

MARCHWIGGIN

THE CHURCHILLIAN BABY

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MARCHWIGGIN - The Churchillian Baby

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Chapter 1.

The good Prime Minister and the rainbow.

Marchwiggin was a baby who was always clothed in a dark, well-cut suit - very tiny, but it fitted him well. On his head was a top hat - well shaped and elegant enough for any gentlebaby, whether at the races, at a garden party, down a coal-mine or anywhere that sociability, humour and manners were needed. But he spent a lot of time in his pram, as he was too young to walk.

His pram was black with a hood that was put up when it rained, and when the sun shone too fiercely. Inside there were two feather pillows, under which he hid his cigars and pipe and tobacco; also beneath their soft plumpness he also kept an ice bag, inside which were several bottles of champagne. The pram had two large wheels and two smaller ones. They were well oiled and had only squeaked once, many years ago, before Queen Victoria was born. Perhaps even before that.

It was Marchwiggin's nanny who pushed him about in this splendid vehicle. Her name was Grace, and she was a middle-aged lady with legs that some said were as powerful and as tireless as traction engine pistons when the steam was up. Not that she ever agreed with this compliment, nor any compliment for that matter. Kind words always fell with a clang on Grace's ears, as very few people in her life, apart from Marchwiggin, had said them to her.

Marchwigin loved Whitehall, that famous road in London, where all British political power lived. He loved its majestic buildings, its history and the variety of feelings it evoked. In memory of those who had fought and died in gruesome wars, he never failed to remove his hat when Grace pushed him past The Cenotaph. Legions of sad thoughts marched slowly through his mind as his eyes rested heavily on the garlands of poppies surrounding this grave monument.

He adored The Horse Guard's Parade, because it infused him with the best of spirits. The guardsman's steadiness, discipline and humility were virtues he knew were very hard to achieve.

Then there was Downing Street. He often sat in his pram at the Whitehall end of this illustrious avenue of democracy for hours on end, smoking a giant cigar or his pipe, as he chatted to the policemen or tourists, while waiting to catch sight of the Prime Minister.

Grace often objected to this. 'It's a waste of time,' she would say. 'Hanging around here all day! Whatever will people think?'

'Never mind that,' Marchwigin would respond cheerfully. 'Why don't you go to that café for a coffee and a cake? That'll take your mind off things.'

But Grace seldom went for the coffee, because she was secretly just as excited to see the Prime Minister as everyone else. She also didn't want to let Marchwigin out of her sight.

Sometimes the great man who lived at number 10, the Prime Minister, swept through the swirling silver gates of Downing Street in a shining rocket proof car. When this happened it was clear from his furrowed brow and determined expression that he had far reaching matters of state on his mind. But at other times, which was more often than not, sunny thoughts of the marvels of life inspired him to travel in a tall, open,

yellow carriage, drawn by eight well-muscled black horses, each with manes so shining that they could reflect the stars at night.

Marchwigin loved it when he saw this yellow carriage, because, although the Prime Minister was very old, he was a charismatic man, who liked nothing more in the world than to wave at the public as he drove by. And when he was in this bright carriage he more often than not waved with such a great whirl of his long arms that he was like a helicopter, the turbulence causing his thick beard to stand on end. This spectacle was something that so delighted our hero, Marchwigin, that he was often moved to tears of joy.

Sometimes, to Marchwigin's elation, the Prime Minister became so excited that he threw colourful streamers onto the streets, spreading joy and hilarity everywhere. This was usually because he was on the way to the theatre, or a ball, or if he had read something revealing in a book of poetry or a novel. Though once it was because he and the King had spent the day together travelling around the country, going from one public house to another, using the King's favourite hot air balloon as transport.

Yes, it must be said that he was the most popular Prime Minister the world had ever seen.

* * *

One day, when Marchwigin was sitting in his pram in Whitehall, Big Ben chimed ten times... eleven times... twelve times... thirteen times. Thirteen times! He looked at his watch, which told him it was six minutes past three - give or take fifteen minutes (Marchwigin didn't worry too much about the precisions of time).

Then, very strangely, he was overwhelmed by nausea, and, frustrated by the restrictions of his pram, he looked about, worried and startled. His top hat even fell off into his lap, but he quickly put it back on.

Meanwhile, Grace had actually gone to the coffee shop. So, Marchwiggan shouted to a policeman, who, for an unknown reason, was lying face down on the pavement as if he was asleep.

‘Excuse me officer! *Officer!*’

Marchwiggan was not to know that the poor young constable had passed out with grief!

‘Officer! Get up!’ Marchwiggan persevered. ‘*Please* officer!’

Fears and misgivings began to overwhelm Marchwiggan’s mind. Then he saw a man dash past - a furtive looking individual with a sallow face that betrayed a limitless lack of self-understanding, a face that could find offence in anything and everything. His black hair was brushed forward.

‘Sir!’ Marchwiggan called after the fellow.

The man looked up with taut eyes, and, seeing a baby in a pram with a cigar in his mouth and a top hat on his head, he became angry and snapped: ‘I’ll put a stop to that! And now I *can* put a stop to that!’ Then he ran away as fast as he could to an office or a quiet, paneled room somewhere in a heavy, thick-walled building.

Marchwiggan watched with horror as another man wailed like a lost soul. ‘Oh! *Woe!*’ He cried. ‘The Prime Minister is *dead!* Oh! *Woe!* What *will* become of us!’

Upon uttering these awful words, the newly deranged individual fell forward in a swoon. He was caught by a strong woman, who could easily have been mistaken for a man as she lowered him gently to the pavement before bathing his brow with a handkerchief that had been dipped in scented water.

Meanwhile, to calm his increasing nerves, Marchwiggan puffed like a steam train at his cigar. ‘Thirteen times did Big Ben strike!’ He said to himself. ‘Thirteen times.’

Suddenly he looked up at the sky, his eyes full of understanding. ‘Yes! Now it makes sense! Thirteen times! Thirteen - a sweeping number. The number of the Great Broom of Death. The number of the Great Malefic’s scythe! So the man wasn’t joking! Thirteen and the Prime Minister is *dead!*’

Suddenly the sky became very dark and everyone, including the police and the Horse Guardsmen, wept heavily. Even the poppies at The Cenotaph turned black. It was a terrible moment, and Marchwiggin was overwhelmed horribly by loneliness. He looked about anxiously for Grace.

‘Oh, where *is* she?’ He muttered. ‘Where *is* she?’

At long last, with cake all over her face and tea stains on her skirt, Grace appeared, trotting from the direction of the café, where she had heard the news. Tears streamed down her rosy cheeks. Once at Marchwiggin’s side, she collapsed with emotion, and fell into a coma.

She was taken to hospital in an ambulance, which had no room for Marchwiggin, so he suggested they towed him through the streets. The ambulance crew admired his courage and leadership, so they did exactly as he suggested.

* * *

Marchwiggin sat in his pram by her bed for a whole week, after which Grace came round with the enigmatic words: ‘It’s the Prime Minister’s Birthday cake!’

Marchwiggin started, for at the moment of her waking he was deeply immersed in a newspaper article about illegal biscuits. But upon seeing his beloved nanny return to consciousness, he tossed the paper aside.

‘Grace!’ He rejoiced. ‘It’s great to see you awake again!’

‘It’s the Prime Minister’s Birthday cake! *Isn’t it?*’ She slurred loudly.

Marchwiggin delightedly reassured her that it was not as she said, but that she was in hospital after suffering from too much of what the doctor said was ‘emotional turbulence’.

Suddenly all sense came back to her, and she smiled at Marchwiggin, but her face clouded when she remembered what had actually happened. The Prime Minister was dead.

Fortunately, however, her spirits returned when the doctor told her that she had woken in time for the Prime Minister’s funeral procession, which would pass along Whitehall to Westminster Abbey on the following day.

* * *

The funeral was, of course, a very sad but important event. Marchwiggin and Grace joined the thousands of mourners who filled the London streets beneath a thick grey sky. The whole of the Royal Family was there in force. Each member was clad in black and weeping. The black feathers in the Queen’s hat were so high that only the gentlest gust of wind blew her over. Meanwhile, the king arrived in his blackest hot air balloon, which unfortunately wasn’t *very* black, for it was in actual fact sky blue and had yellow stars all over it.

