began.

"Annie! Don't interrupt me! You are making things much worse for yourself. I shouldn't even listen to you. Miss Haggstone warned me you would try to talk your way back in here. But I will give you one chance - a chance to explain yourself - and then you will go."

Lady Hexer glared at me. Her eyes, when she was angry, held a terrifying light. It came to me, suddenly, that she didn't want to hear bad things about Miss Haggstone. Haggstone had been her friend for a long time and knew all her secrets. If Haggstone was a fraud, Lady Hexer didn't really want to believe it. I stared at my feet for a moment. Then I thought, I'd gone so far already I might as well say what I had come to say. Even if I knew it wouldn't be welcome.

I started by telling her about Becky and the pinny and how I'd realised that she must have been involved. Lady Hexer sighed and raised her eyes. Somehow, as it came out, it sounded like a silly quarrel between two young maids. Then I told her how I had been into Haggstone's room. She looked horrified. "You stole keys and entered a room without –" she began.

"I hid in the wardrobe," I cut in. "I heard Miss Haggstone and Becky say they were going to teach little Jeannie what to say, in order to fool you. Jeannie is only saying what Miss Haggstone tells her to say. I heard Becky say she'd hidden the cloth from the séance under her bed. She plans to burn it on the bonfire this afternoon." I held out the black threads and the smelly cloth and the mask. "And then I found out that the wardrobe has a secret panel and-"

"I think I have heard enough," said Lady Hexer, with a sigh. "You must think I am very gullible, Annie –"

"I don't even know what that means," I blurted out.

"I mean, you may think I am easy to fool," Lady Hexer went on. "Perhaps I have been. I like you, Annie. I thought we understood each other. But Becky has worked for me for several years and I have trusted Miss Haggstone with my most important secrets. I simply do not know who or what to believe."

"But what about all this?" I asked, helplessly holding out my prizes.

Lady Hexer shook her head. “You say you found these things in Miss Haggstone’s and Becky’s rooms. But Miss Haggstone will say, of course, that you’re lying. You could have got these things anywhere. I can no longer take what anyone says on trust, Annie.”

I felt my face burning. How *is* it that people can make you feel ashamed of something you haven’t done? “What about all the plants in the garden?” I asked. “You said you thought they were growing because we’d made a link with the past.”

“I know your brother is capable of doing wonderful things with plants. Perhaps he is helping you,” Lady Hexer said, although she sounded less sure about that.

“So,” I said. “You don’t want me to go back to the hospital any more. You don’t want me to find the book of cures. Even though I know exactly where it is.”

Lady Hexer paused for a long moment. Then she said: “But I am also promised that young Jeannie can get it for me.”

“All right, then,” I said, with a sudden bright idea dropping into my head. “Why don’t you see which one of us brings the book back first? I bet I can get it before Jeannie does.” Because Jeannie is a fibber and she can no more travel back in time than she can fly up to the moon, I thought. Now I can prove myself.

Lady Hexer thought this over. After a minute or two, she said: “Now then. I still don’t know whether to trust you or not, Annie. But I don’t know whether to trust Jeannie either. And I rather like your challenge. I will give you one week. Seven days. No more. If you haven’t brought me that book by then, I will ask you to leave. And Tom, too, I am afraid. The trouble in the garden is causing a lot of unrest among my staff.”

So it was decided that I would move back into the Hall while this last part of the experiment took place. Lady Hexer knew I needed looking after while I was back in the old hospital – because my body looked as if it was in a deep sleep or a faint. She promised no harm would come to me during these times. She also told Haggstone and Becky about the plan, after calling them both to the drawing room. It was almost worth all the trouble

just to see Becky's face when she saw the old cloth and the mask. But Lady Hexer didn't say anything about them, other than to ask Becky to put them on the bonfire outside.

I could tell Haggstone was angrier than ever. When she heard that her new girl had just one week to bring back the book of cures, she was stumped for words. This was another moment I enjoyed more than a big slice of sponge cake. But of course, she couldn't really argue about it. As for the looks I had from Haggstone and Becky – well. Let's just say it's a good job you can't be wounded by the way someone glares at you.

The last thing I did today was go to tell Tom that I was going back to the Hall. I went with Lucy and we took him some supper from the kitchen. He was sitting at our little table, his face grey and dirt-lined. He was so tired he could barely speak to us. My news cheered him up a little, though. "So Lady Hexer isn't angry with you any more, Annie? That's wonderful. She hasn't realised what a bad little goblin you really are," he said with a faint smile. "I thought we may be sent away and –" then he gave a long sigh that tore at my heart – "I couldn't bear it. Not to lose this job. Our home. And –" he glanced at Lucy, but didn't finish his sentence.

Lucy gave him a smile that was full of comfort. She was just a young girl but I could easily imagine her as a mother, all softness, cuddling and stroking a lapful of babies, soothing them with the music of her voice. She was worried for Tom, I knew, and I loved her for that. She told me, after I pressed her, that he'd had one or two strange, short blackouts and woke up sweating and saying strange things. For a moment I wondered - but then I thought that was daft. My own wishful thinking, longing for someone to share my strange journeys. Someone I could really trust.

So I went back to my room at Hexer Hall, where just a day or two ago I'd thought myself so grand. Lady Hexer came in to see me, for a few moments. She had something for me, a small square shape wrapped in a white cloth. When I opened it, I saw she'd brought me one of the snake-pattered tiles from the drawing room hearth.

“I have had this one taken out for you. If you have been telling the truth, this is your key to my past,” Lady Hexer told me. She spoke in a clipped, formal way, her words snipping at me like shears. As if she couldn’t bear to be friendly with me again, in case I let her down. “You can stay in this room for seven days and nights. No one will come into the room except for me. I will bring in your meals and make sure you are well. In that time, if you are able, you will go back to my ancestor’s hospital and retrieve the book.

“If you get it, Annie, you will be rewarded. Whatever you ask for, I will give it to you, and I do keep my promises. If you fail, however, you will leave here and never return. Tom will go with you. And - Annie – this is very important. You will tell no one what happened here. If you do, I will personally see to it that you are sent to a lunatic asylum and you will never come out. And Tom will never find work again. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” I replied, as sulkily as I dared. “But none of that will happen, because I’m telling the truth. What will you do to Becky and Jeannie if I bring you what you want and they turn out to be the liars?”

“That’s my business,” the Lady snapped, turning away from me with a swish of her skirts and firmly closing the bedroom door behind her.

So there I was. I felt very alone and suddenly I started to worry that I’d boasted too much. What if, for some reason, I couldn’t get back to the leper hospital? And, even if I did, what if I couldn’t get near the book? That doctor trusted me less than his own snakes. Even Meg, my only friend there, was none too sure about me. And yes - those hideous serpent-creatures, whatever they are. I couldn’t even picture them in my mind without feeling sick to the stomach. But I was going to have to brave them somehow. For my good name. For Tom. For Tom and Lucy.

January 7th, 1899.

I had the bright idea that I would eat the supper left for me and get a good night's sleep before I tackled what would be one of the hardest journeys I've ever made. But instead I found I had no appetite for food and I hardly slept. In the icy blue of the early morning, I decided to dress and try to get back to the hospital there and then. No sense in putting it off any longer. I put on my favourite blue dress with its warm velvet trim and the soft blue headscarf. Then I sat on the bed and with cold, shaking fingers I unwrapped the snake tile from its cloth cover and began tracing my finger around its coils.

I ended up not far from my usual spot in the stone corridor, looking directly at the archway that led to the doctor's study. It was a little darker than usual and I could see through one of the windows slit into the thick stone that, outside, it was snowing heavily. I peeked through the narrow gap, blinking at the cold draught that jabbed my eyes and made me blink. In the courtyard the doctor was ordering a servant of some kind to load two large, long-ish, cloth bundles onto a wooden cart. The snow made it difficult to see things properly. I watched as the man did as he was told and trundled the cart away towards the gates. The doctor turned back towards the hospital door.

The archway itself looked even more scary than usual. It felt like I was about to walk into an open mouth. I heard hoarse groaning somewhere behind me – the very sick patients, I knew. I didn't know what made me walk towards the sounds. I turned into the small room where I'd first seen the poor woman on the bare bed, with her blemished face and her deformed hands, reaching out for help. The room smelled bad – like the sourest breath you can imagine. There were two women in the room this time, both lying on their beds, both moaning, but softly, like it hurt them to do it. One was barely awake. The other turned towards me as I came in. I walked up to the

bed and looked down at her. It was hard to look but, thinking about what Meg said, that the patients needed people to care about them, I made myself do it. "Hello," I said, as gently as I could. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

Her face was covered in red-blue swellings. Her hands and feet were blown up and fat. She seemed to find it too hard to breathe through her nose, which was covered in sores, and she could only manage short gasps through her mouth. Her voice, when it came, was thin and rough, like a tuneless pipe. "Please," she rasped out. "Please. No more snake. Not the snake."

My skin prickled and I glanced around the room. I couldn't see the beast anywhere, thank the lord. I frowned at her. "What happened with the snake?"

She moaned again and shook her head a little. Her hood fell back against the bed, revealing an almost-bald scalp covered in shrivelled skin. She had no eyebrows or lashes either, I noticed. Her scaled skin reminded me of a fairy tale I'd once read with pictures of an evil wood sprite, its limbs made out of tree bark. The illness turned her into something that hardly looked human. In spite of this, something made me want to stroke her. I bet no one's touched her kindly for a long time, I thought.

"Tell me what happened with the snake?" I asked again.

"I – I – could not – I couldn't eat it," she groaned. "The doctor said it would cure me – but I couldn't eat it. It made me more sick. Please, no more snake," she moaned again, more to herself.

"You had to eat snake?" The thought made me gag.

I spotted a drinking pot on the floor nearby. I handed it to her but she wasn't able to drink, spilling most of it down her chin.

I could see there wasn't much I could do for her. I turned to leave the room. The second patient said something, in a rasping whisper that was too quiet to hear. I turned back. "Pardon me?"

“The cures are making her worse,” she whispered. I walked over to her bed to hear her better. She had some of the same disfigurements of the first woman and in her eyes – which were red, crusted and swollen – I could see absolute terror.

“The cures,” she breathed, her voice barely more than the rustle of dead leaves. “It is my sister. We came here to be cured. Our families have paid out all their money to the doctor, but she is worse and worse.”

I had to hand her the water cup before she was able to speak again, but she too had trouble getting the water past her swollen lips.

“Snake meat. Snake hearts still beating. Snake – I’m not sure – milk. Other things. Strange animal flesh and herbs. We have tried them all. The doctor says they will make us better, but we are both getting worse.”

Her sore eyes brimmed over and I swallowed hard. I almost always cry when someone else does, I can’t help it.

“My sister is plagued by terrible nightmares and visions. I am afraid she will soon die, little girl. And I will follow her to the grave.” Now she began to sob, painfully.

“I am so sorry. I don’t know what to do. Is there anything I can get you?” She shook her head and waved me away with her arm. Hopeless and helpless, I went back to the narrow window slit to breathe in some cold, fresh air. Then I made myself walk through the dark archway and turn into the doctor’s study, which, to my relief, was warm from the big fire roaring in his hearth. I guessed he would be back there by now, and I was right. He looked up when he saw me and raised his woolly brows.

“Ah,” he said. “The return of our ghost girl.”

“I’m not a ghost girl,” I said, thinking of Haggstone and her silly fluttering sheets. “You’re more dead than I am, truth be told.” I placed my hand on his and he laughed.

“Cold as the grave,” he said. “Go and stand by that fire, you cheeky little thing. Let’s see if you warm up.”

I noticed him watching me carefully as I stood in front of the sputtering flames. “You won’t be able to see through me, if that’s what you think.”

He laughed again. “And able to know my thoughts too. What a strange thing you are.”

“Listen,” I said. “I know you think I’m just a young girl who couldn’t possibly know anything. But let me tell you how I can appear and disappear. I come from the future. From hundreds of years in the future. I’ve come back here because I need your help.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “And why should I believe that lunatic’s tale?”

“Because it’s true,” I shrugged. “Look at my clothes. Have you ever seen anything like them? Listen to the way I talk. It’s English, nothing like your kind of language.”

He sat up a little. “It’s true I have to work to understand you. And what time do you say you come from?” he asked, slowly.

“I come from the year 1899,” I told him. His bushy brows rose higher.

“Where this hospital is now, there is a great big house in my time. It belongs to a Lady Hexer. She knows about you and your work and she wants to carry it on. She needs -”

The doctor held up his hand. “Slow down. Remember your words sound strange to me. I want to ask more questions about this future time. Tell me about life in Scotland in 1899.”

“England,” I told him. “Near to Scotland, but still England.”

“Ah, well,” he looked almost pleased. “You have come from the wrong place. This is most definitely part of Scotland.”

I scoured my brain, trying to remember the little nuggets of history I'd been taught. "Oh," I said. "This part of the country belongs to England now. I think it has done for a few hundred years. But my history isn't all that good, I'm afraid."

"England?" the doctor spluttered. And he used a word to describe the English which for decency's sake I won't repeat.

"Never mind that," I went on. "We live very differently to you. The food's better, for one thing."

"And girls learn as much as boys," he muttered, as if that was almost as bad as his villages being taken over by the English.

"Some do," I said. "Not all of them. But many girls and boys do go to school."

"And is it quite usual," the doctor asked, stroking his chin, "for people to be able to go back and forwards in time, in the same way they might travel on a boat or a horse and cart?"

I hesitated. "Well, no. That's very unusual. Magical, in fact. Not everyone can do it. But I can."

When I said this last part, something warm bloomed inside me. I believed I had a very special gift.

"But." I'd thought through this part in my head, because I hoped it might get me into his favour. "But – the one thing that hasn't moved on very much is medicine. There are still lots of terrible diseases in the world and no one knows how to cure them. That's why Lady Hexer, who is part of your family, I mean, who *will* be part of your family, wants me to speak to you. She sent me here. She needs your cures so she can pass them on to doctors now, I mean, then – I mean, in 1899."

"Ah," said the doctor, leaning back in his chair. "Now that's the bit that makes me wonder about you. You tell a very good story, girl. But you're not the only one who'd like to get their hands on my work. You could be anyone's spy. I'm not about

to hand over my findings to you.”

“Well, then. At least just tell me a bit about it,” I said. “And I could tell Lady Hexer when I go back.”

The doctor looked at me, flint in his eyes. “I’ll tell you what,” he said, at last. “You stay here for a few days and let me watch you carefully. No disappearing this time. Let me ask you questions as I think of them, about the future that you say you’re from. And if you convince me that your wild story is true, then maybe – *maybe* – I will think about sharing some of my secrets with you.”

His eyes darted briefly over to a heavy wooden desk, where a huge book sat next to a pot of ink and a pen made of a bird’s feather. So that was the book of cures, I guessed. Next to it was something shaped like a pot, but covered in a cloth. And curled fast around the book, apparently asleep – how had I not spotted the thing before? - was Melusina, the serpent.

At that moment the study door opened and Meg burst in.

“The players are back!” she squeaked. “I can hear them coming!” She caught sight of me. “Oh,” she said. I could tell she wasn’t sure whether to be pleased to see me or not.

The doctor stood up. “Annie is to stay with us now,” he announced. “No more flying off into nowhere, eh, Annie? So now I have two little helpers again.”

Meg gave me a small smile. I know she thought I was pushing into her special place. But she also liked me, I hoped. And there were no other young girls for her to talk to.

“May we go and listen to the musicians, sir?” she asked the doctor. He nodded, keen, I guessed, to hide his book away before I came back. As I followed Meg, I glanced back and saw him make straight for the covered pot. I wondered what was so special about it.

So out we went into the empty courtyard. Meg was right. I could hear the sounds of the drums and pipes, faint but getting louder. The whirling snow made it impossible to see the players. Meg clapped her hands. "Twice in a few days. They almost never come to us. Usually it's only on special days."

"So today isn't anything special?" I asked her, shivering hard. "Not a feast day or anything?"

Meg shook her head, watching as the little band of musicians gathered outside the gates. I was pleased to see the handsome young piper lad from last time. His mouth turned up in a sideways grin. "The blue lady," he said, with a very dashing low bow.

"Never mind the blue lady," yelled Meg. "Play a dance! Let's get warmed up!"

So they blew and bashed their way through more merry tunes. None of the other patients braved the snow, but I guessed they could hear the music from inside and I hoped it gave them some little happiness. Meg and I had great fun again – although it was a slippery job to try to dance on the snowy cobbles and the players kept breaking off to laugh. We got warmer though and my face got a little pinker each time I caught the piper lad's eye.

After a while, the doctor came out and offered the players some coins, holding them out through the gates. They shook their heads and muttered something about charity again. But the dark-haired young man beckoned me over to the gates.

"Miss Annie," he said. "I have thought of you many times since I saw you last. Tell me - why are you here in this place? Do you suffer from this dreaded disease?"

"No," I said. "Certainly not. I'm – I'm helping the doctor here."

He looked puzzled. "But aren't you afraid? That you might catch the leprosy?"

I shook my head. "Someone has to take care of them," I said, glad that Meg didn't hear. I noticed her watching. She picked her way across the slushy cobbles

towards us. "Now, what's this?" she asked, an impish look on her face. "Don't come too close, mister. We're all diseased, remember."

"Not me," I burst out.