After the service, when the Prime Minister’s body had finally been launched to the sun in its funeral rocket, the King stepped into the basket of his balloon. The moment he raised his hand to wave goodbye there was a bolt of dazzling light that ripped open the dull ceiling of cloud. As if in terror, the clouds peeled back to reveal a clear blue sky. Everyone gasped, some collapsed. But there was still more of this miracle yet to come, for a giant rainbow slowly appeared over Westminster Abbey, filling everyone’s heart with joy.

Marchwiggin smiled and took this rainbow as a positive sign. Indeed, it inspired him so much that he pulled out his notebook from the inside of his jacket pocket and settled down to write a short poem:

*Great Rainbow of Death,
Play me a tune
On your multi-coloured strings;
Pluck me a melody from the sun,
A harmony for all living things.*

Happy with this little piece, he popped his notebook back in his pocket. Then, when the rainbow had gone, and the thousands of mourners were dispersing, Grace started to push him swiftly along the Embankment away from The Abbey, faster and faster, her powerful legs pumping away, her mind set on the peace and quiet of Richmond upon Thames.

She pushed and she pushed so fast that Marchwiggin, at times, especially when they went round a tight bend, had to hold onto his top hat. Yes, they went so fast that it seemed like only a few minutes before they arrived on top of the hill in Richmond. From there they could relax and watch the magnificent river gently slide into the sorrowful evening.

‘What a sad day,’ Marchwiggin said, taking a long puff of his cigar. ‘What a *sad*, dreadful day. If there had not been that rainbow I shudder to think how the nation would have coped.’

‘I never want one like it again,’ said Grace, settling down on a bench to some knitting with a large ball of golden wool. ‘I never ever want one like it *ever!*’

‘What don’t you want?’ Marchwiggin frowned. ‘A rainbow?’

‘No, a day like that,’ she said with syrupy melancholy.

‘Nor does anyone,’ said Marchwigin. ‘But who will take over now that the dear old Prime Minister has passed on?’

‘Well, Marchwigin,’ she replied sagely, ‘there will be an election, and somebody will be voted in by the people.’

At that moment, as if by magic, a small dark car stopped behind them; and sticking out of its sunroof was an intense individual with black hair brushed forward, pale skin and a black coat. His face was stern, his eyes were cold, hungry and restless. At his mouth was an electric megaphone that made him sound as if he was talking through a metal pipe. Marchwigin recognised him as the sallow individual he had seen in Whitehall on the day that the Prime Minister had passed away.

‘I am Doctor Purge!’ The man yelled, as he turned his head from left to right, like a chicken looking for seeds. ‘I am the one who will win the Constituency of the River! ... The Prime Minister is *dead*.’ At this, the Doctor’s head dipped with affected sorrow. Then suddenly he looked up. ‘But we must look *ahead*!’ He raised his free hand, balled it into a fist and punched the air. ‘We must look to the *future*! The time is right to move on - move on to *sense* and *reason*. We need to have a nation that’s in *control*. We need to *strive* for *control*! And to have a *nation* that’s in *control* - a nation that will never go through the sadness of mourning the death of Prime Ministers, we need to *distance* ourselves. That is why we of the *No Humanity Party* will keep a distance. We in our party say that joy, silliness, drinking, romance, love and nonsense are enemies to the distance we need. They are distractions from work, distractions from *progress*! A distraction from control! We need facts! We need targets and statistics! We need leadership! We need to avoid looking back! We need to cut away at history! Throw the past into the rubbish bin!’

Like a troll jumping at its prey, the little man leapt in one movement onto the roof of his car.

‘We need to stand on the present and look ahead!’ He continued. ‘Forget your woes! Forget the funeral today! Ahead is the only way!’

The small crowd of three people that had quickly gathered around Dr. Purge clapped with incredible enthusiasm, their hands a blur. And yet, whilst they clapped with such vigour, they all had the gravest and most stern expressions.

Encouraged by their response, the Doctor from Whitehall continued with even more energy. ‘*Ahead* is protection! *Ahead* is self-understanding! *Ahead* is *nation*! See! Yes, it makes sense!’ He paused for effect. ‘Today you were mourning our past and dear Prime Minister.’ He paused again. ‘But that dear, honourable man may have led us - I regret to say - into a sense of *falseness*! Were his promises of joy and fun fulfilled? No! Did he drink too much? Yes! Did it lead him astray? Yes! And we all know he had *philosophy*! *Philosophy*, he used to say, is a way to understanding! Utter nonsense! *Philosophy* is a *deceiver*!’

The small crowd, which had now grown to four, groaned with grim joy.

‘Like the rainbow today at the funeral. Ha ha ha! The *rainbow*!’ He spat out these words. ‘Remember that trick of light, performed by his party members and their electric boxes of deception! Yes, it was more *deceit*! More nonsense! We all know it has never been *proved* that signs happen at funerals! Ha ha ha! Yes, where’s the *proof*! Life after death! I’ve never seen it! Ha ha ha! God! What’s that! It’s just an excuse to drink wine in churches or to kneel down! And that is why, I, Doctor Purge of the *No Humanity Party* will win the Constituency of the Thames,’ he pointed to the sleek river. ‘And I will put a stop to its aimless flowing and turn it into a dam. Or I will fill it with gravel. Yes, I will cover it with shops! And roads! And offices! And runways! And car parks! And there will be no more nonsense!’

Marchwigin and Grace were horrified by what they heard, so Grace gathered her knitting and pushed Marchwigin in his pram to a quieter place; still very high up on the hill, but away from Dr. Purge and his followers.

From their excellent new position, in shocked silence, Marchwigin and Grace watched the sun sink deeper and deeper into the evening.

After several minutes of reflection and puffing at his pipe, which was, as a matter of your interest, a fine object carved into the shape of a fox's head, Marchwiggin said, 'Do you think I could become a Member of Parliament? You see, dear nanny, if I became one, I could become Prime Minister and so keep that awful Dr. Purge away from his visions of car parks and dams.'

'Marchwiggin, you are a dear,' said Grace, admiring her knitting, which was now a glowing golden carpet. Then suddenly she laughed her loud laugh, the one that always caused a smile to leap onto Marchwiggin's chubby face.

'That's hardly an answer to my question,' said Marchwiggin, still smiling. 'I really need to know whether or not I can become a Member of Parliament. Perhaps I could try for the Constituency of the River. And beat that vile Purge to it!'

Grace was not used to such ambition coming from her little boy's mouth. So, when she realised that he was not joking, she went silent. Her watery blue eyes settled distractedly onto the horizon, and she started to weep drop by drop.

'Why do you cry?' Marchwiggin asked, straining hard to look at her, for she was now standing behind the pram.

As a sign of respect for his dear friend's sadness, he extinguished his pipe, which was difficult, as it had some high flames coming from it, rather like a bonfire. But a bottle of champagne extinguished the blaze quicker than you might have thought.

'Oh, you are a love,' she said very gently, with a sob. Then her tears became a flood that burst from her eyes and turned into a small stream, flowing with twinkling briskness down the hill to the flashing river below.

'You're weeping a torrent! You've wept enough today!' Marchwiggin's face was flushed and concerned. He placed his pipe aside. 'Please stop it or tell me what's upsetting you!'

But Grace could stand no more and took hold of the pram. Then, with a violent push, she sent Marchwiggin down the hill. This was quite an irresponsible thing for a trained nanny to do, for the hill in Richmond is no ordinary hill. It is so steep that it is almost a vertical drop.

So, the slender wheels of Marchwiggin's pram spun invisibly as the vehicle soared and leapt. As he crashed down, down the hill, through hedges, over hedges, over a dog, Marchwiggin was fully aware that there was very little he could do to improve his immediate predicament. That's why he settled back, opened another bottle of champagne and lit a cigar. Meanwhile, the ride became increasingly bumpy, not least because he went through a wall and a greenhouse; but it didn't matter. He was as skilled as the next baby at balancing glasses of champagne when passing over uneven surfaces, and so he didn't spill a drop.

Halfway down, the hill leveled out into a small park, where people were out walking in the late evening gloom. Marchwiggin saw them flash by. He noticed that many of them looked aghast and fearful at him. They were not used to fast prams in the evening.