"Yes, definitely you," said Meg, shaking her head at me.

The young man looked from me to Meg and back again. I could see he didn't know what to think. "You sound like a noble young lady," he said, with a slight bow of the head. "I thought, with your strange way of speaking, that maybe you were from over the sea. Tell me, Miss Annie – do you read letters?"

"Of course I do," I replied.

"I thought so," said the young man, with a smile. "Then this is the right gift for you."

He pulled out a small roll of yellowish parchment from a pocket and handed it to me, through the gate. "For you," he said, with a nod of his head. "Miss Annie." The group turned away and continued playing as they faded like spirits into the heavy snow.

"So what's that?" demanded Meg, trying to take the paper from me.

"I don't know," I said, pulling it out of her reach.

"Is it a love letter?" She poked me and grinned.

"Don't be so silly," I said, cross with myself for blushing again. I unfurled it and found it was written out like a little poem. It was very hard to read the writing – even harder than trying to work out what people were saying in this old language. But it was something, I thought, picking out some of the letters, about a lady in blue. Still hot in the face, I rolled it up again and slipped it into the pocket of my dress, batting down Meg's attempts to take it from me.

As we made our way back, the cart came rattling back into the courtyard. It was empty. "I saw that go out earlier," I told Meg. "There were these long bundles of cloth on it. What were they?"

Meg looked away and frowned. "Well, what do you think?" she said.

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking," I grumped back at her. She could be so annoying at times. Meg stopped and sighed. "Two patients died last night," she said, looking down at the ground. The snow had soaked her thin boots.

"You mean, they were bodies?"

Meg shrugged. "It's a leper hospital. People die. We can't keep the bodies here to rot, Annie."

"So where do they go?" I asked. "To church, to get buried?"

Meg paused then said: "Not exactly."

"Go on," I urged her.

"They take the bodies down to the sea," she said. "It's the easiest way to get rid of them."

"They throw the dead bodies into the sea?" I repeated. "But that's horrible."

"It's only when there are a few too many deaths," Meg says. "The doctor doesn't want the monks coming around and asking questions. We say prayers for them but we don't send them all to get buried in the churchyards. The doctor says we have to keep some of the deaths a secret. Or they might close the hospital down."

What a way to go, I thought to myself, as we headed back towards the doctor's study. Thrown out to sea like a bundle of old rubbish. I wanted to ask: is that where your father ended up, Meg? But some questions are better left unasked.

The doctor was in a good temper. He kept firing questions at me, all about life in the year 1899. Which king is on the throne, he wanted to know? He bellowed again when I told him it is a queen. Who is the lord of the lands hereabouts? A lady, I told

him, grinning at his face. He found it only a little easier to swallow when I told him Lady Hexer was one of his own later family. “It seems to me,” he said, half-laughing, half-annoyed, “that you ladies have taken over the position of men.”

“Well, hardly,” I said. “It seems to *me* there’s quite a lot we’re not allowed to do.” This was an idea that would never have gone into my head before I’d come to Hexer Hall. But it was the sort of thing Lady Hexer often said and she’d read an awful lot of books.

The doctor pretended to cuff me around the head. He let Meg and me sit in his warm study and share his supper. I thought how dull the chunks of bread and salty meat seemed, after the meals at Hexer Hall, with their sauces and cakes and puddings.

He told me how Meg’s father had been quite a nobleman before he caught his illness. “I promised before he died I would let young Meg stay here until she grew old enough to marry. It was a sad day when he finally died. But he left me his money, to help me carry on my work. This disease is running throughout the land like a wild animal and no one dares try to fight it. My work is more important than you can imagine.”

“So why do you keep it so secret?” I asked, placing my hand on Meg’s knee as she wiped away a tear. “Why don’t you let other people – other doctors – help you?”

The doctor finished a mouthful of bread. “My work is very – new. I try things out that others daren’t. If some of those high up in the parish knew about parts of my work – well, I may be stopped. Worse. I may be condemned for witchcraft. I need to be sure of success before the world gets to know about it.”

I noticed that once or twice his eyes slid towards the jars and pots on his desk. Then they slipped quickly back again, as if he didn’t want me to follow his gaze. I

paused for a moment because I didn't want to get the doctor angry, but I knew I had to ask.

"Is it working?" I said, very carefully. "Have you made anyone recover yet?"

The doctor's head snapped up and he glared at me. "What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing." I held up my hands. "I only asked – how it was going."

The doctor rounded on Meg. "What have you been telling her?" he growled, leaning towards her.

She shrank back. "Nothing, nothing," she cried. "I haven't told her anything, sir."

He sat back down. "There have been one or two – unfortunate – mistakes." His voice was gruff and guarded. "But, the deaths – well – the unfortunates would have died anyway. The people in here, Annie – they are sick in a way that means they can't get better. Why shouldn't I try out my cures on them? They may work, given time. And if not – what harm? These people are already doomed."

There was a moment of silence as we thought about this. And then there was a dry slithering sound, so quiet it was almost impossible to hear. Melusina made her way down from the table and across the stone floor. I gave a yelp and jumped. I pulled my knees and skirt up on the chair away from the ground, sitting as far back as I could. It didn't seem to matter how many times I came across the thing. I never felt anything less than sheer terror. It slid up to the doctor's lap, curled up and sat there like a kitten. The doctor gave a horrible smile when he saw my face.

"This is your weakness, isn't it, Miss Clever-talk? Melusina makes you too afraid to move. And no doubt her mother, the noble Bess, does the same. I'll remember that, young Annie. Where ever my secrets are kept, remember this – Melusina will be there too. And if you try to steal my work, then Melusina will find

you, I promise you that. She will follow you where ever you go. Yes, even back to the year 1899, if that is truly where you are from.”

“Forward,” I couldn’t help answering back.

The doctor glared at me again. “What?”

“I think it must be forward to 1899, not back.”

He gave a snort. Then he wound the great snake around his shoulders and strode out of the room – to check on some of the patients, Meg said.

“You shouldn’t get him angry like that,” she told me, now we were alone. “He frightens me when he is angry.”

“Well, he shouldn’t,” I said. “You’re just a young girl and he’s supposed to be your better. He shouldn’t bully you.”

“He thinks I’ve been telling you things I shouldn’t,” she said. “It’s not fair.”

“Meg,” I said. “I spoke to some of the patients. They don’t like being used to try things out, not horrible things like eating snake meat and stuff. They’re scared of the doctor. It’s not fair because they’re too ill to stand up for themselves. And – is that why the two patients died? Because of these mad cures?”

“No!” Meg insisted. “They died of the disease. They just – maybe –” she stopped and bit her lip.

“What, Meg?” I asked her, urgently. “Tell me. I won’t say anything.”

“I was going to say,” Meg went on, “that maybe they died a bit quicker. But – that’s probably a good thing, Annie. They were in awful pain.”

I stared into the fire, where the flames danced crazily to the cracking sound of the wood.

The evening dragged on. It was Meg’s turn to ask me lots of questions. She was disappointed to find I was just a maid and that I didn’t have a big house of my own.

She fingered my dress with a look of longing. “Is this how servants dress in your time?” she asked.

“No,” I smiled. “If only that were true. Lots of us are very poor – no money for fine clothes, I’m afraid. I only have this dress because I’m doing this special job for Lady Hexer. I think once I’ve given her what she wants, I’ll be back wearing my old rags again, like Cinderella after the ball.”

“Like who?” said Meg. I tried telling her the fairy tale, but she said it was stupid.

It got very late. Meg said we ought to get some sleep, because we’d be up early in the morning to work. Because it was so cold, she said, we could sleep in the room next to the study, which was always kept warm with its huge fire.

“The monsters’ room?” I said. “No thanks, I’ll stay in here. It’s bad enough knowing all those horrid things are just next door.”

But Meg said we weren’t allowed to sleep in the study itself. The doctor’s most important things were there. Faced with a choice of bitter cold or a room full of serpents and all those other freakish creatures, it wasn’t so hard for me to decide. So I took a candle and made my way – alone – along the pitch-black passageway. I peeked into the stinking room where the women lay, but from the sound of their breathing they seemed to be resting. I surprised myself when I managed to find Meg’s little cell. I wrapped myself in her small itchy blanket and tried to get some sleep. I couldn’t relax, of course. Every sound – the crying and moaning, the wind sighing through draughty gaps in the stones – made me sit up, alert. In the end, I decided to make my way back to the study and – if the doctor wasn’t there – I would take my chance to get hold of that book. Or look inside that little pot.

The candle was out and I had no means of lighting it again. So I made my way back in the grey-blackness just by feeling, placing my cold hands on the even icier

stone walls, rough as the ground under my fingers and making them numb. I inched my way along the passage and through the arch. The door was heavy wood, with an iron handle. Slowly I twisted this round and peered into the study. No candles were lit, but there was enough of a fire still left to cast some warm light around the room. Its corners were still in dark shadow. I couldn't see the doctor or his horrid pet, so I crept inside and glanced around. I was wrong – the doctor hadn't hidden his book. I saw it large as life on his desk. I opened it up at no particular page. The paper – was it paper? - felt thick and soft, almost like skin, and pages were folded in half. Some sheets were sewn together while others were still loose. Carefully, I pulled out one sheet. On it were drawings and sketches – of some kind of animals, I guessed - and close-set writing in a fancy script. It was too dark to read any of the words, although I squinted hard and held it close to the firelight.

As I tried to make out the strange words on the page and enjoyed the feeling of the fire tingling through my fingers, I suddenly felt a prickling across my skin, as if someone was watching me. I turned quickly and tried to take in the shadowy room, looking for movement, but couldn't see anything. And then I felt it – a heavy, smooth weight rippling across my feet. I froze as sure as if I'd been turned to stone. Melusina was sliding across my boots. I was too sickened to move a muscle or make a sound. I went death-cold as I watched the thing's long, patterned body slip heavily along, without pausing, as if my feet were just a bump in the ground. I didn't even breathe. The wretched thing seemed to go on forever – how long was it, for heaven's sake? At last its tail end slithered off me and I watched, shaking from top to toe, as it made its way onto a chair nearby, coiling itself up like a lady drawing up her skirts. Then it raised its ugly head and looked directly at me. The firelight made an amber glint in its unblinking eyes. Its head swung, gently, from side to side, but its eyes stayed fixed on mine. Still, I didn't dare move. I thought if I did, the thing might strike at me. I

stayed, fixed by its swaying body, for what seemed like an age. And then came a voice.

“O-ho! What have we here? Miss Clever is trying to steal my writing, eh?”

The doctor stood in the study doorway, his face too shadowed to make out. He walked further into the room. “Just as I thought,” he said, staring at the piece of parchment in my hand. “Just as I guessed you would, young Annie. Well done, Melusina. You guard my things better than any dog.”

“No,” I began, struggling even to speak because my throat felt stopped up. “No. I wasn’t stealing, truly. I came in here because I was too cold to sleep – and I was just – just looking –”

The doctor jumped towards me as if he was going to hit me. He placed a hairy hand just below my throat, his nails as long and filthy as an unclipped hound. “I knew you planned to steal something,” he muttered. “I knew it. But I also knew Melusina would do her duty.”

I swallowed drily, feeling the threat in his fingers around my neck. “I’m nosey, sir, that’s all,” I whispered. “I wouldn’t have stolen anything. You must believe me. I want to work with you.”

“I can’t see any reason,” the doctor growled, “why I shouldn’t kill you now. You’re not natural and – whatever you are – you are trying to steal my work. I’ve told you what could happen if this knowledge gets out before my cures are ready. You place me in danger, little girl. I ought to get rid of you.”

“Don’t do that,” I blurted out, quickly, trying to think on my feet. “Think what I could do for you. What would you like from my time?” I tried to think of some modern thing that would impress him, but panic seized up my mind.

“I could kill you in a single moment,” the doctor went on. His fierce, fire-lit eyes were terrifying as the very devil. “I have a dozen nice little creatures in there that

would be happy to despatch you. Quickly, or slowly – your choice, eh? I have a collection of deadly little vipers who would give you a nip for nothing. Melusina and I could watch as your skin swells and your breathing slows and your little heart gives out. No one would imagine it was anything other than the leprosy carrying you off.”

I didn't move a muscle, other than the trembling, which I couldn't help. His fingers were just tight enough to make it hard for me to breathe. I wanted to swallow but couldn't.

The doctor carried on, still with a mad grin on his face.

“Do you want to know what Melusina would do to you, if you annoyed her? She might bite you – and that would be very painful. But it wouldn't kill you. No, Melusina prefers to wrap herself around her prey and squeeze them to death. I don't suppose you'd be so brave and full of yourself as you turned blue, gasping for your last breath, eh?

“Meg tells me you were interested in my little mermaid. Not what you were expecting, I'm sure. And if I let her at you, she'd go straight for your throat, with those teeth of hers.

“Or else I could show you a special prize. My black serpent from the Far East. You could see how interesting he is when he tries to defend himself. He twists into such pretty little shapes. If he thinks he needs to attack you, then he will. I would be happy to watch you go quite mad as his poison courses through your blood. That's before you find you can't breathe and your whole body stiffens up. It would be quite a show. Quite a lesson for anyone else who thinks they may steal my work, eh?”

At this point he tightened his grip on my throat and I thought – either he's going to strangle me or else he's going to set one of his evil reptiles on me. Whatever happened, I thought I might be about to die.

And then the strangest, most unexpected thing happened. A voice shouted:
“Annie!”

Tom’s voice! The doctor whipped around and for just one instant – like the wavering flash of sheet lightning – I saw my Tom standing, white-faced and staring at us. Then, in the same wild moment, he disappeared again. But the doctor dropped his hand and stared open-mouthed at the space where we’d both just seen my brother. “Tom!” I sobbed, barely able to believe what I’d just seen. “Tom! Where are you?”

The doctor whirled back round towards me. “What dark magic is this?” he roared. “What spirit did you conjure up for help?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t speak.

The doctor stumbled towards a jug on one of his benches and poured dark-red wine into a cup. He threw it into his mouth, gulped it down quickly, then turned back to glare at me.

“What happened?” he demanded again.

I took some deep breaths and forced back my tears of relief. I gulped, my throat aching from the doctor’s strong fingers. Then I thought as fast as I could. “That was my spirit protector,” I blurted out, hoping that the doctor was frightened enough to believe me. “He will always come to save me when I’m in danger. And he’ll do terrible things to anyone who hurts me. It’s a good job you let me go.”

The doctor sat down, heavily, and poured himself more wine. He stared at me fixedly, a red rim around the dry skin on his lips. I stood up straight and met his eyes. I knew I mustn’t show him how scared I really was. You can use people’s fears. That’s what Haggstone did with her phoney séance. That’s why the doctor threatened me with his beasts. But *he* was afraid of what he didn’t understand. And he didn’t understand me.

At the same moment, we both turned to see Meg standing between the study and the snake room. I had no idea how long she'd been there or how much she'd seen. The doctor, pouring his third drink of wine, looked almost pleased. "Ah, Meg," he said. "Take your slippery friend back to your room to get some sleep. It's almost dawn and we have work to do tomorrow." As I left the study, he made for that pot on his desk and slid it into his cloak.

Meg said nothing as we walk out into the icy passageway. She stared straight ahead and was quiet. I realised I was still holding the page from the doctor's book. "He's forgotten about it," I thought, with a tiny smile, and tucked it into a side pocket in my skirt. Then Meg glanced at me, sideways, and to my surprise she suddenly and firmly linked my arm in hers. She marched me along a little faster. "You're touching me," I said.

She didn't answer that. Instead she said: "I saw that. All of it. I thought he was going to kill you. He would've done, you know."

"I know," I replied, as we pushed back the rough cloth that covered the entrance to Meg's cubby-hole. "So did you see –?"

"The boy," nodded Meg, as we huddled down into the one smelly skin blanket. "The boy with the long hair. What was he, Annie – some sort of angel?"

"Not likely," I snorted. "That was my brother, Tom. But I've no idea how he got here. Or why. I'm as shocked as you and the doctor."

"But he saved your life, I'm sure," said Meg. "The doctor was furious with you. You stole some of his book. I know you still have it, by the way."

"Are you going to remind him?" I asked.

"Not me," said Meg. "But you're heading for trouble, Annie. He will kill you if he wants to."

I tried to make out Meg's face, but the tiny room was still too dark. "Meg," I

asked. "Has he killed anyone before? On purpose, I mean?"

Meg hugged her knees to her skinny body and shivered.

"There was a man," she told me in a whisper. "He was a monk. One of the ones who helped found the hospital. He was a pompous old windbag, to be sure. But he was worried about the cures. He accused the doctor of witchcraft."

"And?" I urged her. "What happened?"

Meg shivered again and I put an arm around her shoulder.

"The doctor knows each and every creature in that room, Annie. He brought them back himself from countries far across the sea. He bred them and they don't harm him. But he has a little viper that's very poisonous. He picked it out and said he wanted to show it to the monk. And then he threw it right into his lap. I was there, I saw it all. The snake got angry and bit the man on the leg. He got ill in just a few minutes."

"Did no one ask questions?"

"Yes," Meg said. "The other monks came looking for him. The doctor showed him their friend in the hospital. His skin had swollen up and he could hardly breathe. The doctor told them he had the leprosy and they believed him. They couldn't get out of here fast enough. The monk died in a couple of days."