At that moment, Grace, who was now regretting her rash action, was chasing the pram as fast as she could, her powerful legs driving her on and on. Her tears had transformed into dry determination, fanned furiously by her starched white skirt.

Marchwiggin crashed through another hedge, wrecked a modern sculpture of a pregnant woman with three legs, and the park was behind him. But that meant he was now once again descending another steep part of the hill, and gaining speed.

On and on, faster and faster.

He soon finished his cigar and his champagne. So, to help pass the time, he withdrew his notebook and fountain pen, and settled his mind upon the creation of another poem. It read as follows:

*The silver wheels take me swiftly hence,
I know not where, I know not whence,
But the soothing river with its sinking light,
Dazzling the horizon into a glowing flight
Of birds and angels and pheasants...*

At this point Marchwiggin had a mental block because he thought that he and his pram were about to enter the River Thames.

And he was correct, because within one second his pram had taken off from the bank, his stomach had leapt into his chest and he went airborne into the dusk.

Grace was following him at such a speed that she too was unable to stop at the river's edge and so, like Marchwiggin, she also took off into the dusk.

It was only a second later, but it felt much longer, when Marchwiggin came into land, stopping abruptly. Grace landed just behind him. They had both been expecting a huge splash and to be engulfed by cold evening river water. But, contrary to all such expectations, they were safely on a solid platform.

Marchwiggin looked about and saw that he and Grace had landed on a raft made from many logs, all tied together. Also on the raft was an old hut, with a coil of rope hanging on its door. Next to the hut was a large mattress with a large white feather on it. There was also a huge saucepan. A whisp of smoke from the hut's iron chimney rapidly dissolved into Richmond's darkening sky.

'Now, look what's happened, Marchwiggin!' Grace said, panicking. 'We're floating along the Thames, it's getting dark... and... and ... I think... I certainly think that we're getting farther and farther away. Oh! If only you hadn't...'

At this moment the door to the hut suddenly opened and a tiny old lady appeared. She was not much taller than a rolling pin. Her head was large for her body, though

crooked, as if a cricket bat had hit her. It was also covered by a corona of frizzy grey hair. Her eyes were like fireflies. Her long nose was as straight as a thorn; her mouth was wide and still, her lips like red slugs. She had a hairy chin, shaped as if it could open bottles. Next to her, standing upright and proud, was a duck. It was wearing a tall crown on its head. The dim light from inside the hut framed the woman and the duck like a mysterious painting from Victorian times.

‘*Hush!* Grace! *Hush!*’ The old woman said.

Grace wondered how the woman knew her name.

‘Hush, hush, hush.’ The woman went on. ‘It is Marchwiggin who needs to know the future and that is why he is here. So Postleswaite and I can help you.’

‘Who’s Postleswaite?’ Grace asked with eyes as wide as terror itself.

‘This duck is Postleswaite. And he will lay the Egg of Marchwiggin’s Fortune. But first we must have some beer, cheese and a bun.’

‘Did you say that *he* will lay an egg?’ Grace asked.

‘I did,’ said the woman.

‘Then *he* is a *he*. He is a *male* duck and male ducks don’t lay eggs!’ Grace was excited that she had caught the old woman out.

But the old woman was fast, sharp and angry with her answer. ‘He’ll make an Egg of Fortune appear as easily as you can think of a cynical remark like that!’

Marchwiggin had been watching this exchange of words with amusement. He adjusted his tie and smiled. A poem suddenly formed in his mind, but for some unknowable reason, he had already learned it, so he didn’t write it down:

*Oh! For the figs and fun,
And little tiny buns,
And angels of despair
Play fiddles in your hair.*

*Like cheese and beer,
The sense is to see,
But green deceit's
Around the pea.*

*A sweet pea can't grow,
Until it's free to know.*

After running this poem through his mind, his eyes settled on the duck. Why was it wearing a crown? *Very odd!* Then, as if the bird was answering his thoughts, the bird smiled at him, its beak squeaking slightly as it did so.

The tiny woman went back into her kitchen, where she rattled some pots and shook some wooden spoons, knives and forks.

Grace lowered herself onto the mattress.

'My goodness! This is soft!' She said this feeling a little more at ease, as the moonlit river hissed silently by.

'Not all mattresses are soft,' Postleswaite spoke gently through a slow-moving beak before making himself comfortable on a tiny wooden chair. He continued: 'Some people think every single mattress in the world is soft.' He nodded towards the huge white feather. 'Other people think that every single feather is from a bird. But they are not always right.'

Both Marchwiggin and Grace were stunned, for they had never before heard a duck speak, especially in such deep, mellifluous tones. In fact, it was such a remarkable phenomenon that Marchwiggin coughed uneasily, and almost dropped his cigar.

‘Fascinating,’ he said.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ said the tiny woman as she approached with food piled on a tray that was as round and as big as the moon.

‘Ah, lovely! Good food... Good beer... Good cheer! Why does Postleswaite wear a crown?’ Marchwiggin asked, reaching for a tall glass of frothy ale.

‘Because,’ the duck replied, ‘because I know everything.’

As far as Marchwiggin was concerned, this was quite a claim to be made by anyone, let alone a duck. And so he pondered upon it as they all refreshed themselves in starlit silence. The beer was excellent, the cheese very powerful, the buns were hard on the outside, but full of currants and the softest bread.

‘Another ale, Grace?’ The little woman asked.

‘Yes, I think that’ll be very nice indeed.’ She paused. ‘Though, you must realise that I don’t usually drink too much. Nor does Marchwiggin.’

The old woman ignored her.

‘*Do you hear me?*’ Grace hated it when people ignored her.

‘Hardly ever,’ replied the woman dismissively, her eyes now like lightning flashes.

Suddenly the woman leapt into the air, landed softly and whispered: ‘By the heavens that are infinite within the hearts of beasts and man alike, and trees and grass, too. By the winds that can not be seen, and the scarlet morning, gorgeous to behold. And the

world of fairies, and magic alike. And the phantom on the marsh, and the spectres and ghosts, and dark holes beneath sprawling roots. Postleswaite, you knowing bird, lay the egg of fortune for Marchwiggin. Then hatch his path.'

'Not *path*, but riverway, my dearest friend,' said the bird in his deep voice. As he spoke he was surrounded by a shining egg of light, which grew brighter and brighter when his voice went deeper and deeper.

Grace dropped her bun in astonishment. 'What wickedness is happening here!' She exclaimed.

'Grace!' Said Marchwiggin, now enchanted by the bird. 'Please! Don't be so rude! There's no wickedness here at all, except what's made in your silly head! Now,' he said, turning attention to the woman, 'while I listen to this oracle, do you mind if I smoke?'

'No.'

'Would you like a cigar?' Marchwiggin asked.

'Yes, please,' replied the woman. 'Smoke's as good as fog for atmosphere.'

'And the duck?'

'He's in a trance now.'

'Very good.'

At this, Marchwiggin drew out two of his longest, fattest cigars. He tossed one inaccurately to the old woman. She caught it like a goalkeeper, diving a long way to her left. She then dashed quickly into the hut, returning with her cigar very much alight.

‘That really is a bad habit,’ said Grace irritably. ‘A baby like you, smoking all those cigars and pipes! Is there no end to it?’

‘None, my dear Grace. None at all,’ said Marchwiggin with a casual wave of his cigar.

‘As I was saying,’ continued the duck. ‘As I was *hatching!* No, not a pathway. A *riverway*. And a home but not a home. Power but no power. The people, but no people.’ He started talking so fast that it was difficult to understand him. ‘The way but no way at all! The oddness, but not so odd! The holding! Ha ha ha. Without having. Still but... but... butt... butter, ha ha, still but always moving! The blood of the nation! The country! The nation! The artery of the capital! Is all yours! Marchwiggin! All can be yours and ours and theirs! But the riverway is a hard way, so be aware! Be aware! Not *beware!* No politician. No polly-ticial person!’ The duck’s beak chattered rapidly. ‘Not for years. Only Polly parrots! Ha ha! Don’t be a Polly-parrot! That’s my advice to you! Or you’ll never achieve it! You must go on the election campaign for the Constituency of the River! A constituency that’s not a constituency! But it needs an MP! Not a Purge!’

Then they all went to sleep.

Chapter 2.

The Human Fish in Twickenham.

'I am the Human Fish.'