I nodded. It was horrible – but it didn't surprise me.

"Meg," I asked her. "Why do you stay here?"

She looked at me, with a little frown. "Where else would I go? No one will take in someone who has been living with lepers. They're all too afraid of getting ill. If I stay here, I might be able to help people. People like my father. He believed in the doctor, that he'd get it right one day. I think he would have wanted me to stay here."

I decided it was best not to argue with this. "Do you think he will? Get it right?" I asked her. "You told me you did, when we first met."

Meg sighed hard. “He’s such a clever man, Annie. It’s not my place to tell him what’s right and what’s wrong. And he’s made a salve that does many good things – but it costs more than gold – and it’s not finished. But maybe one day, who knows? He might get the cure after all.”

“Hmm,” I said.

We cuddled up and I closed my eyes, aching to get some sleep. But then Meg chirped up again. “Anyway, lady-in-blue. Was that a love letter from John the player?”

“Is that his name?” I asked, heavy-eyed. “John?” He was very handsome, I thought, and he had a smile that looked full of fun. Then I pinched myself. And he’d really been dead for hundreds of years, so it was stupid to dream about making him a special friend.

We somehow managed to snatch a little sleep, because before I knew it the room was a tiny bit lighter, although still just as cold. Meg stretched and yawned. “Let’s find some food to start the day,” she said, pulling me to my feet. I was stiff and all my limbs ached; my feet and fingers hung on me like dead, bloodless limbs.

Now I was awake, Tom sprang back into my mind. What Lucy told me made sense now: Tom was time-travelling too. Maybe only for a minute or two at a time and without knowing what he was doing. Poor Tom, I thought. If I’d done it all on my own, without Lady Hexer’s advice, I’d have been afraid to talk about it too. People would think I was crazy. I ached to get back to speak to him. But, I suddenly wondered, how would I get back this time? In my other journeys to the hospital, I believed it was Lady Hexer, watching over me and calling me back, that pulled me from the past to the present day. Or, after that time in the garden, Tom and Lucy repeated my name and, without knowing it, they willed me to come back to them. In the year 1899, I knew my body was lying alone on a little bed, locked in a bedroom in

Hexer Hall. Part of me was centuries away and all alone. Lady Hexer might have lost faith in me and Tom couldn't reach me. Who would call me back this time? Or was I stuck here forever?

7th January 1899. Hexer Hall.

Yesterday was Twelfth Night. The staff were busy clearing out all traces of Christmas greenery from the Hall, to ensure that no spirits can lurk in there to bring us bad luck in the coming months. It is all superstition and nonsense, of course. It is astonishing how these ancient old beliefs can last. Like bad reputations.

And as I look out over the grounds – still frozen solid – and watch the smoke curling up from today's bonfire, I begin to wonder how much nonsense I have taken into my own head recently. I imagined myself capable of great magic. I dreamed of being a bringer of knowledge, a healer of sickness - a mistress of Time itself. But now I fear it may all have been a great confidence trick. I do not entirely blame Agatha Haggstone, although I think I have wasted a great deal of time and money on her grand illusions. I blame myself for being so arrogant and utterly, utterly foolish.

Yesterday afternoon I was treated to a ridiculous performance by Agatha and her new protégée, Becky's young sister, a tiny, frightened young girl who is clearly acting under instruction. The child pretended to fall into a trance on my hearth. I watched as she struggled to stop herself from opening her eyes and peeping out at me. After a few minutes Haggstone called her name and she sat up with a broad smile, all gums where her front teeth have fallen out. Then she parroted out some phrases about meeting a doctor who promised he would give her his book of cures. When I pressed her for details she was unable to give any – what the doctor looked like, a description of the hospital, anything at all other than the lines she'd clearly been taught to say. I sent her off to have tea in the kitchen with her sister. Then I confronted Agatha with my suspicions, that I was being

taken for a fool. She acted as if she was hugely insulted, of course, and warned me that I should take her predictions and advice seriously. But I find I no longer believe anything she says. I am almost certain that the incident with the ghost was, as Annie claimed, a piece of clever theatre. I will have to think of a way to ask Miss Haggstone to leave, with dignity, whilst making sure she does not ruin my reputation further by telling everyone what has been going on.

The faint, pleasant scent of wood smoke is creeping like incense through my windows. There is a sharper undertone to this scent – something which smells strange and exotic. The men have tried to throw some of the new wild plants onto the fire. They blame young Tom for bringing these new growths to the gardens. They are indeed very strange: in spite of the cruel weather, which is killing the old and young of the village, these plants are somehow thriving, creeping throughout the grounds, gripping and choking everything in their way. I would speak to young Tom about it, but the other men tell me he is ill with the spreading fever and shut away in his cottage. Besides, he may ask me awkward questions about his sister.

Late last night, a further disturbing thing happened. I had trouble sleeping and was overcome by a strong urge to check on Annie in her room. I'm not sure if I wanted to make sure that she was well or perhaps reassure myself that that she too is not tricking me. Whatever my reasons, I found myself almost propelled along the landing to her bedroom – where I found the door slightly ajar. I dashed in to find Becky and Agatha leaning over the girl, who was unconscious on top of the bed. The light was not good – but I thought I saw Agatha pressing down on Annie's sleeping face. Naturally, they both jumped back as soon as I entered the room, so it is impossible to say for sure. But it is just, terrifyingly, possible – that Annie was about to be killed. I was in shock. I demanded to know what they were doing in the room. They had a story ready, however. Agatha claims she was walking along the landing when she thought she heard Annie crying. Becky let her in, she claimed, and

they had found the child having some sort of nightmare. Agatha says she was moving the girl's pillows to make her more comfortable. I ordered them both away. Becky's face was as red as if she'd been slapped and she could not meet my eye. Miss Haggstone was as enigmatic as ever. I could neither prove nor disprove their version of events – but I have made sure I now have all copies of the key to Annie's room.

And events get even stranger. When the pair had gone, I felt Annie's forehead, which was damp with sweat. But she seemed to be breathing regularly. I pulled the eiderdown over her to keep her warm – and under her limp arm I found a folded piece of paper. No, not paper – some kind of old parchment, thick and brown with age. It looked like a page from a larger volume. On it were writings and drawings. I slid it out and took it with me. I need to study it with great care, when I can be sure of being absolutely private – but the writing seems archaic and the drawings remind me of one of the older family herbals from my library. Even Annie cannot be such a forger. It surely has to be genuine.

Ah, Annie. What are you? Are you the clever time-traveller I believed you to be or are you an ingenious little confidence trickster, smarter than your upbringing would have allowed? And what bond between us brought me to your bedside last night where – I do fear – I may have saved your life.

The strange thing is – I rather miss my little talks with you, Annie. You have a spark that makes me smile, intelligence beyond your years and – a sadness in your eyes that touches me in some deep, forgotten place inside.

January 7th. Or 8th. Or maybe 9th. Definitely January, and deepest winter. (I asked Meg what year it was and she didn't know.) She was able to tell me we are at St. Bartholomew's leper hospital, somewhere in the bare borderlands between England and Scotland. I'd been in this wretched place of sickness and death for longer than

ever before. I'd lost track of whether it was two or three days and nights. I now knew my way well around the passages of the hospital and around the courtyard. I tucked away my blue dress in Meg's little cell and I wore the russet-coloured tunic with a hood that all the lepers here wore. It was made of stiff, rough, woollen material that itched my skin, but it was thick enough to keep out some of the cold. I knew how to milk the cows and I knew where the hens and geese laid their eggs. I was glad Meg didn't ask me to help her with the creatures again, though. I found the doctor's herbal garden, too. It was covered in snow, of course, but I could see that it was laid out in the same way that Tom planned for the grounds of Hexer Hall.

I also now knew the names of some of the patients. I tried to remember that they weren't horrible monsters, just because of the way they looked, anymore than I was. They liked a kind word just the same as anyone. Last night the sad lady in the little room died and her sister followed her a few hours later, just as she'd known would happen. How terrible to know you are going to die and no one is to help you. I saw their bodies being wrapped up in blankets and laid on the cart. I hoped they never knew they'd be thrown out to the icy sea for the fish to eat.

I was torn over what to do next. I so, so wanted to get back to Tom. I hadn't seen another glimpse of him here, yet. But I guessed he would be back in our real time, believing he was having terrible nightmares or wild imaginings. I was the only one who could tell him he wasn't going mad. He would also be worrying about me. But I had to get this book of medicines. If I went back without it, Lady Hexer would always think I was a liar and a trickster. Tom would be sent away from his Lucy and neither of us would have a job or a home. The horrid Haggstone would keep digging her grasping claws into Lady Hexer's mind as well as her money. I knew I shouldn't care about Lady Hexer. She didn't care about me, only what she thought I could do for her. But I still didn't want to see her duped and diddled by that scheming old

toad. So I couldn't go back until I'd done what I promised. It was just turning out so much harder than I thought.

Every time the doctor went out, he left his creepy guard Melusina in the study and I was too afraid to go past her. Meg told me that he couldn't take her very far at the moment because she really belonged in a hot country and the cold might kill her off. So I knew she would always be there. And there were all the other creatures from his nasty little collection. They could've been lurking anywhere in his study too.

After a long time, I thought of a plan. Or half of a plan, more like, but I had to give it a try. Time was running out.

Meg had been plaguing me to see the note from John, the young player. So today, we sat in the courtyard watching some food arrive on a cart from the nearby town and I offered to show her the thing. I hoped she would be able to tell me what some of the words meant, because although I was getting better at hearing Meg, John's language may as well have been from another world. But it turned out she could barely read. Only one or two words she'd picked up from her time with the doctor. So I read what I could out loud to her. I was squinting at his writing and struggling to get my tongue around the words. Some of them were a little like the words I would use, but not many. It said something about my eyes matching my blue ribbons – I think - and my having a sad smile. A bit soppy for me. But Meg clasped her hands together and put them next to her heart.

“Oh, Annie! He's fond of you! How sweet! He must have paid a scribe to write it out. That will have cost some money.”

“Fond of me? I'm not thirteen yet,” I pointed out.

She gave me her favourite sideways look, like she thought I was a complete fool. “I had a cousin who was married at fourteen. And young John himself is no more than fifteen, I'm sure. I think his father is a baker in the town. Quite wealthy. John's

had a bit of schooling, just like you. You should answer him, Annie.”

“Ah,” I said, sadly. “But I’m too ashamed. What about my hair?”

“Hmm,” Meg agreed. “It’s not very pretty. You should’ve let the doctor try to cure it when he offered.”

“Meg,” I said. “I’d be so happy if my hair grew back and I didn’t have to hide it. But I’m afraid of asking the doctor. He was so angry when he thought I was stealing his papers.”

Meg put her head on one side. “You can’t blame him for that.”

I waited a moment. “Meg,” I said, as if I’d just thought of it. “Would you come with me and ask if he’ll try to cure me? He listens to you.”

Meg frowned. “I could,” she said. “But he might say no. And, Annie – the cures. They may not be – to your liking.”

I swallowed. “Would they involve snakes?”

“I don’t know,” Meg admitted. “But even so, he might ask you to eat or drink something that doesn’t suit you. You’re a bit of a fuss-pot, you know, Annie.”

I took no notice of this. My thinking was that it may be a way to get back into the doctor’s study for a good length of time and I could work out my next move from there.

We had some cleaning up to do. I tried to make some of the patients more comfortable, but it wasn’t easy. Once all our work was done and the late afternoon went dusky we made our way back to the doctor’s study. Meg knocked on his door, going in before me.

After a few moments, she beckoned me in. I saw the serpent curled up beside the fire.

The doctor looked at me through eyes full of mistrust, his arms folded across his chest.

“So, Miss. There is a suitor outside the gates, Meg tells me. And suddenly you care about how you look.”

I nodded, trying to look like a girl in love. The very idea made my face go warm and red. The doctor took this to mean he was right and roared with laughter. “Ah, well,” he said, winking at me. “I would hate to stand in the way of Cupid and his arrow. Let’s talk about what we can do.”

I pulled back my hood and he fingered the spongy skin on my scalp. I hated anyone so much as seeing it, let alone touching it, but I stopped myself from squirming away. He checked again that I had no other symptoms of leprosy, and then hummed and hah-ed to himself.

“There is a medicine for this,” he told me. “It may be a little -unpleasant. But worth it, I imagine, if it means you can look pretty for your young piper-boy.”

“Does it,” I asked, breathing hard, “involve snakes? Because if so, I don’t think I can face it.”

He gave me his twisted grin. “Not snakes, this time. Are you afraid of any other animals?”

I thought for a minute. “None that come to mind. Unless you have a tiger hidden in the room somewhere.”

The doctor laughed. “Certainly not. I think we will be able to try out our cures, then. Come back before you go to bed and I will have prepared something for you.”

I hesitated. “The thing is, doctor – I am so afraid of your creatures. Do you think – when I come back for my treatment – that Melusina could be in the other room? Where I come from – in my time – it is thought that being very afraid of something can stop you from getting better. It – makes the heart beat too fast for - er

– a proper recovery.” I made this bit up, of course, but the doctor nodded wisely and said it made a lot of sense.

It was quite late in the evening when I went back to the study. Meg came with me and she carried the heavy Melusina into the stinky, steamy room where the other beasts are kept. Braver than me, I thought, admiring her. I couldn't touch that thing to save my life. The doctor was waiting and on his desk were two bowls. I smelled some kind of meat in one and the doctor handed it to me.

“What is it?” I wrinkled my nose.

He rolled his eyes. “Just eat it, girl. It's not poison.”

I hesitated again and sniffed at the bowl. I couldn't tell what was in it. The doctor gave a snort of annoyance and grabbed at a piece of the meat with his fingers, then stuffed it into his mouth and chewed.

“Not poison,” he repeated. “See?”

I picked up a piece of the fleshy stuff and put it in my mouth, ready to gag. In fact, it didn't taste too bad, though very salty. I managed to finish the small amount in the bowl.

The next part was the worst. I got worried when I saw the doctor put on a thick leather glove. He picked up a sliver of something wrapped in a cloth. “You won't like this bit,” he warned me. “But you have to put up with it if you want that hair to grow back.”

He pushed back my hood, rubbed his hand across my scalp and I screamed in pain. It was like being pricked with a million pins and needles. “What is that?” Tears were pouring from my eyes.

“I'll tell you in a minute,” the doctor grunted.

Then he picked up the other bowl, which had some sort of thick, pale stuff in it that looked like lard. I pulled a face.

“This isn’t to eat,” he told me. “This is an ointment.”

Roughly, he rubbed the warm, thick grease into my scalp and then wrapped my stinging head in a muslin bandage. “Keep it on,” he said. I was sure I could feel my scalp bleeding from the hundreds of tiny prick wounds.

“Are you going to tell me what you’ve used on me?” I asked again.

He wiped his fingers. “Hedgehog, of course. Flesh, spines and fat.”

“Oh,” I said. No wonder it hurt. I tried not to think about how I’d just eaten one of the creatures, although my stomach gave a lurch. I squeezed back the tears. My head still burned with pain. “How will that help?”

“It’s common sense, girl. The hedgehog is all spiky quills. I use its elements to produce the same in you. Your hair will spring up too. This one works – I’ve seen it work before.”

Then – he did exactly what I hoped he’d do. He went into the steamy reptile room next door and started talking to Meg. I took my chance and pulled the heavy wooden door shut behind him, dragging the thick iron bolt across. I heard him roar and hammer on the door with his fists. I also heard Meg shouting: “Annie! No! Don’t be so stupid!”

I ran across to the desk, where the doctor’s big book sat, open. One side was propped up at an angle against some kind of mottled jar. I started pulling the huge book towards me. Then the jar toppled over - and that’s when I saw it. A slim, black and red patterned snake slid out of the jar as smoothly as blood from a wound. It hissed at me and raised its body like a forbidding finger. Its tiny tongue flickered so fast it blurred. For a moment or two I completely froze. Then – as the thing was about to strike at me – I threw the heavy volume at it with as much force as I could manage. I didn’t know if I hit it or not, but I ran to the bolted door and heaved it open, before running back out and along the stone passageway, panting and sweating.

For once, I was glad it was dark. I blundered along, the blood pounding through my head and chest. I was a little way ahead of Meg and the doctor because they'd taken a moment or two to realise they were free. But I heard the doctor shouting and gaining on me. I blindly felt right and left for somewhere to hide.

And then I saw him again – Tom. He was standing near the entrance to a hospital room, his face death-white and terrified.

“Annie!” he shouted and held out his arms. I ran into them and hugged him hard. “Annie!” he said again, his breath heavy. “I’m having some terrible nightmare. But at least it’s better now that you’re with me!”

“It’s not a dream,” I told him. I pinched him hard on the arm to prove it. He winced and looked over my shoulder. I turned to see Meg and the doctor, standing still as stone and staring at us.

“What new trick is this?” the doctor bellowed, almost as afraid as he was furious. “What are you, sir?”

Tom just stood there looking baffled, with his mouth open.

Then Meg blurted out: “It’s only Annie’s brother. He’s not harmful. She told me so.”

I stood in front of Tom. “He’ll take me away with him if you try to harm me,” I said, as boldly as I could manage. “And,” I went on, thinking on my feet. “When I get out, I’ll tell everyone about your witchcraft. All the priests and parish people will get to know. And they’ll close down your hospital and they’ll put you in prison. Both of you,” I added, meanly, to Meg, even though I knew that wasn’t very fair.

Tom held my shoulders with a tight grip. I turned my face to him. “I’ll explain all this someday soon,” I murmured. “But for now, just know that you’re not dreaming and you’re not going mad. It’ll be all right, Tom.”

Tom still looked as if he had no idea what’s going on. Which, of course, he

hadn't. Poor thing. He dropped his grip on my shoulders for a moment and – of all the bad luck! – he suddenly faded away like a rainbow, into the dark.

I cursed. "If he'd still been holding on to me, I'm sure I would've gone back with him. Now I'm stuck."

I looked wildly round but it was too late to run. The doctor marched forward and grabbed me firmly by the wrist.

"It looks as if you're not going anywhere now." He pulled me roughly along the passageway with him, back to the study. Now it was my turn to be very afraid. To be really honest – I was almost wetting myself. "Did you catch the snake?" I asked, in a bit of a whimper. "It's not still slithering around in here, is it?"

He pushed me onto a wooden chair and leaned down. His face was right next to mine. "Maybe I did," he snarled. "But maybe I didn't. Maybe it's about to drop on your head from the shelf. Maybe it's about to crawl under your skirt and up your leg. Who knows, eh? You'll just have to stay very, very still and hope you don't make it angry."

This was too much to bear. I liked to think I was brave. Until it came to those creatures. They turned my blood to ice. "I'm sorry," I pleaded. I could hardly get the words out because my teeth were chattering so hard. "I don't know what came over me. I promise I won't –"

The doctor held up a hand.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You asked me for help and then you tried to steal my work. Again. You will stay here for the night while I decide what to do with you. Meg will keep an eye on you. Melusina will help."

He gave Meg a long rant about how untrustworthy I was and how she had to be on her guard all night. No sleep allowed. Then he stomped out, taking his flask of wine with him. I heard a bolt slide firmly across the study door. He was very angry

but, I was sure, he'd lost his nerve as far as hurting me goes. Perhaps he thought I might conjure up an army of big brothers to sort him out. Oh. If only I could!

Meg glared at me. "I haven't had any food for ages," she grumbled. "And now I have to sit with *that* thing." She nodded at Melusina, who was coiled up in front of the fire again. "And I have to look at your fool of a face all night."

"Think yourself lucky," I said. "I had to eat hedgehog."

She didn't smile. "There's nothing so wrong with that. I don't know what fine foods servants eat where you come from, Annie. You go on as if you're a princess or something."

"No, I don't," I argued. "Anyway, it's not so nice when you have their prickles rubbed all over your head." I touched my scalp, which was tender and sticky through the bandage. Meg winced for a second, but she wasn't about to make peace. "You acted like you were my friend. I trusted you. You asked me for help. And all you wanted was to try to steal the book again."

"I'm sorry," I said and I meant it. "I am your friend. At least, I want to be. I didn't plan to lie to you. But it's so important that I show Lady Hexer the book. It might be a matter of life and death. In fact –" I wondered if this would work – "if I could just borrow it, then I could bring it back before the doctor even noticed?"

Meg made a snorting noise. "You must think I am really stupid." She wriggled a little closer to the fire, carefully, so as not to disturb the big snake.

It was going to be a very long night.

January 8th, 1899. Hexer Hall.

The cold weather has not relented. It seems to be following a pattern. First, the snow comes down, in fat flakes, thick and fast. Then the temperature drops and it all freezes

hard. If the mercury rises a degree or two, then the snow falls again. It means that outside there is layer upon layer of thick ice, almost impossible to walk across. The window panes are so whitened with frost that it is difficult to see out and everything seems unnaturally still. It is harder and harder to heat up the Hall, even though there are fires in almost every room. I have never known anything like it.

I have spoken at length to Mrs McKinnon, who has worked for me since the early days of my marriage and who is one of my most trusted members of staff. The situation is very worrying. It seems some kind of sickness is creeping through the staff and many of them are seriously ill. This includes young Tom and several of the labourers. This sickness may have come from the village, she says, and it may be because of the dreadful weather. But of course many still think there is some connection to the strange plants which continue to strangle the grounds. I do not have enough staff at the moment to cut them back, so every part of the grounds is now covered in these thick tendrils, bright green and firm, even though they're topped with ice as thick as marzipan.

Mrs McKinnon confirmed she has seen Becky having many secret conversations with Miss Haggstone. McKinnon believes Becky is a hard worker – I know this, of course – but that she has ideas above her station and longs to better herself. This ambition may have led her to try to place her little sister into my household. That, I think, I can forgive. But McKinnon, it appears, has never trusted Miss Haggstone. It is her belief that Agatha Haggstone may not even be her real name and that she has changed it several times to avoid charges of fraud, connected with her medium practice in Edinburgh. I only wish Mrs McKinnon felt she could come to me earlier with this suspicion – at least before I took the wretched woman so far into my confidence. It is now risky to upset her too much, and let her tongue wag about me.

Now to more strange happenings. I have to confess that I couldn't resist stealing into Annie's room again this evening, just to check that she was well. I am disturbed by

what I found there. She still lies sleeping on the bed, but I noticed a stain on the pillow. Her scalp has been bleeding badly and is somehow covered in tiny sores like pin pricks. I wondered if Becky or Haggstone could have been in the room to harm her, but I am certain I now have all the keys. I asked Mrs McKinnon to fetch me a jar of Taylor's Healing Ointment and I rubbed it gently over her scalp. I am not sure how useful this stuff is, of course, but it is all I have to hand. It felt strange for me, who has never been the motherly type, to be ministering to a child, but somehow I knew it was the right thing to do, whether Annie is aware of it or not. The poor little thing whimpers and fidgets in her sleep and I wonder what is going on in her world. It crossed my mind that I ought to try to call her back immediately – that perhaps this lengthy period of time-travelling is taking too much of a toll on her. But then I thought – a few more days and she may bring me the prize I've always wanted. And then, surely, I could make it up to her. Yes – just a few more days.

The same night. Sometime in January. Still in the hospital.

I sat and stared into the fire. Meg kept her back to me, like a sulky cat. I tried talking to her but she took no notice. I even tried humming the little tune the musicians played. "Remember when we danced out in the snow, Meg?" I said. But she just made a tutting sound. I gave up.

I thought hard about Tom. It seemed so odd that I'd seen him here only twice, but both times when I was in the worst danger. Did he somehow know I was threatened? Is that what pulled him here? But how could he know where he was going? What symbols brought him into the past? Or else – and this is what I thought was the most likely – was it me, somehow willing him to come? Did my need for him drag him back over time to be with me? I didn't like that idea, because it meant I was putting him in the same sort of danger as I was myself. And he hadn't agreed to it.

But it might explain how he wasn't able to stay for more than a few moments. Just long enough to save my life.

I have studied the parchment I found in Annie's room. Of course she cannot have made this up herself. I am ashamed of myself for ever thinking such a terrible wrong about the child. This document is written in a mixture of languages, as if to deliberately confuse the reader and to keep the knowledge secret. It has taken me the best part of two hours to make sense of this small fragment. But it is more exciting than I could have expected. It talks of the preparation called theriac, which the doctor will only use on his more wealthy patients because of its expensive ingredients – notably, the flesh of vipers, but a total of sixty-four other ingredients. He was able to bring some of this theriac back from his journeys abroad to Venice. After his supplies ran out, however, he has created his own version. For this very purpose, he brought back his own reptiles and a true menagerie of creatures and has bred them in careful conditions in his hospital – but all in secret, for the drug and the very snakes themselves are associated with dark magic.

He is not the first to work with these cures. But he combines them with his own form of magic. He talks of harnessing energies and natural powers to add great strength to the drugs. And of course he is able to test them directly on his own patients.

The thing is – the principle seems to be the same for any illness. The poison cleanses the body of the sickness so that it can be repaired and the extra magic worked by this great doctor boosts the power of the cures. I just need to know the right ingredients and combinations and I too will be able to work these wonders on the diseases of our time. Oh, Annie! Hurry back and bring me more of this!

Later, the same, long night.

And then I thought about Lady Hexer and what she wanted me to do. I boiled when I looked at that book, still sitting on the desk like a fat little king on a wooden throne. If I made a move towards it, Meg would be on me like a spring. And no doubt that wretched snake would do its part too. But there it was, the only reason I was here, just a few feet away from me.

Something else frightened me, though. What if I was able to bring that book back to Hexer Hall in my year 1899? It was full of the doctor's ideas about curing people – and in spite of what Lady Hexer believed, weren't they a little crazy? Worse! Weren't they dangerous? I thought about the poor sisters who were sent half-mad before they died. The doctor didn't cure them. And what of the other patients here? Not one of them told me they were getting any better. So many patients die, half of the bodies are thrown out to sea so that the church doesn't notice. All I could see here were people in terrible pain. People turned into monsters by sickness. Lady Hexer thought this dead relative of hers was a forgotten genius. I wondered if he was forgotten because he didn't cure people at all.

Time. Even the very air is easier to pin down, I thought. I have bent time and travelled through it. But it still carries on. It's behind me and ahead of me, where ever I am. People say: Time will tell. And it has told. Time did not save the memory or the work of this doctor. If he cured people of terrible diseases, Time would have kept his work. There was a reason why this book was lost. I realised I shouldn't be the one to bring this book of spells and poison back to modern days. I might be doing something very, very wrong.

9th January, 1899

I barely slept and the night hours have ticked by interminably slowly. In the very early hours I crept back into Annie's room – in the faint hope that she would be back with me and fully conscious. But she still lay on the little bed in whatever trance envelops her. I started to have unexpected thoughts – such as, whether she was eating properly, back in the past. Whether those wounds on her head mean that someone is hurting her. Whether I should try to call her back, just to give her a meal and check she is quite safe. But I must take hold of my emotions. I am not the girl's mother. I must not allow myself to care more for her well-being than for the reason I brought her here in the first place, which was only as an expendable messenger to bring me something I need.

I got so sick of pacing the carpet that I pulled on my cloak and crept downstairs. There has been so much snow that the moon was not visible and the stars were also clouded. Only the snow lightened the grounds. The night was chilled and gloomy as a churchyard. I wandered, without really planning it, to the site of my new gardens and all along I saw these unnatural plants and growths that make everyone so afraid. I can understand it. They seem to give off a faint odour of sickness and death. Have they come straight from the past? Have they fought their way through centuries? Has Annie's visit prompted something to live again – and if so, is it good or evil?

I swear I saw a tendril grow longer even as I watched it. A trick of the dark, of course, but I scared myself enough to hurry back indoors.

The next morning.

The darkness faded to the dull grey of another snowy day. I heard the bolt creak and the doctor came into the room. He looked as if he hadn't slept well either. The rings under his eyes were almost as black as his hair and his chin is as grizzly as an old goat. Meg was dozing and she jumped to her feet when the door opened. The doctor

looked relieved to find me – and his book - still here. “Sleep well?” he asked, as if he really hoped I didn’t.

“All is well, sir,” Meg said. “May I get something to eat? I had nothing last night.”

“Off you go.” The doctor waved his hand and Meg rushed out of the door. I heard her feet pattering along the stone passageway.

“Still here, then,” the doctor said, sitting in front of me. “Not able to magic yourself away somewhere?”

I shook my head.

“I’ve been thinking hard about you, Annie,” the doctor went on. “You give me quite a problem. You came here and asked for help. I was kind enough to treat your deformity – without so much as a fee. And now I believe you only wanted to trick me, nothing more.

“I would send you away. But as you pointed out yesterday, you could cause me a great deal of trouble. The monks who fund the hospital are very nervous about any mention of witchcraft. They’re already suspicious about some of my methods. It would just take one silly girl jabbering about snakes and the like, and I could be finished. What do they do with witches where you come from, Annie?”

I shrugged. “They don’t really believe in them, much. They’re just in stories.”

The doctor scratched his chin. “Well. Here they burn them. I don’t intend to die in shame and agony because of a nuisance of a girl like you.”

All right,” I said. I was worn out by now and couldn’t think of anything clever to say or do. “I promise not to tell anyone about your work. No one at all.”

“Ah. But I can’t trust you, Annie. That much I do know. So – what would you do if you were me?”

I looked up at him. “Can’t we work together? I’m cleverer than Meg, I can

read and write. Maybe I could help you.”

The doctor gave a nasty laugh and shook his head. “You don’t give up easily. But no. The safest thing for me to do is to get rid of you, Annie, so that mouth is shut for ever. You’re dangerous.”

“Get rid of me?” I asked, my skin suddenly crawling. “What do you mean?”

The study door opened and Meg came in. The doctor shot me a look that warned me to be quiet. “I think you know what I’m saying,” he muttered. Then he turned cheerily to Meg. “Ah. Food.”

She’d brought oatcakes, ham and ale. My stomach gurgled hungrily. I thought about the breakfasts at Hexer Hall: bacon, eggs, cold meats, buttered toast with those wonderful preserves. And hot tea.

“May Annie eat?” Meg asked the doctor.

To my relief, he nodded and I almost snatched at the food. The crumbs around Meg’s mouth told me she’d already helped herself.

“Enjoy it,” the doctor said. “But don’t let her go anywhere,” he added to Meg. He glanced back at me. “Remember my little pet is still around. Don’t touch my book.” He gave me a last evil glare and stamped out of the room.

I looked at Meg. “Thank you for the food. I’m starving.”

She didn’t answer. I finished a mouthful and swallowed. “He’s going to kill me, Meg.”

Meg shook her head. “He wouldn’t really.” Her voice didn’t sound too sure. “Not on purpose. He’s just gets angry and says things like that.”

I leaned forward and put my hand on her knee. I felt how thin and bony it was under the thick cloth of her skirt. “No, Meg, he means it. Just before you came back, he told me he was going to get rid of me for good.”

Meg got up and picked up some bits of wood from a pile on the hearth. She

threw them onto the fire and poked at it with an iron rod, making the bits of flames sputter and spit.

“Meg,” I said, more urgently. “I have caused trouble, trying to get the doctor’s book. But only for a good reason. Please don’t say you think I should die for it.”

“Of course I don’t,” she muttered. “But you keep making things up, Annie. I never know what to believe with you. You tell stories about the future and I’ve never heard anything so daft in my life. But really you just want to steal something.”

“Listen,” I pleaded with her. “You find my story hard to believe. Well – if I’m honest, so do I. I know it sounds completely crazy. But here I am, Meg. With my funny clothes and my strange way of talking. I couldn’t make up all that stuff I’ve told you – about the time I’ve come from. I’m telling it because it’s true.

“And Meg, I’m not trying to steal the doctor’s book because I’m a bad person. I’m doing it for someone else, who has a lot of power. Power over me and also over my brother. Please let me explain it all to you.”

We sat for a long while as I told her my whole story from the beginning. At first, she sat with her arms folded in front of her and her mouth set in a firm line. But some things interested her so much that she couldn’t help asking questions. She was wide-eyed when I described my bedroom at Hexer Hall and the beautiful clothes Lady Hexer bought for me. I had to give her every last detail. I told her how my bed was specially warmed, what the fastenings on my coat were made of, what luxuries we ate at mealtimes. And other things touched her: such as when I told her how much I missed Mam. How I wanted to stay with Tom and how we would be homeless and penniless if he lost his job. How “But, Meg,” I finished up. “Now I’m not just worried that I won’t get the doctor’s works back to Lady Hexer. I’m worried what will happen if I do. Those cures don’t work, Meg – some of them hurt people, instead

of making them better. The doctor doesn't want to admit it, but I can see it. I really don't know what to do."

Meg stared down at her hands. "Look what he did to me, Meg," I said. "All right, eating the hedgehog meat doesn't sound so bad, to you anyway. But look at this." I shook back my hood. Carefully, wincing at the soreness, I unwound the sticky cloth from my head and showed Meg the mess of blood, scabs and ointment.

"Oh," she breathed and puts a hand out as if to touch it. "I thought he would use his special –" Then she changed her mind and put her hand on my lap. I grasped her fingers.

"And what if the doctor gets rid of me, as he put it?" I went on. "What will happen? It won't help the patients here. They'll keep on dying. And Tom will never see me again. He'll never know what happened to his sister. He'll be broken-hearted. And then, Lady Hexer will just try to find someone else who can go back in time. She'll keep trying to get her hands on those writings. Some new child will be put in danger. It won't stop."

Meg bit her lip. There was a long silence.

"What are you going to do, Annie?" she asked. Her voice sounded wet with misery.

"I've been thinking and thinking," I told her. "Some of the pages in the doctor's book are loose. I think I could take some of them without him noticing. I just need to find a way to get back. Problem is, I don't know how to make myself get back on my own. But if I could – with just some of those pages – I might be able to make Lady Hexer see that they're not proper cures at all. The thing is, Meg – I have to do it quickly, before the doctor tries to – you know – send me on my way. So to speak." Another pause, but I could almost hear Meg's mind working. Then she said: "One

time when you disappeared – you were in my little room. You just stepped out and you were gone.”

I thought about this. “Yes. Every time I’ve gone back I’ve been out in that passageway. And every time I’ve come back here, that’s where I’ve found myself. So that’s part of it.

I stood up and made for the desk. I glanced under the table. “Meg, is that snake still crawling around?” I asked, my eyes darting about.