Marchwiggin stirred.

'I am the Human Fish.' Louder this time.

Grace moved her head dreamily, a strand of the huge feather upon which she lay touched her nose. She sneezed, sending her body spinning ten feet into the air, her starched skirts spreading like wings. She landed softly, and was embraced back into sleep by the mattress.

'I am the Human Fish!' The voice had a bubbling quality to it and this time it was so loud that both Marchwiggin and Grace finally woke up.

Marchwiggin adjusted his top hat, which had fallen over his eyes. He looked about and saw that he was still in his pram on the raft. They had stopped beneath a weeping willow. Grace, still lying down, rubbing her eyes. The hut door was open, everything inside was tidy, all the saucepans and a big frying pan were hanging over the sink, and there wasn't any mess from the food of the previous night. But there was no sign of Postleswaite or the strange old woman.

Marchwiggin cleared his throat and smiled. He was surrounded by peace, silence and light. Everything was new, as if spring had suddenly arrived. The leaves on the weeping willow were translucent green and very soft to touch. Marchwiggin reached for a length of slim, flexible willow branch, snapped it off and put one end of it behind the ribbon of his top hat. He drew out a cigar and lit it, squinting into the dewy sun as it rose over the horizon.

‘Hello, Grace,’ he said. ‘Did you say something to wake me up?’

‘No dear,’ she said, still adjusting to the surroundings.

‘Oh! For goodness sake!’ It was that strange bubbling voice again. ‘Of course *she* didn’t say something, but *I* did!’

Who *was* saying these words!

Marchwiggin looked about.

He saw a rotting fence, covered in moss, a thick hedge, two chaffinches (who suddenly started to sing), a field, where crocuses grew, and pansies, and blue bells, and slim trees. Recognising that he was now not far from Twickenham, he realised that they must have drifted up river during the night. His eyes focussed on a rusting frame, upon which rested a large glass tank of water. Peering out from within was a little man, or, at least, a fish, an orange fish, with a human head. The creature had large, steady, challenging eyes. His cheekbones were prominent. His long, fine blond hair floated vertically to the surface, creating the slow motion impression that he was alarmed.

‘I’m the Human Fish,’ the creature said, as if to say, ‘Who the hell are you?’

Alarmed by the strangeness of The Human Fist, Grace screamed and ran into the hut.

‘Grace, where are you off to?’ Marchwiggin said lightly as he re-lit his cigar.

‘That thing! That thing in that strange fish tank,’ she said, pointing a finger of one hand at the creature, while holding the frying pan threateningly in the other. ‘What is it!’

‘The Human Fish,’ said the Human Fish with as much matter of fact as there was fact in the matter.

‘You’re a terrible fiend!’ Grace said before disappearing back inside the hut. ‘And where *is* the old lady and where *is* that duck?’ She demanded. ‘Mind you, they’ve left everything very tidy. Oh, my goodness! Marchwiggin, this is a *peculiar* time we’re having.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Marchwiggin casually. ‘Why don’t you make some breakfast and some coffee, or tea?’

‘Well, that’s a good idea,’ she said from inside the hut. ‘Ooh, look, plenty of food - and drink!’

‘They’ve still gone, though, haven’t they?’ The Human Fish remarked, complacent in his knowledge. ‘That old hag and her duck - left you in the lurch, haven’t they? Food or no food.’

‘I couldn’t say,’ Marchwiggin replied as he intensely examined the Human Fish through a cloud of cigar smoke. ‘They were very nice, and they do appear to have given us their raft,’ he said. ‘Anyway, what *are* you? You say you’re a human fish...’

‘*The* Human Fish.’

‘And what is that?’

‘*What is that?*’ He repeated mockingly. ‘*What is that? What is that?* I’ll tell you *what is that*. We’re all *doomed!* That is what.’

‘Doomed?’ Marchwiggan said, a slight frown appearing beneath the rim of his top hat. ‘But it’s the most magnificent morning I’ve ever seen.’

‘The Prime Minister’s *dead*,’ continued the Human Fish pushing his face against the glass of his tank. ‘He may have gone around in a yellow carriage, but he was as depressed as they come. I know. We’re all depressed. We’re all doomed. And I’m the only person who knows that. No one else can face it. So I’m the only one who’s happy, but then happiness has no meaning. There’ll be another World War soon - the Apocalypse - all the signs are there.’

‘Marchwiggan,’ Grace said, appearing again at the door to the hut, this time with a teapot in her hand. ‘Don’t talk to strangers like that. It’ll do you no good.’

‘Please get on with the breakfast, Grace.’ Marchwiggan turned his attention back to the Human Fish as Grace went back inside. ‘Tell me, sir, why are you in that tiny horrible tank when the River Thames flows splendidly by? It appears to me that the only person who is doomed is you. And that’s through your own doing.’

The Human Fish laughed hysterically, bubbles shooting up to the surface, his water getting dirtier and dirtier as his anxious movements stirred up all the filth and slime that had accumulated on the bottom of the tank.

‘Don’t speak to me like that!’ The Human Fish bubbled loudly. ‘Don’t *ever* do that! Don’t *ever* do that! You’re *wrong*! You’re *WRONG*!’

Suddenly there was an incredibly loud engine noise.

Marchwiggan leant forward in his pram to see what it was. It was a motor boat. A long, thin one, driven by a small man. His broad jaw was jutting slightly forward; his wide mouth stretched to a grin. He was so unusual looking that, if he had been green, he would have been a toad. Standing behind him on a tall box was Doctor Purge,

megaphone in hand, black hair brushed forward, black coat wrapped tightly around him.

Above the noise of the engine, and above the stink of its exhaust, came the tinny words: 'Vote for me! Vote for the *No Humanity Party!* Vote for control! Vote for facts! Put the Constituency of The River in the right hands!' Doctor Purge's eyes settled on the Human Fish. 'Aha! There you are! Mr. Human Fish! I knew I would find you here somewhere!' Doctor Purge punched the air, and looked as grave and as serious as he could.

'Dr. Purge!' The Human Fish bubbled. 'Now there's a welcome guest!' He gave Marchwiggin a contemptuous glance. 'So, yes. At least we now have a *real* man, one who can face *reality*. Yes, Doctor Purge is a man who knows how to avoid the frills and nonsense - got a good idea about being doomed, no doubt!'

'Doomed!' The Doctor repeated. His elegant boat steered smoothly but loudly alongside the raft. 'Yes, we're doomed alright!' He shouted tinnily, pointing his megaphone at Marchwiggin. 'Can I have your vote, young sir?'

'No, I am afraid not, Doctor Purge,' said Marchwiggin evenly.

'And why is that?' Purge demanded.

'Because I am also campaigning for the Constituency of the River.'

'Since when?' Purge said mockingly.

'Since I decided to, which was this morning when I woke up.'

'Well, well, well! Is that so?' Purge smiled.

Purge gazed on in horror as Marchwiggin extinguished his cigar before opening a bottle of champagne. There was a loud pop when the cork flew out and over the willow tree into a field.

‘So I have an opponent, a political opponent, have I? And this man - this baby - this smoking, drinking infant is after the Constituency of the River, is he? Well, you’re *doomed*, you babyish fat idiot, I’ll say! Don’t you think, Smug?’

Smug, the toad-faced driver of the boat, nodded ingratiatingly.

The Doctor turned to The Human Fish. ‘I take it you’ll be voting for me, Mr Human Fish!’

‘I take it you’re right,’ said The Human Fish.

Marchwiggin had been observing the situation with curiosity and it had been difficult to keep a smile from his face as he put down his champagne, pulled out his splendid red pipe, which had a fox’s head carved on it, and filled it with tobacco from a leather pouch. As he lit this pipe the carved fox’s face managed a chuckle. Marchwiggin then looked about for his nanny.

‘Grace!’ he called. ‘Grace! It’s only Doctor Purge!’

Doctor Purge said very loudly, ‘Look at you, smoking a disgusting pipe!’ He turned to the Human Fish. ‘Take it from me, Mr Fish, there’ll be laws against pipe smoking! I can tell you now! *And* I’ll make laws against Champagne! Disgusting French rubbish! Oh, you can take it from me, Mr. Human Fish, we’ll be banning many things!’

‘Yes! A man after my own heart,’ said the Human Fish with delight. ‘You’ve got my vote! Now, Mr... er...’ He looked at Marchwiggin.

‘Marchwiggin will do,’ said Marchwiggin.

‘A ludicrous name!’ Smug barked out of turn.

‘Indeed! Ludicrous! Idiotic!’

‘Well, you listen, Mr. Marchwiggin,’ The Human Fish bubbled. ‘Get off my riverbank! Get away from my weeping willow! Clear off and see that you lose this election!’ The Human Fish coiled about in his tank with excitement, immediately regretting it because he had once again stirred up the filth at the bottom of his tank.

‘Grace!’ Marchwiggin called.

‘Yes, I’m coming,’ she said as she appeared in the doorway and looked directly at Purge. ‘Now you may be a politician, but I heard everything you just said; every revolting word. And if you speak like that to Marchwiggin again and I’ll bash you hard with this.’ She showed him the spoon she was holding like a club.

‘Take her name, Smug. We’ll be suing her for threatening behaviour!’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Smug enthusiastically, and wrote the word ‘Grace’ in his note pad.

‘You’re his nanny aren’t you?’ Purge asked.

‘Of course, I am,’ said Grace.

‘Well, mark my words,’ Purge continued, pointing a long finger at Grace. ‘Passionate behaviour will be legislated against! When I’m in power, people like you will be taxed, rounded up and thrown into prison. And if you ever get out of prison you will *never* be able to be a nanny again. You will be BANNED from going within one mile of any children!’

‘Grace,’ said Marchwiggin calmly. ‘Could you throw me the rope that’s hanging on the door.’

Grace boldly stepped outside, and handed the rope to Marchwiggan, who immediately tied it into a lasso and threw it so that it looped around the Human Fish's tank. 'Grace, now please could you apply the brake to my pram. Please do it as firmly as possible.'

In amazement, Doctor Purge, Smug, Human Fish and Grace watched on.

'Thank you,' said Marchwiggan as he popped his pipe into his mouth. He then gave a big tug on the rope, which instantly upturned the Human Fish's tank. The Human Fish screamed as he, his tank and its filthy water tumbled into the Thames with a huge splash.

A moment's silence followed. Then there was a flash of the brightest light, and out of the river leapt a golden, shining, creature. It re-entered the water with a delicate splash, swimming, gliding beneath the surface, sending golden, warm light everywhere. After disappearing beneath the surface for a minute or two, it stuck its head out of the water, and everyone saw that it was the Human Fish, now transformed into a huge, happy, glowing Human Fish. He was very handsome.

'Oh, my! I can't believe this!' The Human Fish laughed like a dolphin. 'What a shock, though! What an exquisite shock! Ah, the river, the flowing infinity of the river! Thank you Marchwiggan! You've broken the spell!'

'Good show,' said Marchwiggan, happily. 'What about being doomed now?'

'Doomed? Did I say *doomed*? If I did,' said The Human Fish, 'then please imagine that I didn't!'

'Ah, yes,' blurted a very stunned Doctor Purge through his megaphone. 'Hmm, yes, but we'll still be assured of your vote, will we not? I mean, we will be banning that awful champagne, and...'

‘Oh, why don’t you shut up!’ The Human Fish shouted. ‘You’ll not get my vote. Not now! Not ever! And I hope no one else’s either. And forget all your banning nonsense! Now clear off!’

At this, Smug and Doctor Purge slipped away in a whirl of noise and exhaust fumes.

‘This isn’t the end!’ Doctor Purge warned through his megaphone as he disappeared into the distance.

Grace brought out a tray with breakfast on it. There were eggs and bacon and steaming coffee, and cereal and toast, and orange juice and pineapple juice and bananas and cakes. It was the biggest breakfast ever seen, but she said it was a time to celebrate, and it was good to indulge once in a while.

They asked the Human Fish to join them, but he said he was too happy to stop and eat, and wanted to explore the wonders of the river. So he vanished with a hundred and one thank-yous, and two hundred and two promises that Marchwigin would get his vote.

After breakfast, Grace used a pole to push the raft from the bank. It immediately caught the stream, and floated on blissfully.

While she did the washing up, Marchwigin sat back and wrote a poem:

*Full of food and topped with life,
The Human Fish without gloomy strife;
Now freed from his tank,
He’s tumbled into the Thames,
From a mossy bank,
Where passing sights,
Dissolve like dreams,
Taking things that are seen,
For things that they mean.*

Chapter 3.

Back to Richmond.

The listening woman; and meeting the prisoners.

Oh! It was such a beautiful morning! There wasn't a cloud in the sky, the air was so very fresh, and the Thames, swiftly sliding, flat and shining, took Marchwigin and Grace back to Richmond. Because there was no rudder to their raft, it slowly turned around and around, giving them a view of everything.

Filling the air was the delicate singing of a million happy birds. There were those that flew past; there were those in the bushes and trees; or there were those hiding in the tall grass; some were standing on sticks floating on the water. Some were parrots, yellow and vibrant against the green. Only the ducks and swans kept quiet, but it was obvious that they were enjoying themselves, especially when one or two of them laughed.

The raft drifted past fields full of sheep, a sight that inspired a poem to flow first from the whole Creation into Marchwigin's mind, and from there into his head, then down his arm, through his pen, then down through his pen nib and finally onto his notepad:

*Rumbling sheep jumping so high,
To become fluffy clouds,
Or thick shepherd's pie.*

*You'll land on the ground,
And make not a sound,
With sponges for hooves,*

*Soft, bouncy, bouncy, bouncy, bouncy sheep,
Then picking daffodils for Little Bo Peep.*

*And Little Bo wondered
Where they had gone,
So she wrote a song,
Which she played with her pipes,
Her fingers dancing,
Dancing all night.*

*And the owl did a jig,
So out came a pig,
And the barman too,
With ale and food,
'Til the sheep came back
With thousands of daffodils,
Wrapped in a sack.*

*'Thank you,' Peep said,
With a duck on her head,
'Now, dear sheep, please,
Take to the sky!
Or you'll become slices,
Of old shepherd's pie!'*

Marchwiggin sat back and laughed at his verse, reading it again and again, laughing more and more, until the line about food and drink suddenly made him thirsty and hungry.

'Grace!' he called, his laughter slipping into a good-humoured smile, his eyes still dancing over the words of the poem.

'Yes, dear,' she poked her head out of the hut.

‘Is there anything to eat, or some ale to drink?’

‘Marchwigin! For goodness sake!’ she said, furrowing her brow. ‘You’ve just had a breakfast so big that it would easily have fed a bear! Isn’t it about time that you stopped eating and went on a diet?’

‘Well, I have to say, Grace, that eating is a pleasure that makes little difference to my size or health - I mean, how long have I been eating... and drinking? ...’

‘And *smoking!*’

‘Yes, that, too,’ he said, looking at her with a smile. ‘It’s a very long time - as long as the world – and, like I said, it’s made no difference so far!’

Little did Grace and Marchwigin know, but a very proper woman had detected this lively little exchange of opinions. She was sitting in the tree they were passing at that moment. She was very thin with wide, wild eyes, which would have terrified any child half out of his wits.

‘Excuse me!’ said the woman. ‘Excuse *ME!*’

This demand to be excused was heard very clearly and terribly suddenly, even above the sweet sounds of the birds and the silent lapping of the water against the logs of the raft. Indeed, it was so loud and startling that Marchwigin leapt in the air a couple of feet above his pram, only to land back in it with a few quick bounces, the vehicle’s ancient suspension being tested almost beyond its limits. Grace would have leapt the same distance in the air had not the doorframe above her head prevented her from doing so.

‘I said *EXCUSE ME!*’

‘Yes! Yes! Go on,’ said Marchwigin, looking up at the woman.

‘How dare you talk to us like that!’ said Grace, irritably rubbing her head and giving the woman a nasty look. ‘Haven’t you got anything better to do than sit up there listening to people’s conversations! And interrupting them!’ Grace went back inside to fetch a frying pan or a heavy spoon to defend herself should the woman jump from her tree like a bat and attack them.

‘Why are you up there?’ Marchwiggin asked.

‘Oh, I’m always up here! I hear so much of what people are saying from up here, and I always let them know what *I* think! And,’ she said, in a quieter voice, ‘you’re a disgrace to the Globe.’