“The one from last night?” Meg half-smiled. “Don’t worry about that one, you idiot. It’s probably the least dangerous one we’ve got.”

“It looked pretty mean to me,” I said. “I’m sure it was going to bite me.”

“Well, it would if it had to,” Meg explained. “But those ones are very nervous. And we have a cure for bites. Yes, a proper cure that works,” she said, seeing my face. “Horehound and camomile and – something else. I’d have to ask. But anyway,” she grinned. “I put it back in its glass last night.”

“Right then.” I turned some of the heavy pages of the book. Most of them were loose and folded. I slid four or five thick pieces of paper out from different parts of the book. I lifted my tunic and – with a wink to Meg – I tucked them into my underwear. She raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

“Come with me,” I said. “If we get caught, say I needed to use the pot.” We made our way along to Meg’s little cubby-hole.

“There’s one more thing,” I said. I unrolled the little note from John, the player. On the back, I scribbled, trying my best to write in a way that would be understood: *“Dear John. Thank you for your nice words but I am going away and will not be coming back. If you can, get Meg away from here. Then stay away from this place forever. This doctor is doing terrible things. Everyone around him is in danger. I will not forget you or your music. Your lady in blue, Annie.”*

I looked at it for a moment, wondering what magic had helped me find the words in this strange language. Then I handed it to Meg. “If the players come back,” I told her, “Give this to John for me.”

“What does it say?” asked Meg.

“Just – goodbye.” Then I thought hard for a moment, trying to picture myself getting back to Hexer Hall.

“I don’t know if this will work,” I said. “But let’s give it a try. I’ll stand in your room, like I did before. You push me out through the doorway. Let’s see if it - I don’t know –makes something happen.”

So we stood, looking at each other for a moment, feeling a bit silly. Then Meg leaned forward, awkwardly, and put her arms around me. I hugged her, not too hard because she was so thin I almost felt I might bruise her.

“If you get away,” she whispered to me, “don’t come back. It will be too dangerous for you. If you get away, stay away.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ve no plans to come back. Goodbye, Meg.”

Suddenly Meg gave me a firm push, out through the cloth which covers the way in to her sleeping quarters. It gave me a fright and I stumbled backwards.

Later. January 9th

An awkward situation arose this morning. The maid Lucy brought up a tray of tea and after she set it on the table, she hovered around, jumpily. I thanked her and said she may go. But then she blurted out, in a terrified voice, that Tom was still confined to the gardener’s cottage, very unwell. She asked if she could take Annie to visit her brother, as she was sure it would make him feel better.

I tried to say a firm no.

“Why, Lucy, if Tom is ill then the last thing we should do is send little Annie anywhere near him,” I told her. “She may well fall prey to whatever infection he has. He seems a robust young man – I’m sure he will recover soon, and then, by all means, you may take Annie to see him.”

Lucy stood, twisting her pinny in her fingers, looking close to tears.

“The thing is, Ma’am, he is having these strange dreams. He says he finds himself in some strange old stone building and Annie is there – sometimes being threatened by some evil-looking old man.”

I found myself staring at the girl, speechless.

“I’ve tried to comfort him and say they are just dreams – that Annie is quite safe, here in the Hall with you. But when he asks if I have seen Annie, I have to tell him I have not seen her at all, not for a few days. Nor has Becky or Mrs McKinnon. He’s most anxious to see her just for a few moments, Madam. Just to prove that his dreams are – well, just dreams.”

I was so taken aback that I didn’t quite know what to do, but I held my nerve. “Lucy, you cannot be suggesting Annie is not safe?” I said. “It should be quite enough for you to know she is in my care. It should be enough for that young man too. Annie will visit her brother when I decide she is strong enough and not before. Now go away and please stop pestering me when I am having my morning tea.”

The girl ran out of the room. I stared down at my cup. What could this mean – that Annie’s brother has followed her to the past? How could that happen? And how long could I keep explaining why Annie had not come out of her room for such a time; why no one is being allowed in to see her? Haggstone knows the truth, of course, but I hope to come to a generous financial arrangement with her and I trust she will pack her bags as soon as Annie completes her mission. Becky is sworn to secrecy and she wants to keep her job. The fewer people who know about this experiment the better. I can’t have Lucy gossiping all

across Hexerdale.

And then I rather panicked. I should have been kinder to the girl – Lucy is a soft-hearted creature and was probably weeping in the kitchen, with all my staff around her patting her shoulders. I decided I would have to bring Annie back from the past, just to prove that she is alive and well. In a way, this is not too much of a hardship as her safety has been preying on my mind.

So I went into her room. There she was, apparently sleeping, but fitfully, as if in a very bad nightmare. I took the snake-patterned tile from her grip and called her name. I had to do it several times but suddenly – and this was very strange – she seemed to land down on the bed as if she'd fallen from the air. Yet she had never left her sleeping position. I blinked and questioned my own eyes – perhaps anxiety had made them play that particular trick on me. And a moment after this strange illusion, the girl sat up rigidly and gasped.

“Oh!” she said to me, wide-eyed. “Did you call me back, Lady Hexer?”

“I did, Annie,” I said, gently, placing a hand across her forehead, which was still clammy with a cool sweat. She stared around the room for a minute or two, collecting herself. Then, asking me to excuse her, she turned away, hitched up her skirts and produced – I don't like to think where from! – a sheaf of documents, with a similar aged appearance to the last one I'd found. She apologised again for the immodest display, but I shook my head. I was so relieved to find her well.

I persuaded her to wash her face and hands and wrap a scarf around her head, then come with me to the drawing room, where I would order her some food and drink. She wanted nothing more than hot tea. And as we waited, I asked about the scratches on her scalp. She launched into a long story of incredible detail about visiting the hospital, about speaking to the doctor, about his serpents and about the rather painful cure that he inflicted upon her. It all fits together perfectly.

But one aspect of her story troubles me greatly. She is convinced that the doctor is not curing his patients – worse, that he is harming them – with his experiments. She said she has brought me the pages from the book for two reasons – to prove that she is telling the truth and also to show me how misguided the medicines are. She pleaded with me to believe this and to give up my quest.

I tried to suggest that she has no medical knowledge (or indeed barely any education at all) and is therefore in no position to question the doctor's work. Just bring me the complete volume, I told her, and I will promise to study it responsibly. But I cannot carry out any meaningful work on a mere handful of pages, fascinating as they are. "You must go back, my dear," I told her. "I have only brought you here today to visit your brother, who is feeling unwell. Lucy tells me he would like to see you."

It was Mrs McKinnon who brought us our meal. She told me that Lucy was "indisposed" and that now Becky has fallen prey to the mystery sickness that is affecting so many of the staff and is confined to her quarters. Mrs McKinnon seemed pleased to see Annie and did not question my story that she has been unwell, but is now recovering.

I told Annie she would be allowed to visit her brother on the strict condition that she returns within an hour and resumes her mission to find me the book.

9th January, 1899. (At least I now know what date it is).

I know I shouldn't say this, but I'd like to slap Lady Hexer. At last, she believes that I truly go back in time. But she will not listen to my worries about the doctor and his cures. I've shown her what he did to my head. I've told her the terrible story of the two sisters who died. I've told her about the nasty creatures he keeps and she didn't so much as flinch. I've even told her that the doctor threatened to kill me. She thinks I am – she said a very long word that I can't quite remember, but it means I am over-doing my story just to frighten

her and get out of going back. I'm so angry I could scream. But that won't do anybody any good.

Lady Hexer made sure she came with me through the grounds to our little cottage. I couldn't believe my eyes. It's very difficult to walk as everywhere's so slippery. And all the grounds are covered in thick, choking plants, smothering every single patch of earth. This greenery is also covered in frost, so I don't know how it's managing to grow. It's crawled up every statue and wall and across every pathway. It's climbing up the walls of the Hall. Mrs McKinnon says every day they have to pull more and more of it away from the kitchen door, just to get in and out. Our own little cottage is almost lost underneath all this growth.

Inside, Tom was not in bed as I'd expected, but sitting at the table, Lucy at his side. He looked very poorly and I could tell Lucy had been crying. He was so pale his skin was a sickly green-grey. His hair was even wilder than usual and he's become much thinner in only a few days. He was overjoyed to see me, but it was hard to have Lady Hexer hovering over us and listening to our talk. I longed to speak to him about the hospital. I wanted to say how he'd come to my rescue, but when he mentioned his "dreams," as he put it, Lady Hexer's eyes bored into me like needles. I held his hand and squeezed it and promised him I would come to see him again soon. Lady Hexer told Lucy she could collect some food from the kitchen to bring back to Tom. And after just a few moments, she was placing a hand on my shoulder and ushering me out of the door.

We tottered back across the icy grounds. For a change Lady Hexer didn't look very noble. Part of me hoped she would fall down on her bossy backside. But of course she didn't and she even grabbed me and stopped me from falling over. We had a bit of a laugh about it, until I remembered that I was angry with her. Back inside, I had hot tea and cakes beside her fire. She was feeding me up before sending me off to risk my life.

"I should have been able to tell Tom what was happening," I blurted out.

“I understand, Annie,” Lady Hexer sighed. “But you will be able to tell him everything – one day soon, when we possess the secrets to curing illness and when we are no danger of being the subject of spiteful gossip. Then, Annie, I shall reward you well. You and Tom will be wealthy and secure.”

“What if,” I said, taking a deep breath, because part of me didn’t even want to think this thought, never mind ask the question.

“What if I get killed? What if I get bitten by a snake? Or squeezed to death by that great big brutish creature? Or what if I catch the leprosy? What will you do if I don’t come back?”

Lady Hexer’s white face flinched a little, although you had to be watching closely to see it. She promised I’d be safe.

“How do you know?” I demanded, in a way that I would never have dared speak to her just a few days ago. But I felt I had the right to ask.

“Well – think about it sensibly, Annie. If you were killed hundreds of years ago, then you couldn’t be here talking to me now, could you? You would never have been born. But you were. You are here. So – you are sure to survive whatever happens when you are in the past.”

I thought about this hard but, to be honest, it made my head hurt. I couldn’t make any sense of it. “But going back in time is impossible,” I pointed out. “The whole thing is impossible. So who’s to say things will happen the way you think? Who’s to say it will all make sense like that?”

Lady Hexer frowned. She once said she liked the way I asked questions. But she didn’t like being asked things when she didn’t have the answer, ready to roll off her smooth tongue. Instead she looked at the clock and said: “Talking of time. It’s pressing on, Annie. I think you ought to go back to your room and complete your mission.”

I didn’t move. “I’m not sure if I want to,” I blurted out, surprising even myself.

Lady Hexer looked as if I'd thrown my tea in her face.

"I beg your pardon?" she said. It wasn't because she hadn't heard me, but because she was daring me to say it again.

I swallowed. "I don't think I want to go back," I repeated. "It's all too frightening. I'm scared I might get hurt or killed and I'm afraid I won't come back, whatever you say about it."

"Perhaps you were never telling me the truth," Lady Hexer suggested slyly. "Perhaps you know you cannot bring me what I want, after all."

I glared down at my hands. "Think that, if you want," I muttered. "Send me away if you like. But I don't want to go back to that hospital."

The clock tutted gently. I could hear Lady Hexer's breathing. Then she said: "But you wouldn't want to see Tom sent away? Without a job? Or a reference? We had an agreement, Annie. You came up with the promise that you would bring me back that book."

I looked up and tried to read her face. "It's nothing to do with Tom," I said. "He's worked hard for you. Keep him here. I'll go back to my aunt's or find a new position."

Lady Hexer shook her head. "That wouldn't be possible. There would be too many questions. I insist that you finish the job, Annie. Or else I will bring ruin on you. And Tom. And Lucy. Everyone you care about. Do you understand?"

My face felt like firelight and inside I boiled. It was as if she'd opened me up like a surgeon and found all my weakest parts.

I waited in Meg's little room until it began to get dark. That doctor had kept her busy today. Then the cloth was pulled back and Meg came in, clutching her candle and yawning. She jumped hard when I spoke. And as I'd guessed, she started telling me off. "I can't believe you're so stupid! The doctor lost his temper when he found you

gone. I had to make up a story about how you'd just disappeared into thin air while I sat with you in the study. You know he'd be happy to kill you, Annie. Why in the name of –"

"Because I had to come back," I cut in. "If I don't get the book – I've told you. Tom and I will be begging on the streets."

"You said the book was dangerous," Meg pointed out. "You said you were going to tell your lady."

"I did," I sighed. "At least, I tried. But she's determined, Meg. I have to do this. It's the only way."

Meg shook her head sadly. "All right, Annie. He mustn't know I'm helping you, though."

I promised.

Meg told me that the next morning there was to be a visit from some of the monks who founded the hospital. The doctor wouldn't take these visitors anywhere near his study because the terrible creatures he kept were a secret. They would be saying prayers in the chapel. The doctor would have to be there and it would take a little time. That would be a good chance, she said, for me to get in and snatch the book. She told me something else too. The brown pot the doctor watched so carefully had his best and most magical potion in it. This was the thing, Meg said, that worked better than anything else. She'd seen it take away bad skin sores and the doctor thought it would cure even the leprosy, when he found the right patient to test it on. But it needed such costly things to make it up – snake venom, rare herbs – that he only made a tiny amount at a time. That would be the thing to take, she said. That would be the best prize of all.

She looked unhappy. "I feel bad telling you this," she went on. "I believed in the doctor. I still think he is trying his hardest to make the patients well. But someone

else died last night and – well – I think he may have been poisoned. He wasn't ready to die. It happened suddenly, a few hours after he'd had one of the medicines. It was horrible to watch, Annie. The man was in agony." She pulled her thin rug around her shoulders and hugged herself. I put my arm around her and we huddled together. Eventually she fell asleep with her head in my lap. I noticed that at the back of her head there was a patch of skin where her mousy hair has come out. I stroked it gently. But I guessed Meg hadn't even noticed and I decided not to mention it.

It took a long time for dawn to arrive. But when the faint greyness crept into the tiny room, Meg blinked herself awake and ran off to find us something to eat. It was the same fare as last time – oatcakes and a chunk of chewy meat that tasted more of salt than anything else, and sour ale to drink. But we were hungry. As we ate, Meg promised that as soon as the doctor went to the chapel, she would call me along. She'd even check the room for serpents, she promised, and place Melusina in the side room out of the way. I can't tell you how grateful I was.

It felt like hours before I began to hear sounds of movement from the passageways. Meg came scurrying back.

"The monks are here. The doctor's in the chapel, and so are all the patients who can walk. They're just about to start their service. Now's your chance, Annie. I'll have to go to the chapel too. Please be quick. And good luck."

So I slipped along to the study as fast as I could. Now that I knew the place well, I could scuttle like a spider, just like Meg, darting round corners without hesitating. I glanced around the room. It looked like Meg had kept her promise to get rid of Melusina. There was the book, sitting half-open on the desk. This time, I was careful to check for any other nasty little creatures hidden as a trap – but I couldn't see any. My heart was pounding so hard and fast I thought it might burst out of my body. This was my last chance to get the wretched book. If I got caught today I would not

survive, I was sure of it. I put my arms around the great tome and heaved it off the desk. It was the heaviest, most awkward thing. I grunted with the effort. Thick leaves of paper slipped out of it and flapped onto the desk and floor. I cursed and put the book down on the floor for a minute so I could pick up the loose leaves. I was scrabbling in the dust under the desk when I heard footsteps and the creak of the wooden door. Panic turned me into stone. For a wild moment I wondered if I could just stay still and the doctor - for now I saw his soft black boots - might not notice I was there. I heard him shuffling around in a pile of smaller books and muttering: "There it is," as he picked one out.

There was a short, terrible moment of silence. Then he let out a huge shout and ran to the desk, giving it a furious push and almost tipping it over on top of me. Something told him to look on the floor and there was the book - with me, crouching like a cornered rat, next to it. Another roar, so loud it would have terrified a lion. He leaned over and lunged at me. I tried to swerve away but he grabbed my ear and pulled me up. I yelped in pain. I tried, uselessly, to prise his fingers off me and I tried to scream. But he used his other hand to grab my throat and push me down over the desk.

"I have had enough of this!" he spat in my face, still gripping my throat. I was choking. My eyes were bulging. I could hardly breathe.

"This, you wretch, is your last attempt to steal my work. Indeed, it's your last at everything. I'm about to go to a service in the chapel. But when I get back it's you who should say your prayers."

Now he grabbed my arm, squeezing it painfully, and pulled me into the hot, steamy serpent room.

He breathed hard as he pushed me into a sitting position on the floor. "You will not get away again. Sit!"

I sat, wanting to be still but shaking madly. Just being in the same room as all the snakes and nightmare creatures was punishment enough as far as I was concerned. The musky stink was sickening. Still with his livid eyes on me, the doctor went into the corner where the massive Bess lay. Suddenly gentle, he stroked her huge horned head and lifted it up. She raised herself a little as if was a great effort. "This way, my Bess," he crooned softly. The great thing slid further towards me. With a lurch, vomit rose painfully up into my throat. I tried to swallow and force it back down. "Now," he said to Bess, still in a quiet, sing-song tone as if he was nursing a baby, "Don't take your eyes off this little thief. I want her still here when I get back. And then I will give her to you and all your friends as a plaything." Bess lowered her marked head again. Her eyes, like chips of polished jewels, stayed on me. And the thick, forked tongue flicked in and out of her mouth, which was as cracked and lipless as an old crone's. Her hideous daughter Melusina crawled across her huge body and coiled at my feet, laying her head down like a puppy. As the doctor expected, I couldn't move. I was trapped in my own worst nightmare. My skin was crawling as if a thousand insects were running across it. I felt I could easily go mad with fear.

The doctor glared at me. His eyes were like a beast's. Pure hatred. "I have to go to this service now, or too many questions will be asked. But I'll be back within the hour to deal with you. If you try to move, Bess will hold you in place. Very tightly, I promise you."

He made to leave the room. Then he turned back with a dark, lopsided grin. "I only came back for a prayer book," he said, with a short laugh. "Perhaps God is on my side after all. Or the devil himself."

So there I was. The room was still overbearingly warm and sticky. I was shaking so hard I made the wooden bench judder. My teeth chattered so hard I bit my own tongue and I could taste blood. I tried to clamp my jaws tight to stop it,

because the serpent seemed to be interested in the noise, or maybe it was the movement. Sweat ran down my face like tears. All right – there were tears too. I had never, ever, been this scared. I thought: *this is it. I am going to die.* Lady Hexer's promises were all air, and Tom would never know where I went. For a moment, I felt fury with Meg, for failing to warn me the doctor was coming back. But when I thought about it a little longer, I realised there was no way she could have got to me first. And I knew she would be worrying about me. But not as much as I was afraid for myself and my own life.

7pm. January 9th.

I am surrounded by sickness. Almost all my maids and many of the workmen have succumbed to this strange fever which confines them to bed. I am very thankful for Mrs McKinnon's strong constitution - she seems quite determined not to be brought down by this mysterious infection. Lucy too is unaffected – she has moved into Mrs McKinnon's quarters to keep her away from Becky, who is also stricken with this unnamed malady. The girl's young sister – who I was rather hard on, I admit – is also suffering. It was Haggstone who told me this – she said the little girl was taken ill in her presence and it was she who put her to bed.

McKinnon is urging me to send a messenger to the next village to see if there are workers available to help us out. In particular, she wants to get a team of strong men to cut down the choking plants from around the grounds and the walls of the Hall. It does look disturbing, I have to agree.

Annie, however, appears to have done as I asked and returned to the hospital. I locked her in her room but returned after less than an hour to find her lying in her strange trance, perspiring and trembling violently. I still worry that perhaps I should put a stop to

it. I do not, after all, want the child to come to harm. But this behaviour may mean that she is close to bringing the book, so I will not interrupt.

So I sat, hugging my knees and trying not to move, for a length of time I couldn't work out. There were no clocks here. I never took my eyes off the reptiles. For the most part, they didn't move much and I was glad of it. I wished I could think straight about the serpents. Stay calm about them. But the very way they writhed their long bodies about and the way they lifted themselves up without arms and legs, as if they were on an invisible string – that made me sick. As to some of the other creatures in the cases – ones I couldn't even name - I had to put them out of my mind. I felt as if my own stomach was full of wriggling, knotted snakes, making my insides shift and churn. The beasts, however, seemed quite sleepy, as I watched them. Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I saw shapes moving in the thick glass jars and tanks around the walls. But I didn't let myself look properly. In these, I knew, were some of the most dangerous of the doctor's collection. Somehow, I felt that if I looked at them directly, they would notice me and all would be lost.

The heat and steam in the room became almost overpowering. The dungy smell didn't help. All the time, sweat trickled down my neck, back and chest. My palms were wet and slippery. I tried not to think about what the doctor would do when he came back. I hoped that the monks in the chapel were saying something about forgiveness and mercy. Something that might make him have a change of heart. What was that thing in the Bible about suffering little children? I never took much notice of sermons. Maybe they'd say that one and the doctor would listen. But I knew it was a pretty faint chance.

Suddenly - making me jump and Melusina raise her ugly head –I heard a wailing scream and the doctor's voice shouting. His heavy footsteps stamped their

way towards the study and the childish whining voice got louder. I tried to work out who it was. It didn't sound like Meg and I'd seen no other children in the hospital. The door was flung open with a loud bang. The glasses and jars rattled. All the creatures were now awake, hissing, spitting and agitated. My heart raced so fast I thought it would surely burst. The doctor was dragging a kicking, wriggling girl along by her ear. He shoved her roughly onto the wooden bench next to me. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was silly little Jeannie - Becky's sister. The one I'd accused of being a fraud, just pretending to be able to travel in time. Yet here she was, covered in her own tears and snot, yelling like a mad thing. She was so intent on her weeping, she hadn't even noticed Melusina and Bess. The younger serpent reared and shifted its head from side to side, as if it was trying to work out what this screaming creature was. Even Bess arched up her heavy, shovel-shaped head. I grabbed the silly girl by the shoulders and shook her.

"Shut up," I warned, through gritted teeth. "Be quiet, you idiot."

Jeannie opened her mouth to yell again. Then she recognised me and her eyes went wide. But she started to cry again and in despair I clapped my fingers over her wet mouth. "Shut *up*," I told her again.

The doctor had his arms folded as he watched it all.

"I knew it," he said. "I was walking towards my study when this shrieking spectre appeared right in front of my feet, making me trip over. I knew at once she must have something to do with you. I was right, as usual. Another in your band of little thieves, eh?"

I loosened my grip on Jeannie's mouth but she immediately started to yell again, so I clamped my hand firmly back in place.

"Look," I hissed at her, nodding my head towards the beasts on the floor. "Look at those things, Jeannie." Her eyes popped and she made another attempt at a

scream, but thanks to my strong fingers it just came out as a frantic *hmmnnn* sound. She tried to wriggle away but I kept an arm tight around her shoulder. “Stay still, Jeannie,” I urged. “We don’t want to get those things angry. Just calm down.”

The doctor snorted. “I still have visitors to see. Stay here and keep quiet. Any more yelling and screaming and you will be all the more sorry when I get back.” He turned and left.

I gave Jeannie a hard look. “If I let you go, you have to promise to stay still and quiet,” I said. “Otherwise those things will probably attack us. Do you promise?”

With huge, watery eyes, Jeannie nodded and with relief I took away my hand and wiped her spit on my tunic.

“What are they?” she whispered in her tiny voice.

“That man – he’s a doctor in charge of this hospital. Those foul things are his pet serpents, or kind of dragons or something. I don’t really know what they are. But I know they’re dangerous, Jeannie. We mustn’t get them angry.”

“The hospital?” squeaked Jeannie, lisping because her two front teeth were missing. “Am I really in the old hospital? That’s where Miss Haggstone wanted me to go. But I thought it was just pretend. She didn’t tell me there’d be snakes.”

“You’re here all right,” I said, with a sigh. “But you’ll soon wish you were somewhere else. How did you do it, Jeannie? I thought you were making it all up.”

“I was,” the child admitted. “I was just saying what they told me to. Becky said I made a rotten job of it. She was cross with me. The lady never believed me. But today Miss Haggstone told me to try once more. She made me put my fingers round all the snake shapes around the fireplace and then – I felt funny and cold. And then that horrible man came and fell over me.”

She looked down at Melusina and Bess and shuddered.

“They’re scary,” she said. “Will they eat me?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “I don’t think so,” I told her, though I was only saying what I think might make her feel better.

“I think they just eat rats and mice and things. But they can bite. Meg – she’s my friend here – she says these two big ones aren’t poisonous.” I pointed around. “But some of these ones in the jars are really dangerous. So don’t go near them, okay?”

Jeannie nodded. “Have you got the book then?” she asked me. “You know – the one they all keep going on about. The one with all the magic spells in it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t have it yet. I will try to get it, if we can get out of this room. But I don’t think it’s magic, not really. I think it’s a lot of rubbish.”

Jeannie looked miserable. “So you’ll get all the money, then,” she said.

“What money?” I frowned.

Jeannie wiped her runny nose on her arm. “Miss Haggstone promised me and Becky would get a big reward if we brought her the book. She said if you got there first, you’d get all the money. She said you’d spend it on fancy wigs for your baldy head.”

“Did she really?” I said, huffily.

“Sorry,” Jeannie added.

“I don’t know about any reward money,” I said, swallowing my anger. “All I know is, if I don’t bring Lady Hexer that book, she might send Tom and me away without any work.”

Jeannie thought for a moment or two. “I want to go back, anyway,” she said, quietly. “My Becky’s not very well. I’m afraid for her.”

I put my arm around her shoulder. She seemed very small indeed. “We will go back,” I promised her. “With or without that book. I just have to work out how to do it.”

The door began to creak and open very slowly. I turned, wondering why I hadn’t heard the doctor approach. But it was Meg who put her pale face around the door. She slipped inside and ran up to me, giving me a light hug.

“I’m so sorry, Annie,” she said, her eyes tearful. “I couldn’t get back in time to warn you. I was hoping you wouldn’t be caught. But I could tell by the doctor’s face when he came back to the chapel. And who –”

I quickly explained that Jeannie also works for Lady Hexer and that she’d ended up here with me.

“Jeannie’s only seven, Meg. She’s very frightened. Her sister’s back in our real time and she’s sick. We both need to get away, somehow. Can you help us? Please?”

Meg sat with us and stared down at Melusina and Bess.

“We have a bit of time,” she told us. “The doctor’s busy with that group of monks. They’re asking a lot of awkward questions and he’s trying to keep them sweet.”

“What kind of questions?” I asked.

Meg shifted on the bench. “One of the bodies washed up on the beach the other day. The men hadn’t bothered to take off the patient’s tunic like they’re supposed to, so everyone knew where he’d come from. The monks wanted to know all about it.”

“Did they find out?” I wanted to know. The more trouble the doctor was in, the better, for me.

“In a way. The doctor said that patient had run away from the hospital. I’m not sure if they believed him. But they can’t prove he’s lying. They’re worried about how

many patients are dying. This hospital gets a lot of food and money from the people in the town and they want to know where it's all going.

“Also,” she gave me a little grin. “I don't know what you said in your note to master John. But he and his father turned up to attend the service this morning and they brought a little crowd of the wealthy people from the town. They asked to see around the hospital. The doctor's still trying to talk them out of it but they don't want to go away.”

“Good,” I said. “I hope they keep on asking lots of questions. I hope that doctor is having a very hard time answering them.”

I gripped Meg's hand. It was so frail I thought it might turn to dust. “Now, Meg. Can you help us get out? I don't know how to get past those frights down there.”

Meg sat up straight. She reminded me of a little chicken hearing a fox creeping up. “He's coming back, I can hear him,” she hissed. “Stay there. I'll think of something.”

She slipped back into the study. Moments later I heard the doctor come in. He sat down with a deep sigh and started muttering about the fools from the church meddling with his work. Meg fussed around him and poured him something into a cup. His wine, I supposed. Just a minute later, I heard her offer to go and fetch him some more. Melusina slid off the great bulk of her mother's body and around the door to see her horrid master. *One less snake to worry about for now*, I thought. I gave Jeannie a wink and a cuddle, as if I had a plan and it was all going well.

January 12th, 1899. Hexer Hall.

No changes, to speak of. No relenting in the weather and no one's health has improved. I had a talk with Haggstone this morning and she became quite hysterical. She admitted that

she had been trying to get Becky's sister to travel back to the hospital when she became ill. She fears the leprosy illness may somehow have been brought back – by Annie, in Haggstone's opinion – to the present day. I do not want to believe this. It may yet turn out to be a fever caused by the terrible weather. She also said that it is our interfering with the past which has encouraged these strangling plants to appear all over the grounds and up the walls of the Hall.

“It's as if they're trying to choke us,” she shouted at me. “They're telling us to stop. We've gone too far. You must give up your scheme, Hexer. Let it go. These happenings at the Hall are the talk of the village. There will be trouble and I will not be part of it.”

“Well, no,” I snapped back at her. “You're already in trouble here and there, aren't you? Under your many different names, of course. Oh, yes. I now know your history, Miss Haggstone.”

She flinched but didn't reply to that. “I am going to pack my bags,” she told me. “When I am ready, we will discuss how much you will pay for my silence over these matters.”

Oh yes, I thought. I will agree not to turn you over to the constabulary for fraud and blackmail. That is what I will pay.

I stared out of the window at my overgrown grounds, my mood as sick and heavy as the sky. Then I tried to think coolly. Suppose she is right. Suppose opening the doors to the past has let all sorts of bad things come through to the present time. Well, then, it is too late to close that door. So I may as well get something useful from the danger. I must hold out for the book.

Meg was much cleverer than I give her credit for.

After a little time, she put her head around the door.

“He’s gone to use the pot,” she whispered. “But I’m putting something in his wine. I can only put little drops in or he’ll taste it. But after a few more cups it’ll make him sleep, heavily enough for you to get out and get away.”

I smiled at her.

“When he’s knocked out, I’ll tell you. Then you can get the book and go,” Meg explained. “Get that potion too. I’ll take care of the serpents. I’ve got some rabbits they’ll be keen to eat. In the meantime – here. Food.”

She threw a bundle at me and disappeared.

Jeannie was happy to eat the food but I couldn’t face it. Anyway, I knew the bread in this place tasted of ashes. The cheese wasn’t much better.

We sat, feeling like we were melting in the sticky heat, for what I guessed was another hour or so. Jeannie fell asleep, her fluffy, fair head on my lap. But I couldn’t relax a single nerve or limb. Every time Bess moved at all, just a slight flick of the end of her tail or a ripple across her thick, muscley body, I jumped and felt my scalp prickle and my skin creep. It was the same every time I sensed a movement in any of the glass tanks: my throat gagged. I was glad the glass was so thick and mottled I couldn’t see the creatures in any detail, just their shadowy, horrible shapes. How Meg got used to handling the things, I couldn’t imagine. She once tried to tell me Melusina was not cold or slimy, as she looked. She said she were soft. That the softness comes as a surprise. This didn’t make me want to touch them. But then Meg could also handle that monster of a doctor, I thought. For such a little thing, she was very brave. All the time, I was aware of him grunting and moving about in the room just next door. Meg’s soothing voice piped up now and again and there was the clinking of more wine being poured. Was his voice sounding slower and slurred? I wanted to believe it.

It grew darker and much more quiet. Somewhere far away, across those snowy fields, I heard the sound of what must be the monastery bell. Funny time to ring a bell, I thought. I was sure it was the early hours of the morning, well before the sluggish winter dawn. And then – at last – Meg put her head back around the door.

“It’s time,” she said, under her breath. “He’s fast asleep.”

I gently shook Jeannie awake. Meg came in, holding up her apron. She was followed by Melusina, slithering across the stone floor behind her. For a moment I wondered why the beast was following Meg. Then she tipped out the contents of the apron and two blood-stained rabbits fell onto the floor. Melusina went for one immediately. I turned away from the sight of the animal being dragged, slowly and cruelly, into the snake’s jaw. Its mouth got wider and wider as it took in the food. Meg bent and picked up the other rabbit, throwing it towards Bess. The bigger snake didn’t take any notice.

“Funny,” Meg murmured. “Bess has been off her food for days now. Perhaps she’s ill.”

I hardly cared about that. “Come on,” I said, through my teeth to Jeannie, who was watching open-mouthed as Melusina devoured the rabbit. The beast didn’t chew, just slowly gulped the animal’s whole body further and further back. The lump it made stretched the snake’s throat, making me feel even more sick. “We haven’t got time to watch the animal freak show.”

Carefully, we checked around the door. The doctor was slumped across his desk. One arm was stretched out across his book.

“Oh no,” I groaned. “Of all the places for him to fall asleep.”

“Don’t worry,” said Meg. She lifted up the doctor’s heavy arm and dropped it back on the desk with a soft thump. Her tired eyes twinkled. “He doesn’t know it, but his wine’s been flavoured with mandrake, henbane and poppy. You won’t be able to

wake him up for hours, not even if you play the pipes and drum right next to his ear.”

“That’s wonderful,” I grinned. “You’re so clever, Meg.”

Meg even found us a large cloth which we wrapped around the book several times and tied at the top into a kind of knotted handle. I put in the lidded pot with the doctor’s special cure. I heaved the bundle up onto my shoulder. I was trembling all over again. Probably from sheer tiredness and excitement.

I had it. At long, long last I had the precious book. It might be full of ideas or it might be evil. But that couldn’t be my problem. My job was just to deliver it - and leave it in Lady Hexer’s hands.

14th January 1899. Hexer Hall.

It was early this morning – before I even had my breakfast, which had failed to arrive – when I became aware of a commotion out in the courtyard. I went to the window and breathed on it to see out past the film of cold. I could see several of the servants – two of my labourers and a handful of the maids – milling around. They were wearing their shawls and cloaks and holding bundles. One of the gardening men held his sick child in his arms, wrapped in blankets. She looked barely conscious. Another was supporting his wife, who could hardly walk. I could hear Mrs McKinnon’s voice and I strained to hear what was being said. I decided I ought to go down there – so I went through the kitchen, which was empty, and out to the back cobbled yard. It turned out that almost all of my staff – the well and the sick – are abandoning me. Mrs McKinnon was trying to reason with them and persuade them to stay. I remained in the background, unnoticed, listening. The servants were saying they had “had enough,” that they were afraid of the sickness sweeping through the estate and of the frightening jungle that seems to be forming across the grounds. They were leaving, they said, in fear of their lives.