‘Shakespeare?’ said Marchwiggin, suddenly interested.

‘No, not that! The *Globe*, the *Planet*! It’s people like you who eat all the time, and eat animals, and wear leather hats...’

‘This isn’t a leather hat,’ said Marchwiggin, touching his top hat.

‘That’s what *you* say,’ said the woman thinly. ‘That’s what *you* think! I bet it’s made from a rabbit or a mink! And you probably killed the poor creature yourself! Strangled it! Tortured it!’

Grace reappeared with a frying pan and a glass of ale. She handed the ale to Marchwiggin.

‘Listen, whoever you are!’ said Marchwiggin, taking a sip of his drink and smiling a thank you to Grace. ‘My hat is not made of a mink or a rabbit. It is made from felt and wood. And I think that before you start knocking people, perhaps you ought to get your facts right.’

The woman was so alarmed by Marchwiggin's directness that she screamed and tore at her hair, fell out of her tree and landed in a thorn bush. The thorns were sharp and hooked; they held her like a fly in a web until she managed to tear herself away from their grasp. Then she ran away, her arms waving high above her head.

'What an extraordinary woman,' said Marchwiggin, shaking his head, and lighting a big cigar.

'What a dreadful, interfering silly woman!' said Grace angrily. 'But she has a point about you eating too much.'

'Possibly, but could I have a sandwich?'

'Alright, I'll make you one.'

By the time Grace had emerged with the food, they were entering Richmond. People were wandering up and down the path alongside the river. There were couples and children. Marchwiggin noticed a little girl wearing a blue dress and a tiara. She was standing on a giant cushion, her parents looking at her adoringly. There was a group of children racing each other on rocking horses, going round and round a gigantic maypole. There was an abundance of flowers and colour. The sun was rising modestly, and a Greek temple, rather like the Acropolis, had appeared from nowhere on top of the hill, transforming the town into the place of inspiration it had always aspired to be.

Grace was speechless with delight at the spectacle. Marchwiggin chuckled, his mouth full of sandwich.

As they approached the arches of Richmond Bridge an interesting thing happened. Under the supreme command of a giant swan, a group of ducks in bowler hats took control of the raft and pushed it until it stopped outside an old boathouse, just on the other side of the bridge. With their task done the ducks lined up on the river and, on the command of the giant swan, they took off in unison, like fighter aircraft. Once in

the air they performed an excellently drilled flypast, banked and flew very low over the river into the distance.

Marchwigin and Grace hurrahed and clapped at this impromptu but most welcome display. They then turned their attention to the boathouse, outside which they were now moored.

Its green doors were open, exposing a long room, with racks of rowing boats and sculling boats, in all sorts of states of repair. There were several workbenches with carpenter's tools on them. Lots of sawdust had been neatly swept into piles. The peculiar thing about this boathouse, however, was that it was ticking very loudly, rather like Big Ben; the reason being that inside were thousands of clocks, all very accurate and all wound up regularly.

Outside, beneath a red parasol, was a rowing boat, supported by two wooden trestles. Leaning over it was a tall man with a bald head, long nose, broad lips. He was wearing a smart old school tie and waistcoat, which were perfectly clean, fitting him excellently. On his feet was a highly polished pair of brogues. These fine shoes had been refined to a sharp point. On his nose was a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. His face was very close to a butterfly joint, which he stroked lovingly with a forefinger, making sure it was as smooth as could be. No one would have guessed that he had been examining this joint with microscopic intensity for six hours.

Above the door of the boathouse was a sign: LORD NEVILLE CABLECAR'S BOAT HIRE AND REPAIRS - ALSO CLOCKS REPAIRED. Above this sign was a large, old clock with thick, black hands and Roman Numerals.

'Hello,' said Marchwigin. 'I'm Marchwigin. How are you today?'

Lord Cablecar did not respond because a crossbow bolt suddenly, and with a loud report, entered the sign above the door.

‘Oh! For goodness sake!’ said his lordship as he dashed into his boathouse to hide under a workbench.

Grace screamed and went into the hut.

Marchwigin looked up and saw a large man wearing denim. He was on the bridge, looking down at them, waving a crossbow above his head and shouting happily. Then he ran from where he stood in the middle of the bridge to their side of the river, leapt down the steps and approached as fast as he could.

Upon arrival he puffed and panted, looking about. ‘Aha!’ he said as if speaking to himself. ‘There it is!’ He pointed to the crossbow bolt that was sticking out of the sign. Happier now, he cocked his weapon, reached up to the sign, pulled out the crossbow bolt and placed it gently on his crossbow so that it was ready to shoot. After this he looked hard into the boathouse, then up and down the river. He turned to Marchwigin and said keenly: ‘Where’d he go?’

Believing that this man needed to kill Lord Cablecar, Marchwigin slowed things down by asking him his name.

‘I’m Allan from Prison,’ said Allan vaguely.

Marchwigin asked what he wanted.

‘Neville and me was in prison together. And I’ve just been let out.’ He paused. ‘Sorry, I’m forgetting myself and I’m forgetting my manners. Good to make your acquaintance.’ He leaned forward and offered his hand. Marchwigin took it and couldn’t help but note the man’s firm grip.

‘What are you doing sitting in a pram?’ Allan asked, suddenly perplexed.

‘I’m a baby,’ Marchwigin replied.

‘Well, yeah, I like that. You got small hands, so I should have known. But I think you think I was trying to kill Cablecar with this crossbow,’ said Allan, smiling broadly.

‘It did look like it,’ said Marchwiggin, finding it easy to smile back.

‘Things ain’t what they seem. Always changing. You’ve heard that before. Anyway,’ Allan turned to look for Lord Cablecar. ‘Where *has* my man gone? Hey! Cablecar! Come on out of there!’ He turned back to Marchwiggin. ‘He’s not really called Cablecar, you know. His real name’s Viscount Pottle, but he had to change his name when he was doing time, cos when you’re doing time, I mean to say, you don’t want people to know about it. Know what I’m saying?’ He paused for a moment’s deep thought. ‘It’s a funny name, though - Cablecar, that is. He got the idea from a skiing calendar his sister sent him after he’d locked for a month or two. There was a beautiful picture, you see, on February, I think it was. Yes, a beautiful picture of... well, just that... a cable car, going upwards and upwards.’

Lord Cablecar emerged sheepishly from the boathouse. He was holding a ruler and a clock.

‘Hello, Allan,’ said Lord Cablecar, his bald head, a platonic orb, glowing in the sun. He spoke very gently with a modest well-spoken accent. ‘It’s good to see you.’ He placed his clock and ruler in the boat on the trestles and reached for the crossbow. It was his way of making some sort of contact, albeit a distracted one, with Allan. You see, it was too much for him to talk to Allan, or anyone, without having something as a distraction. That is why, with the weapon in hand, he made very little eye contact and proceeded to aim the weapon at the ground, at the river, and at the sky, where he spied a pink balloon, which he shot, piercing it straight through the middle. It was too far away to hear it pop. ‘This is a really lovely crossbow, beautifully made,’ he said, stroking the weapon in the same way that he had stroked the butterfly joint on the boat.

‘Yeah, well listen, my man, don’t waste any more of my bolts,’ Allan said, taking the weapon from Lord Cablecar. ‘And I haven’t come here to talk about my crossbow,’ he said, slightly irritated. ‘I’ve come to take that job you offered me - you know when I saved you from Loghead Len and his sock full of batteries you said you’d give me a job when I got out. So here I am.’

Marchwiggin offered them both a cigar, which they took and lit immediately.

‘So, Lord Cablecar,’ said Marchwiggin. ‘Why were you in prison?’

‘Hey! Hey! Hey!’ laughed Allan, smoke exploding from his mouth. ‘You got to hear this story.’

‘You said your name was Marchwiggin, didn’t you?’ asked Lord Cablecar, taking a puff of his cigar.

‘I did.’

‘Hmm,’ said Cablecar. ‘Well, I don’t know if I want to discuss why I was in prison, if that’s all right.’