Mrs McKinnon pleaded again. "When have you ever had such a generous, liberal employer?" she scolded them. I smiled to myself. That was kind of her. "You will not get such good rates anywhere else," she went on.

"Aye," one of the men replied. "Nor will we have to put up with dark magic and ghosts being called from the dead. Bringing their cursed disease. If we leave, we may save our souls."

There was a general murmur of agreement and they began to shuffle out of the courtyard, carrying all their possessions with them. I walked away quickly around to the other side of the Hall, before I was spotted. I feared if they saw me, they may turn on me. I found myself on the great front step of my beautiful Hall, my eyes stinging and watering from the pinching cold, clutching my arms around myself and wishing I had stopped to put on a cloak. I lifted the brass knocker, shaped like a noble python with its mouth agape, and rapped for someone to let me into my home. No one came.

I turned to Meg and held her two hands. I noticed her skin had become red and sore in patches. "Thank you so much," I said. "All I have to do is find a way back and I'll be safe. And free."

Meg looked guilty for a moment. "I still have your blue dress," she said. "It's there, rolled up under the desk. I was going to hide it and keep it."

"You can have it," I said. She looked delighted and immediately dragged the bundle out from its hiding place. Grinning, she pulled it on over her plain tunic. It was far too long for her, but she didn't seem to care.

"But what will you do now?" I asked her, suddenly realising I might actually miss her. "Will the doctor be very angry with you, Meg?"

Meg looked up at me. "I don't suppose I could come with you?" she asked. "Things seem better in – where ever you come from. I like your clothes. I could stay

and work for you instead of the doctor.”

I didn't know what to say for a minute. “You can't work for me, you silly thing. I haven't any money to pay you. On my own, I haven't enough to feed myself.”

“I don't eat much,” Meg added. “I wouldn't be any trouble.”

“I don't even know if it'll work anyway, the other way round,” I said. “I don't know if I can bring you with me. We could try, though. We'll go back out to the passageway and try to find our way back, like we did before. I've never quite worked out how it's done. It's always felt like a bit of an accident or just good luck. Anyway, Meg, you stay with us and keep hold of one of our hands all the time. We'll do our best.”

Meg's eyes shone. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“Only – listen, Meg,” I went on. “It's not that much better, where I'm from. Not if you haven't got lots of money. And I really haven't, I'm afraid.”

“Doesn't matter,” grinned Meg, linking her arm to mine and squeezing it tight. “There's nothing for me to stay here for any more. And whatever I end up doing, it has to be better than cleaning up snake mess.”

Jeannie made a gagging noise.

“Let's get going,” I said. Then we all stopped and listened. There was some kind of noise going on and getting closer. The sound of people shouting – or was it singing? Yes – some kind of rowdy singing. Not hymns or carols. I looked at Meg. “What is it?”

She looked bewildered. “I don't know. Wait there.”

She let go of my arm and hurried out of the study, into the chilly passageway. The doctor gave a loud snore, making Jeannie and I jump. We looked at him, but he hadn't moved. He was still slumped across the desk, breathing as noisily as an old boar, his mouth open, showing his stained teeth and a sliver of spit trailing off them.

Meg darted back in and shut the door behind her. "I forgot," she said. "It's Twelfth Night. The patients have started early this year. It's not even daylight." "Started what?" I asked, my stomach turning over again.

"The celebrations, idiot," said Meg, shaking her head at me. "They've chosen their Abbot of Unreason and they're –"

"What's a Bot of Reesin?" whinged Jeannie. "I want to go, *now*."

"So do I," I said. "What're you talking about, Meg? Where I'm from they've already had Twelfth Night. All we do is throw out the Christmas holly and have a bit of cake."

Meg sighed. "The Abbot of Unreason is the stupidest, lowest person," she explained. "They're like the king for the day. They've chosen Old Will. He was half-mad before he came here and is worse now. He's in charge of everything. And all the patients are going to be singing and acting daft for the rest of the day. Last year it was a bit wild. We had a lot of trouble putting the fires out. The doctor had to lock himself in his snake room to stay out of the patients' way."

"Fires?" I said, as the singing grew louder. I could make out some very bawdy song words. "I really don't like the sound of that. Can we go?"

Meg looked awkward. "They're asking to see the doctor," she said. "I said he's still asleep but they might get a bit rowdy in a minute. It'll be difficult to get past them without being dragged into their daft games."

"Oh, great," I said. "What will they say if they see the doctor like this?"

Meg looked worried.

"Let's hide him," suggested Jeannie.

"How can we - wait a minute. That's not a bad idea," I said. We put the book down, still wrapped in its cloth. Meg and I each took hold of one of the doctor's arms and put them around our shoulders. Jeannie took hold of his feet, slipping off his

heavy cloak and boots first. It was lucky he was small and lean for a man. The noisy band of patients was banging on the study door, shouting and laughing. Slowly and clumsily we dragged the doctor into the snake room, puffing and panting with the effort. Jeannie complained about how heavy he was. "This was your idea," I grumbled back at her as we laid him on the floor close to Bess, who lifted her head and glared.

Then we heard the study door being pushed open, with much groaning and laughter. "Where's the old chief, then?" someone shouted. "It's our day today. Tell him to hand over his wine. Twelfth Night, doctor! No rules! Only mis-rule until the sun goes down! Wake up!"

The three of us shuffled out into the study. We must have looked very guilty, standing in a row in front of the entrance to the serpent room. Around nine or ten patients were there, unsteady on their feet. Some of them wore masks and head-dresses made of fur, twigs and horns. I knew some of them couldn't walk too well anyway, but they'd also been drinking. The sour smell of barley ale hung around them, mixed with their usual stench of sweat and bad breath.

"Where is he, Miss Meg?" slurred a man wearing some sort of horned mask on his head, like a deer. "In there?"

"That's where he keeps his fine wines," yelled a woman. "Let's get in!"

Meg held up her hands. "No, don't go in there," she begged. "He'll be very angry with you, never mind Twelfth Night."

The little crowd of strange figures burst out laughing again. Jeannie stepped behind me and hung onto my tunic, snivelling.

"There's no wine in there," I said. "Only medicines."

"Well, we could all do with a few of those too," roared someone wrapped in a mangy fur cloak. "Let's see what's on offer, eh?"

“No,” pleaded Meg, but they all pushed past us. One of them tripped on the sleeping doctor and gave a loud, rasping laugh. “Looks like he started celebrating without us,” he shouted. “Let’s see what drinks he’s hiding. Anything in these jars, Miss Meg?”

“Don’t touch them,” screamed Meg.

But someone pulled a thick glass jar towards them and tipped it over. Out slid a long, slender snake-like creature, the brightest jewel-green I ever saw. I jumped back with a yelp. It slithered rapidly into a corner and hid. The patients started shouting and stumbling around in a panic. Stupidly they continued pushing over the jars, in spite of Meg yelling at them to stop. To my horror, one serpent after another tumbled out on to the floor. Some were slim and brightly-coloured as a hair ribbon, red, poison-yellow, glossy black. Others were thick, darkly-patterned with bands and speckles, menacing. The horrid creature that Meg called a mermaid fell out of its tank, its fishtail flapping on the floor, its wicked little monkey-face gnashing its teeth. The patients seemed to take a few moments to realise what they’d unleashed. Then they began to turn and make for the door as fast as they could, trampling over the doctor’s sleeping body in their rush. Jeannie joined in their screams. Without a further thought I snatched the little girl up into my arms and ran unsteadily out of the room, through the study and out into the passageway. I yelled for Meg to follow us.

Hexer Hall.

I sat shivering on my own doorstep, the cold from the snow-covered stone seeping quickly through the thick velvet of my skirts. I watched as a line of people who were once happy to take my wages trudged slowly out of the grounds, heading out of the estate. They would rather walk into the dead of winter with no job or prospects than stay here. Some of them

turned their heads and noticed me, but they quickly looked away again and kept walking. My own face and fingers were burning with the cold. I picked myself up and brushed the snow from my clothes, then walked around to the back of the Hall and the kitchen door. I found myself knocking at the servant's entrance to be let in. This may be my Hall but the kitchen is not my territory. Mrs McKinnon opened it. Her face looked tight and strained. She was very shocked to see me, of course. "No one answered the main door, Mrs McKinnon," I said.

She looked down. "No, ma'am. I'm afraid – most of the servants have gone. They are too afraid to stay, what with the sickness and – and – everything else."

I sighed and asked her to bring me up some tea and something sweet to eat. She hung her head. "We are a little short on supplies, ma'am. The grocer has refused to come these last three days, because of all the talk about the sickness at the Hall. I went into the village myself yesterday but he would not serve me because of the terrible gossip that is going around. I don't know what to do next, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Well, then, take the coach into the town," I snapped at her. She shook her head. "The coachmen have left, my Lady."

"Were they ill too?" I asked.

"No, but – they are both very religious. They feared that – some sort of evil practices were going on. I couldn't make them see sense, I'm afraid."

I sat down, there in the kitchen, and stared at the whorls in the wooden table. "Then I don't know what to suggest," I said.

Jeannie and I stood, gasping for breath, in the stone corridor. We watched the patients stagger and drag themselves past us. They headed out into the white courtyard, where the night was just giving way to a blood-red winter dawn.

“The thirteen fires!” I heard one of them shout. “Fires will put paid to the little devils! Light the thirteen fires!”

Meg came stumbling along behind them, dragging her too-long skirt. “You’re still here,” she panted. “I thought you might’ve gone without me.”

“What’re the thirteen fires?” I asked.

“It’s a custom,” Meg said. “You light one big fire and twelve little ones. They did it last year and some of the hospital burned down.”

“Well, they’re about to do it again,” I warned. Meg groaned. She ran out into the courtyard, to try to talk the patients out of it. “Let’s go,” said Jeannie, tugging at my arm. “Let’s just get away, now.”

“We can’t,” I said, even though I was panicking inside. All those monsters on the loose – my worst nightmare. And now we might all get burned alive. “We can’t go now. We promised Meg we’d try to take her with us.”

Jeannie pouted. “Well, she’s too late then, isn’t she?”

I frowned at her. She might’ve looked like a sweet little thing but she really did have a bit of her sister’s nastiness.

I pulled her into Meg’s little cubby hole to wait. We listened as the shouting from outside grew louder. I heard the crackling sound of a fire getting under way. I glanced outside. The patients had pulled together enough bits of wood to start a fair-sized blaze and it was spitting nastily. Still in their head-dresses and animal masks, they started to sing some old song about the end of the winter. They moved around the flames in a slow, stilted dance.

Meg dashed in to find me. “They’ll start the rest of the fires soon,” she said. “We’ll try to wake the doctor up and then we’d better get away.”

“Meg,” I said. “If he wakes up, he’ll kill us. And that room is alive with snakes and - the devil’s own creatures. I can’t go back in there, I just can’t.”

“I can,” she said, stubbornly. “I can’t just leave him to die. And,” she added, with a sly look, “The book’s in there. If we don’t get it now, it might get burned up.”

The smell of smoke filled up my nose. Flickers of orange danced across the slit window cut into the stone wall. Jeannie started to cough. “Let’s just go,” she said. I looked at her and thought: *I have to be braver than you, miss. Meg is right.*

“Come on, then,” I said, with a sigh, sounding much stronger than I felt. “Let’s wake the old goat up.” We turned and ran towards the study.

Hexer Hall.

Of all my other servants, only Lucy has stayed. When the others left, she was in the gardener’s cottage nursing her sweetheart Tom. Indeed, I think her loyalty lies with that young man, rather than with me. Or perhaps she finds it hard to get work, because of the colour of her skin. As I sat talking to Mrs McKinnon, Lucy rushed in, all tears, begging for cool water and anything else to bring down a fever. Tom, it seems, is getting worse. “Oh, ma’am, he is unconscious and thrashing around on the bed in great distress,” she told me. “And his skin is burning! The heat is coming off him as if he’s on fire - I hardly dare touch him!” Mrs McKinnon took pity on her and helped her find a clean cloth and a jug of fresh, cool water. Then she began searching her cupboards for anything else that may help. I felt so useless at this point that I left and returned upstairs.

I stood for some time in the drawing room surveying my ruined grounds. Watching all those people walk away from me – taking my good name with them, no doubt, to toss around in the shops and ale-houses – has left me bereft. I feel as if I have barely a true friend in the world. I have but one hope left: that Annie will bring me the book. Only that can help me heal my broken reputation.

The three of us all held hands as we crept towards the study door. We checked the floor all the while for serpents. Outside the blaze grew larger and brighter. The singing and shouting got louder. I thought I could hear a crackling sound from one of the rooms along the corridor too. Slowly, Meg pushed the study door open and glanced around.

“I think they’re probably all hiding,” she whispered. “They’re quite nervous things, really.”

“I can’t think why,” I grumbled. “I wouldn’t be frightened of anything if I looked as scary as they do. And if I had poisonous teeth.”

Meg frowned. “Something’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t really know, it’s just – I have a horrible feeling” - she pressed her hand to her stomach – “just in here.”

“You’re scared,” I told her. “We all are. Let’s get this over with. Jeannie and I will get the book and you wake the doctor, if you can. Then we’ll all run for it.”

Checking around her feet, Meg went into the serpent room while Jeannie and I hoisted the book, still wrapped in its cloth, up from the floor. The pot rolled out to the floor. I was about to reach for it. Then we heard Meg give a terrible, high, moaning sound, like an injured pup. Jeannie and I glanced at each other and rushed to the doorway of the snake room. Meg stood there with her back to us. She turned, her face death- white and her hand clapped across her mouth.

“What?” I asked her, looking over her shoulder. “What is it?”

Meg couldn’t speak but only shook her head, her eyes brimming. Then Jeannie screamed and jumped back. In the same instant I suddenly noticed the huge, misshapen body of Bess on the floor. Misshapen, in that it was no longer a fat log-shape. It was bulging out with the beast’s last meal. The giant snake was eating her

sleeping master - and her body was swollen with the distinct shape of a small man. Only his lower legs and feet still stuck out of the snake's jaw, which had slackened and grown to get the huge meal in. It was a few moments before I realised what I was seeing. Then I turned away and was shudderingly sick on the stone floor.

Jeannie was wailing like a banshee by now. I wiped my face but I didn't tell her off. Meg too was weeping as if her heart would break. "It's all my fault!" she sobbed. "I left him in there, half-poisoned with sleeping draught. I as good as killed him!"

I tried to comfort her, putting my arms around her skinny shoulders. "No, Meg, no one could have guessed what the thing would do," I told her, but the very words made me retch again. We clung to each other for a moment. Meg was crying so hard I had to hold her tight, trying to stop her violent shaking. Then the smell of smoke seemed to get suddenly stronger and I remembered the patients and the fires.

"Look, let's try to get out of here," I shouted. "Come on, Meg. There's nothing more you can do for your master now. Save yourself!"

Still sobbing, Meg followed me as I started for the study door. We pulled it open. Bristling, burning sounds hissed at us from every corner.

Hexer Hall.

Haggstone marched into the drawing room and had the nerve to complain because she couldn't get a coach to take her away from the Hall. I suggested that she might like to walk, as all my staff had done. She was trying to bully me into finding her some transport when there was a loud rapping noise at the Hall's front door. Voices, shouting, in furious, accusing tones. I guessed that Mrs McKinnon was trying, alone, to fend off this intrusion. So I made my way to the top of the staircase, overlooking the entrance hall. Poor Mrs McKinnon was trying to hold the heavy front door against a small crowd of people who

were braying to get in. It hardly seemed fair on the woman, so I walked down the staircase and demanded to know what was going on.

It was Mr Pocklaw, the local minister, some of my own former servants and a handful of self-elected dignitaries from the town. The minister stepped forward to speak for this rabble. "It has come to my attention," he began, with his usual pomposity, "that unnatural things are going on in this hall. I hear disturbing tales of séances and unholy magical practices. Your servants have abandoned you but I cannot allow the matter to end there. Your staff believe you are responsible for the spread of sickness among themselves and many of the villagers. We demand answers, Lady Hexer. Just what has been going on in this place?"

I answered with as much dignity as possible, given the aggressive tone of his voice and the poisonous looks I was getting from the whole party. "Mr Pocklaw," I replied. "These are the wild imaginings of an over-superstitious, under-educated group of peasants."

There was an angry gasp from the little crowd.

"I know of no such nonsense," I went on. "It is fair to say –" I glanced behind me at the staircase, where I guessed Haggstone was lurking – "It is fair to say that I have foolishly entertained a woman who claimed to be a psychic and medium. I now believe this person to be a fraud. She will be leaving my premises today. As to all your other suggestions, they have no basis in fact. Now please leave my grounds and stop frightening my housekeeper."

The minister bristled. He was used to people cowering when he spoke, not standing up to him. "Lady Hexer," he went on. "The servants feel you ought to destroy the exotic plants which are covering the ground. They believe they have sprung from evil roots and may be a cause of the current epidemic of fever."

“Just as soon as I can find the labourers,” I replied, “I will do exactly that. As you know, many of my workers have abandoned their duties. The plants are merely weeds, of course, but unpleasant none the less.”

“I’d be happy to torch them for you,” muttered one of my old gardeners.

I waited for a moment. “Will that be all?” I added.

My self-appointed judges glanced at each other and then the minister puffed himself up again. “We believe there is a child in the Hall. A servant girl who you have - taken into your care.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Yes. An act of great charity, would you not agree, Mr Pocklaw?”