‘No it ain’t alright,’ said Allan, now sitting in a high-backed armchair he had wheeled from the boathouse. He patted some ash from the end of his cigar, and it fell to the pavement where it was whisked away by a quick spin of breeze. ‘I’ll tell you what happened - and I’ll tell you why his hair fell out - why he’s got that shining bald head. He was in the army, and in love. A major, weren’t you? Well, whatever. Anyway there was this beautiful girl he had met at a ball. He had arranged to meet her at half past eight and he needed to get there precisely on time, like the dutiful knight he believed he should be. But time was passing, and our young lord here was late and he had no idea what to do about it. So he played some songs on his record player, heard all sorts of lyrics about bravery, big deeds and holding the woman tight - all that sort of thing. This got him all heated up. He thought a woman likes to see a bit of the *man* - if you know what I’m saying. So, in a moment of passion, and with time now

very close to half past eight, and nipping at his heels, so to speak, Cablecar had an idea.

He was living at Chelsea Barracks, you see, where they were keeping a few heavy battle tanks – the ones that can blow something up a few miles away. And, as you will no doubt understand, there aren't many things more impressive and manly to a young woman than being picked up by a dashing army officer in a fully armed, fully operational, British Army tank that can blow things up from miles away.

And so, with unfamiliar passion flowing through his veins, our friend Cablecar gets into this tank, starts it up and drives, no, not *out* of the gates! No, not *out* of them, but *through* them! Cos you see, young Lord Cablecar ain't only got no ideas about what a woman wants, he also don't have any idea whatsoever about how to drive this great big tank. He didn't know how to stop it, neither!' Allan from Prison laughed hugely. 'So, he went through all sorts of things - houses, gardens, a wall, restaurants - before crashing it into the Thames. Fortunately the tide was out, otherwise, he'd have surely drowned. Anyway, he was arrested immediately, and he was so worried what his family, friends and commanding officer would think that all his hair fell out. He once had some very nice blue hair, didn't you, Neville?'

To help avoid hearing this painful story, Lord Cablecar had been focussing all of his attention on the intricate workings of a clock. So he did not answer.

Allan persisted, 'Come on! Ain't that right, Cablecar?'

'What?' Cablecar looked up.

'That you had a lovely head of blue hair once, didn't you?'

'Err... Well, I don't quite...'

‘Ah come on!’ cried Allan. ‘You know it’s true! Stop hiding from yourself! You ain’t never going to get nowhere doing that! And be a man of honour, and give me that job you promised!’

Marchwiggan watched on, with Grace now standing by his side.

‘Why,’ said Marchwiggan in an attempt to deflect the pressure from Lord Cablecar, ‘why were *you* in prison, Allan?’

‘Me?’ laughed Allan before suddenly looking very earnest. He tossed his cigar aside. ‘Well, I was caught trying to steal some fun from life - *didn’t take things too seriously in a serious place*, they said in court. Or, to put a fine line on it, I shot a golden bolt with my crossbow over a show for the arts. And it livened things up - you know what I mean - cos it glowed so bright in the sky that no one saw what was being shown on the ground.’ He laughed briefly, his eyes wide with life. ‘And everyone - except the artists and organizers - looked up at my bolt, and said, “Now that’s more like **It!**” You know, like they’d forgotten what **It** should be! So the police arrived and took me away. I only just in time managed to hide my crossbow in a tree,’ he said, gazing lovingly at the weapon. ‘But at least I came across Neville Cablecar in prison and taught him a thing or two!’ He turned back to Lord Cablecar and said with renewed force: ‘Now be a man of honour, and give me that job!’

‘Okay,’ said Lord Cablecar, brightening suddenly as if he had just finished an inspiring daydream. ‘I’ve got lots of boxes in the back of the boathouse that I need to put things in. Lots of tools, and measuring instruments, and lots of antique, well-tooled pieces of brass – they all need to go in those boxes. You can help me do it - they’re scattered all over the blasted place, and I can’t bear it - especially when I’ve got boats to mend. And,’ he gestured to the rowing boat on trestles. ‘I’ve been working on this one since I was released - a year and a half, but I just can’t get it right.’

‘If you don’t mind my saying so, Lord Cablecar,’ said Marchwiggan. ‘It looks beautiful to me. Just a coat of varnish and you’ll be there.’

‘I should say so, too,’ said Grace. ‘You’ve made a fine job of it, I’m sure.’

When Grace said these words, although the sky was still pure, fresh, empty of clouds, Lord Cablecar was struck by lightning, and vanished into a blue mist. He reappeared moments later on the back of a swan, which swam towards them. But he was no longer dressed in the old school tie and waistcoat. Instead he was wearing a golden robe and a flowery pointed hat, fine red Persian slippers; and he looked happier than ever before - even his blue hair had returned.

‘Well, let’s get to work, then!’ he said to Allan, as he stepped from the swan onto the bank. He beamed a smile that would have been remarkable even on the face of the happiest person on Earth. ‘Yes, to work! But don’t worry about those boxes, Allan! What am I doing worrying about putting things in boxes? We shall together make this a wonderful business. Ah! Did I *really* spend so much time with my mind caught in my past, my old school? Did I *really* spend hours and hours stroking a butterfly joint as I sought perfection? Did I *really*?’ He spun in a sort of pirouette, his arms open, as he looked up at the sky. When he stopped he said, ‘Talking of time, let’s reduce the amount of clocks here, and let us put more boats on the river so that people may float and glide, rather than traps themselves in details!’

Allan looked startled. ‘But Cablecar,’ he said, ‘it is the precision of your mind that makes such good boats. It is also that same precision that can time things so much to perfection. If you lose that, then the business will fail and we’ll both be out of a job!’

‘Ha, ha!’ laughed Lord Cablecar. ‘Well, yes you may be right. But you can have too much of a good thing, can’t you? But oh, yes! The precision is still here, and I’m sure I will get lost in it from time to time. But now I have inspiration and a sort of broad view – which feels so strange to me - to help me on my way! You see, my dear Allan, when that bolt of lightning hit me, and when that swan took me for a ride, I also gained access to the River. So, come to think of it, I have both my precision *and* the great flow of the River. It will be a hard balancing act, for they are so opposite. But it is *wonderful*! Yes, I think it will be wonderful. And yet so sudden! I feel so

appreciated too! Thank you,' he said, bowing to Marchwiggin and Grace. Then he clapped his hands. 'And do you know, it is like my heart has opened, the dam has been breached! And that means!'

'Means what?'

'It means falling in love. I will be able to fall in love, won't I? Don't you think? I will charm lovers with my tales of time, and I will solve their most challenging emotional conundrums with the best reason and best understanding possible. There will be no more tanks, and, I don't feel – ha ha – feel! Did you here that? I said *feel!* I can *feel!* Well, I don't *feel* that there will be any more tanks,' he put his hand on Allan's shoulder and smiled. 'But first, let us say farewell to our friends. Then we'll close up for an hour or so and go for a celebratory cake or something!'

'Great idea!' said Allan rubbing the palms of his hands together.

Marchwiggin was slightly perplexed by the extraordinary changes that had just happened in an instant before his very eyes, and was frowning at the tip of his cigar as if it would offer him an answer. But, the tip of his cigar just smiled and said: 'Don't look at me. Enjoy me, I won't be around for very long.' Marchwiggin was about to respond, when he was quickly distracted by the noise of an engine.

Grace cried, 'Look! It's that awful Doctor Purge!'

Doctor Purge had clearly been doing some successful campaigning, as he was towing a boat full of his partisans. Marchwiggin recognised a couple of them of them from the Doctor's first speech on Richmond Hill, but there must have been ten others, who he had never seen before, though they all had the same, determined expressions.

'The *No Humanity Party* awaits your vote with dignified silence!' cried Doctor Purge, who was now perched high on a tall construction made from scaffolding that was bolted to his boat.

‘I’ve had enough of him,’ said Allan, slipping a new bolt into his crossbow, which he then aimed in the Doctor’s direction. ‘I’ve just about had enough of him going around spouting all his rubbish!’

The bolt from Allan’s crossbow hit the boat’s accelerator very hard, pushing it to ‘FULL SPEED’. It only just missed Smug’s hand. With this sudden injection of power, Purge’s boat roared off, its bows rising into the air. This caused Doctor Purge to fall off his tower and into the boat they were towing. As they sped into the distance, Purge got up and shouted through his megaphone: ‘Marchwigg! You disgraceful reveller! Beware! I say beware! You will soon be tested beyond your wildest fears. It is foolish, very foolish to mock me!’