“Ah, well,” said Pocklaw. “That rather depends on how she fares. We hear that she is locked away, that she may be ill and that she has not been seen for some days.”

I swallowed hard. “She is, as you suggest, unwell at the moment. But she is only locked in her room for her own good – to stop her from sleep-walking in her present fevered state.”

“We demand to see the child, Lady Hexer,” Pocklaw insisted. “Her aunt, a good church-going woman, has written to me asking about her welfare.”

I shivered as the cruel winds blew into the Hall. “If you imagine,” I told him, “that I am going to let a crowd of strangers march into a child’s room when she is ill, you are mistaken. It is my duty to protect the girl at the moment.”

“She’s killed her!” yelled out one of the men, suddenly. “She’s murdered her and her ghost is wandering around the Hall! Some of the servants have seen it!”

There was a shocked murmuring and the minister stuck his booted foot inside my doorway. “We must see the child. At least one of us must confirm that she is alive and well.”

“Very well,” I agreed. “But I refuse to invite any of you inside my home. You may stand in the grounds and I will bring Annie to the bedroom window. You will be able to see

that she has not been harmed.”

The minister turned to confirm this idea with his cronies and I took the opportunity to pull back the door and slam it shut, when he wasn't expecting it. It was rather satisfying to hear him yelp in pain as he jumped out of the way.

Then – ignoring Mrs McKinnon's open mouth - I swept back up the stairs. There was nothing for it. I would have to call Annie back to the present – right now. I hurried along to the little bedroom and unlocked the door with trembling hands. The room was empty. Annie was not there.

“We have to get out of here – fast,” I urged. I was out of breath but the air was full of the smell of burning, which scratched like nails at my throat. “They’ve set fires inside the hospital. I don’t know how fast they’ll spread.”

Jeannie was tugging on my sleeve and snivelling.

“Whatever it is, Jeannie, it’ll have to wait,” I told her, pulling her along.

We heard some of the patients blundering around outside, panicking and shouting. We edged along the corridor, smoke clogging our nostrils. I bore the weight of the book, because Jeannie was no help at all. In fact she was really dragging her heels and slowing us up.

We were almost at one of the doors but we saw that the biggest bonfire, in the courtyard, was spreading fast towards it.

“I think we can get past it if we’re very, very quick,” I whispered, trying not to breathe in too hard. I pulled Jeannie towards the door. But the stupid child came to a dead stop.

“Come on,” I urged. “We have to get out, now. Move!”

“I’ve been bit,” wailed Jeannie. She dropped to her knees. “I’ve been trying to tell you. You’ve not been listening. One of them snakes has bitten my foot.” She started to make a high-pitched keening sound. “I’ve been poisoned! I’m going to *die*.”

I stared at her, helpless. She wrapped her arms around herself and I knew she wasn’t going anywhere. Meg wiped her face and took a deep breath, then coughed hard because of the smoke. “Get that pot out,” she said. “There’s a cure in there. Hurry!”

My insides sank. “We dropped it,” I admitted. “Back in the study. I forgot to pick it up.”

“I’ll have to go back and get it then,” Meg said, sniffing, her eyes watering because of the smoke. “You can’t,” I pleaded. “There isn’t time. There’s too much smoke. You won’t make it, Meg.”

She gave me her wilful look, through the grime left by her tears. “I will,” she said. “You wait here. I’ll be quicker on my own. You need me to bring back the special salve or else Jeannie could die. We don’t know what bit her.”

She turned to head back for the study. I watched her disappear into the thickening smoke and heard her call: “Don’t go without me!”

Hopelessly, I sat on the hard floor with Jeannie, and took her hand as she cried and rocked back and forwards with pain. I sighed. *Trust you*, I couldn’t help thinking, *you little pest. We could have been out of here by now*. I knew it wasn’t fair to think like this, but really. This girl had been nothing but a nuisance and now we might all fry, thanks to her.

The next second, there was a huge exploding sound and a blinding globe of fire burst out of a room further down the passageway. I jumped up and pulled Jeannie, sobbing, to her feet. The fire was like a mad tiger, making its furious way along the

corridor. It latched onto cloths or wood or dust or anything, eating up everything it passed.

“This way,” I croaked, and pulled Jeannie back towards the study, even though the smoke was so thick and foul that way we could barely see. What fool made the windows such tiny slits, so no one could get through them? I pulled my hood over my stinging eyes and tried to cover my nose and mouth from the fumes. One hand was still clutching at Jeannie and pulling her with me. Panic filled my whole head and body with a loud thumping and pounding.

And then there was a terrible crashing sound. Just behind us, a wall collapsed. The fire licked greedily at its newly-found bits of wood. The stones threw up so much dust that we were totally blinded for a few moments. I rubbed my eyes and then – the strangest of things – I could see out to the courtyard where several smaller fires were dancing. The heat melted great dollops of snow, which slid off the roofs and slapped onto the ground. And right in the middle of the cobbled yard stood Tom. He was holding his arms out to me and shouting my name, his face scorched red and desperate-looking. I screamed for him. Still pulling Jeannie, who seemed to be getting heavier and heavier, I stumbled through the broken remains of the wall. I threw myself into his arms. He encircled both of us.

We all clung together, staring round at the blazing courtyard. We could hear the yells of the patients, some limping, some scuttling around the square, not knowing what to do. I knew there would be others who wouldn't even be able to get out of their beds. They'd be lying helpless as the blaze headed towards them. Some patients had got as far as the gates but they were too afraid to go beyond them. There were terrified bleating and grunting sounds coming from the animals, thrown into panic as the fires raged on.

Then came the worst moment of all. I saw Meg stumbling towards the collapsed part of the wall. It was as if she was being chased by the fire. The blue dress pulled behind her, slowing her down. She saw us all huddled together out in the courtyard and shouted out: “Annie! Don’t go without me!”

I watched in horror as she tripped over the hem of the silly long dress, falling her full length onto the stony rubble. A tiny pot sailed out of her hand in an arc and somehow, behind me, Tom reached out and caught it. In less than a second, the angry flames whipped their way up the back of the dress and Meg disappeared into a flash of orange-gold, like a Chinese firework.

Screaming and sobbing, I started towards her, Tom trying to pull me back. But then the flames burst out of the building, enormous, overpowering, blasting me with their wicked hell-heat. I stumbled backwards, hearing Tom shouting, Jeannie yelling. Then all I knew was the dizzying blackness of nothing.

I thought I could see Meg, standing smiling at me in the blue dress she loved. She looked beautiful, surrounded by a soft summer sky and pink blossom. I tried to say her name, my throat raw and stopped up. My words turned into a painful fit of coughing. Meg shrank smaller and smaller. I blinked my sore, dusty eyes. Then I realised I was looking at the silly painted plant pot with its fancy picture of the goddess of spring, next to the hearth in the drawing room of Hexer Hall. The fire I could smell, though, wasn’t just the sweet coal and pine logs of Lady Hexer’s grate. I could still taste the dirtier, thicker smoke of burning buildings. I sat up and looked around. It felt very warm, much warmer than usual. Jeannie was also lying on the thick rug, eyes closed and white-faced. Next to me, slightly charred, was the doctor’s great book, still wrapped in a hot, dirty cloth. And there was the little pot that Meg had thrown.

Meg. I couldn't even bear to think about her. I grabbed the pot and opened it. The distinct, clean smell of lavender and all sorts of other herbs hit my nostrils. I looked again at Jeannie. She was breathing heavily. I picked up her bare foot and saw that it was purple-red, blistered and swollen, with two tiny puncture marks near the heel. Without much hope, I dipped my fingers in the pot and rubbed the oily lotion around the wounds. The drawing room door opened and Lady Hexer stood there, staring at me.

"Annie! Thank goodness!" she gasped. "I didn't know where – but how did you get in here?" Then she spotted the book, some of its leaves sticking out of the greyed wrapping. Her eyes turned excited and greedy as she bent down towards it. "Oh, Annie! You did it! My book!"

Furious, I leaped over and sat on the book, hard. "Is that all you can think about!" I shouted at her. She stepped back, staring at me in her shock. "Why, Annie -"

"Jeannie's nearly died because of you! My friend in the hospital – she's been killed. I don't even know where Tom is. All because of you and your mad ideas."

Lady Hexer stooped down and held out her pale hands. They were shaking like birch twigs in the winter wind. "Now then, Annie. You must tell me all you have been through. In a moment. But first we will do what we can for Jeannie."

She sighed. "No local doctors will come near the Hall. But you have the book, Annie! Let's see if there is anything there which may help the child!"

I shook my head. "Oh no," I said, firmly. "Not this thing. I've already put one of the doctor's crazy cures on Jeannie's snake bite, but a fat lot of use it'll be. And as for this - it's all madness! This is what I think of it!"

In one quick movement, I rolled off the book and grabbed at it. I heaved it up, cloth and all and lifted it above my head.

"Now, Annie," said Lady Hexer, pleadingly. "Remember what an important thing this book is. To both of us. Be careful, please." She circled me carefully, but I could tell

she was going to make a grab for it. I looked around wildly and then, with all my last strength, I flung it on to her fire. It made a great whooshing sound. The flames chomped at it, making a noise as if they were cackling with laughter.

Lady Hexer let out a howl. She threw herself at the fire, all the while screaming: “No! NO!” She kept plucking at the mad flames and then jumping back because of the heat.

I suddenly realised there was a lot of noise coming from the grounds outside. It might’ve been going on since I had arrived, but I hadn’t had time to give any thought to it. I ran to the window and saw there were huge fires out in the grounds. They were tearing along the gardens and the thick plants like angry dragons. Strange, thick, green spirals of smoke rose up from the flames.

“Lady Hexer,” I shouted. “Your grounds are on fire!”

She didn’t turn round but kept approaching the fire in the grate, arms outstretched. “Stupid minister,” she muttered, more to herself than me. “Stupid, superstitious peasants. They think they’re burning out the magic. They’ll pay for this. They’ll be sorry, when I have the power to cure all their ills.”

Tom, I thought. He might be in the cottage. I have to get to him.

But then there was a loud hissing, spitting sound. I turned to see Lady Hexer backing away from the hearth, making moaning sounds. Rising out of the fire, was the shape of a serpent, formed from greenish-black smoke, its mouth open, its tongue flicking. Arching up, it crept out of the fire and along the carpet. It was followed by a second, thick-bodied snake, no less terrifying because it was made of smoke. Then a third.

“Get out of here!” I screamed at Lady Hexer.

I suddenly noticed Jeannie stirring, rubbing her eyes. I grabbed her hand and pulled her up and towards the door.

“Come on, you stupid woman!” I yelled at Lady Hexer.

She looked frozen for a moment. Then she blinked and with wide eyes she ran towards the fire again, jabbering: “The book! I must try to save the book!” The smoke-snakes were gathering, forming misty knots around her. And then she threw herself bodily at the flames.

I heard her terrible screams but I didn’t stop to think a second longer. I dragged Jeannie away, out of the room and down the back stairs towards the deserted kitchen. From the thundering, rattling sounds and the thick, poisonous smells, I knew we were being followed by fire.

“Becky!” Jeannie yelled, when she found the kitchen empty. “My Becky’s asleep upstairs!”

“I’m sorry,” I pulled her out of the door in a panic. “We have to get out before we get killed too. Hurry up!” We ran out into the grounds. Panting, I tried to work out a way across the gardens that avoided the worst of the fires. We scurried in a crazy zigzag, heading for the cottage. The heat and smoke-stench almost overcame me. Then I heard someone yelling my name. Tom and Lucy were running towards me. I ran at them and tried to hug them both at once. Tom’s eyes were streaming.

“I had terrible dreams about you, Annie,” he said, squeezing me hard and kissing the top of my head. “I dreamed we were stuck in a fire. Then Lucy woke me when all this started in the grounds. We need to get away, Annie. All of us. Fast.”

Still clinging to each other, we turned towards the Hall, which was well alight. The thick plumes of smoke which rose up from it formed the shape of fat, stinking snakes, their hazy bodies swelling before they faded into the sky.

We had to edge closer to the burning building to get to the main road out of the estate. Again I could hear the sickening, crashing sounds of the Hall’s grand rooms falling

in on themselves. I heard a terrible, mad shriek and we looked up to see Haggstone, leaning out of her open bedroom window, the bright amber of the fire right behind her.

“Help me!” she was yelling, her throaty voice alight with fear. “I’m trapped! Help me!”

We all looked at each other, gasping for breath. “There’s nothing we can do,” Tom called up at her. “We can’t get to you. Is there no way you can get out?”

Haggstone let out another crazy scream and to our horror she clambered up onto the ledge.

“No,” I whispered. I wiped the sweat and grime from my face. We watched, our mouths open, dumbstruck, as she fell, stupidly flapping like a shot bird, her wraps and scarves aflame. She landed with a thump right in the middle of one of the fires. We ran towards it but again the flames and black smoke forced us back. And in just a few seconds the blaze disappeared, as suddenly as if someone had thrown water at it. We edged closer. Nothing was there but a fat pile of dark, smoking ash.

“Lady Hexer,” I said, tearfully, looking back at the burning, collapsing building. “She’s still in there.”

“Becky! My Becky!” Jeannie wailed.

No one said anything. Lucy just squeezed me around the shoulders and steered us away.

As we stumbled to the gates of the grounds, a coach rattled up towards us and stopped. Mrs McKinnon got out. She stared at the burning hall and grounds with wet, gleaming eyes. “Get in the coach,” she ordered. “Jeannie, your sister has escaped and made it to the village. She’s weeping her heart out, thinking you dead. She’ll be overjoyed to see you. Lucy, you can stay with my sister in the village for tonight. Tom, Annie, there is a room for you in the Fleece Inn.”

As we clambered into the coach, carts carrying men from the village lumbered up

towards the grounds. "Get away from here," one of the men shouted. "We'll do what we can to put the fires out."

The coach clattered us towards Hexendale. Flames were still thrashing out of every window of the Hall and from the tall chimneys the smoke serpents were rising and fading into the bright blue winter sky.

January 14th, 1899.

We spent an odd, sleepless night in the village inn. The keeper made a supper for all the people who had fled the Hall, in return for listening to their stories. I didn't tell all of mine, of course. No one would have believed it anyway. Becky came up to me and her pinched face broke into the first proper smile I'd ever seen her make.

"You saved my sister," she said. "You got rid of the snake poison. Thank you so much."

I shrugged. "It wasn't me, really," I admitted. "It was someone else. My friend Meg." Saying her name gave me a stabbing pain in my stomach and I blinked hard. "She knew what would cure it. I didn't really believe her. But it worked after all."

Becky squeezed my hand. "Well. Jeannie said you were really brave."

I felt myself blush.

Later, Tom came and put his arm around my shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I brought you to that place and you were in so much danger. I didn't know."

I leaned my head on his chest. "It wasn't your fault," I said.

"Maybe I'm not able to look after you," he said, hanging his head. "Do you want to go back to Aunt Catherine's?"

I made a choking sound. "I do not," I said. "Do you?"

Tom shook his head. "Lucy's going to try to find a position in Edinburgh. I thought I'd go with her."

"And me," I said.

Tom grinned. "And you, hobgoblin. If that's what you want."

He gave me a squeeze. "Hey," he said, suddenly. "Feel that."

He took my hand and rubbed it across the top of my scalp. Underneath the pads of my fingers, I could feel soft, new, baby hairs on my head.

January 18th, 1899.

Tom, Lucy and I make our way back to Hexer Hall this morning to see if we can salvage anything from our cottage. The fires hadn't reached quite as far as our little home, so we're able to bundle up some blankets, a couple of pots and, thankfully, Tom's little leather bag where he'd saved his wages. "There's quite a lot in there," I say, surprised.

He winks. "I told you Lady Hexer paid well. This should be enough for our train fares to Edinburgh."

"A train?" I'm excited, because I've never been on one before. Lucy chats about how she may be able to find work with her old employer, who'd be happy to see her come back. Edinburgh's full of tall, beautiful buildings, Lucy promises. And there are factories, too. All sorts of ways to find work. And I know everyone will speak as if they were singing, just like Lucy.

We walk towards the blackened bones of the Hall. The snow's all disappeared. Not just because of the fire and water, but because the temperature's risen and the air's much milder now. The grounds are soft and muddy under our feet. Under the lingering smell of the burned-out building and the scorched trees and shrubs, is a new, sweeter scent. Moist earth, filled with the promise of growth.

But we won't stay here to see it. "This place is bad," Tom says. "I feel sorry for anyone who tries to build on it or grow anything. So many terrible things have happened here. I'm not sure it'll ever be right. In fact," he shivers hard, in spite of it not being cold. "Let's just get out of here, as quick as we can."

And I agree. The main thing is to leave this place. It took Tom and me in, like a pretty face. But I opened a door to the past and I don't know if it will ever fully close again. Maybe, somewhere else, I won't keep seeing Meg disappearing into the blaze whenever I close my eyes. Maybe, we will find a place where people will not stare at Lucy because of the colour of her skin. Maybe.

And maybe, I will find some good to come from all of this. I've taken just one thing with me. Meg's ointment is tucked into my pocket. When I'm sure it does no harm, who knows? It may yet make my fortune. We link arms, all three of us, and start to march away towards a wide, wide, new world.