‘Ah, well,’ said Marchwigg, wiping a tear of laughter from his cheek. ‘We had better depart. It’s been very good meeting you both.’

With these words, Marchwigg’s raft was pushed out to the centre of the river by sixteen flamingos that had just arrived. As they pushed faster and faster, the elegant birds said in a chattering way that Marchwigg must - really *must* - go to Kew for his next stop.

Allan and Lord Cablecar waved from the bank. Lord Cablecar looked like a cloudless morning with Venus on the horizon as he stood in his golden robe and flowery, pointed hat.

Allan was shouting: ‘You’ll get our vote, my man! And the prison’s vote, too!’

Marchwigg wondered how they knew about his campaign, because he hadn’t mentioned anything. Perhaps they had guessed when they heard Doctor Purge’s reaction. Or perhaps it was just that some things are just known, and always will be known. He exhaled the last smoke of this particular cigar, and thanked it for being so pleasurable. The cigar, much shorter than it was, but still glowing, said, ‘I’m glad. Now, if you would, please do me a favour and toss me into the Thames.’

‘Of course,’ said Marchwiggin.

The cigar flew in a perfect parabola, and plopped into the flat water.

‘Oh! Marchwiggin!’ Grace said, very annoyed. ‘You mustn’t be so disrespectful to Nature. Tossing your rubbish into the Thames like that.’

But before she could finish her lecture a white cloud suddenly appeared from where the cigar had fallen in the water - a perfect white cloud, with a big smiling face and fat cheeks.

‘Grace, I understand your concern,’ said The Cloud, who was once the cigar. ‘And I know that it’s usually very disgusting to throw rubbish into the river. But, as you can see, I was not just a bit of rubbish. And it was my dying wish to be tossed into the calming river. So, please don’t be annoyed, because I’ll now do you a kindness, and blow you, Marchwiggin and the raft all the way to Kew.’

The Cloud then took a deep breath, puffing out his big white cheeks and started to blow the raft very gently, first past the flamingos, who cheered, and then past a crowd of people sitting outside a coffee shop. This merry bunch cheered and blew whistles. One of them threw a cake, which delighted everyone, especially Marchwiggin, as it splashed in the water not far from the raft. And within minutes Marchwiggin, Grace and The Cloud were out of Richmond and on their way to Kew.

Chapter 4.

Blown to the Magic Gardens at Kew.

‘It’s such a help to have The Cloud blowing us,’ said Grace, who had settled down on the huge feather to do some more knitting. ‘But what I don’t understand is that, although The Cloud is blowing very hard, we’re not getting blown off the raft. Even more strange is that the feather is staying exactly where is.’

‘That’s because we’re going as fast as the wind,’ said Marchwigin, looking at The Cloud, who smiled between breaths. ‘It’s like being in a balloon.’

‘Ah, well, I suppose you’re right.’ She said. ‘Lord Cablecar was a strange young man if I’ve ever seen one - and turning into that funny wizard with blue hair was most peculiar.’

These words prompted Marchwigin to write another poem.

*Stuck in time with boxes and clocks,
Lord Cablecar was freed and given a frock,
Of golden threads; and there was a hat of flowers:
A moment of knowing and a thousand powers.*

*Now Allan’s involved,
And his problems are solved;
Because his love from a dart,
Was sent from the heart.*

There’s more to minutes than seconds,

*More to a blue bell than its bulb;
There's more to hours than minutes,
More to a play than a part;
There's more to days than hours,
More to a painting than the painter;
There's more to weeks than days,
More to a home than its walls;
There's more to months than weeks,
More to a kingdom than a king;
There's more to years than months,
More to the sky than we can ever see.*

*Getting stuck with seconds,
Ignoring what beckons,
Is a dreadful thing,
That makes foul things sing.*

*So, blow! Cloud, blow!
To Kew, we must go!
We must have votes, you see,
To win the Constituency!*

Having completed this splendid piece of verse, Marchwiggan turned to Grace.

'Grace,' he said. 'What are you knitting?'

'I haven't the faintest idea, my love,' she replied.

'Perhaps that's the best way.'

'When I was in *The Guides*,' said Grace, placing her knitting on her lap, 'I was always taught to expect the unexpected.' She spoke with pride. 'And you never know what

the unexpected might be, so I'm sure that whatever I'm making will be useful for something. One day.'

'I hope so,' said Marchwiggin with a knowing smile. 'Anyway, whatever it is you're knitting, I must say that it is lovely and golden. Like the path of morning sunlight on deep waters.' He looked ahead. 'I wonder if there's a fountain at Kew Gardens.'

'I don't suppose so. Which means there probably is,' she said. 'Why do you ask? Do you want to bathe? It's been a good long time since you last had a bath or a wash.'

'Precisely. You do have my bathing costume, don't you?'

'In my bag,' she said patting that large, black item, which never left her side.

The Cloud eventually blew them to a wooden jetty very close to Kew Gardens. Standing there, waiting for their arrival was dinosaur - a gigantic one, with a massive head and a powerful tail. It seemed strange that in all his hugeness he had such tiny arms and hands. Perhaps this was why he was wearing a pair of purple gloves - his only items of clothing. Except, of course, for his dazzling electric blue turban.

'Hello,' said the ancient lizard. 'My name's Ian. I'm very frightening to most people, but I'm glad to see that you are not as afraid as most. If you throw me the rope, I'll secure your raft, and look after it while you wander about the Magic Gardens at Kew.'

'*Magic Gardens?*' asked Grace.

'Magic Gardens, yes.' Ian nodded.

Grace looked momentarily startled and shrugged.

'That's very kind,' said Marchwiggin.

Ian had alarmed Grace, but, like he had said, she wasn't that afraid, and, amazingly to her, she was slowly getting used to the strange goings-on. So she agreed with Marchwigin: 'Yes, Ian. That's very kind indeed.'

Grace threw the rope to Ian, who caught it in his tiny, gloved hands, and, with an elaborate knot, tied the raft to a post.

'Well, I'll be going,' said The Cloud with big smile. 'You've got my vote, whatever happens.'

'Thank you for blowing us here,' said Marchwigin.

The Cloud took off into the sunny sky, where he performed several astonishing loops and swoops before disappearing over the horizon.

'See you later,' said Ian, as Grace pushed Marchwigin in his pram along the jetty. 'I'll be here when you get back.'

'Oh, there is one more thing,' Marchwigin said.

'What's that?' said Ian.

'Is there a fountain in the Gardens?'

'I should say so!' said Ian emphatically.

'One I could bathe in?'

'Most probably.'

Marchwigin thanked Ian.

'Now you have a good time,' said Ian. 'I'll see you here later.'

The gates to the Magic Gardens were as tall as a block of flats and were made of swirling coils of silver, like those the old Prime Minister had put outside Downing Street. But, hanging from it were thousands of jewels, each like a huge coloured dewdrop. As if by magic, the gates opened slowly, and Grace pushed Marchwigin into the most extraordinary and most beautiful place she had ever seen. Marchwigin had actually seen such a place before, but only in his most peaceful and delicate dreams.

When the gates closed behind them they saw a path that cut between a million flowers, and a thousand bushes that were heavy with thick leaves and shining berries. There were one hundred mystical trees. There were acres and acres of undulating lawns; there were hedges cut into all sorts of shapes - from giant geese to oxen and eagles and dogs and crocodiles. As they walked on they saw other pathways, leading into several directions. In the distance Grace noticed the famous Pagoda at Kew. It was reaching up so high that she was surprised it hadn't touched the sun and caught fire. A gust, a breath, nay even gentler than that, a *caress* of air brought the perfumes of exotic lands that no longer exist. The scents were light, sweet and seductive. The birdsong was that of the first day of spring, when nests are built in bushes and trees. But it wasn't a piercing sound; it was as smooth and as undulating as the hills in Heaven itself. Laughing with it was the twinkling sound of a nearby stream.

'Well, well, well!' said Grace, quite breathless. 'Well I never! Marchwigin, this place is wonderful!'

'As blissful as I could imagine,' he replied, happily uncorking a bottle of champagne.

'Oh! Marchwigin! Not here! Please!'

'Oh, my dear Grace! Most certainly in these gardens!' He protested. 'In fact, more here than anywhere else! I'm going to enjoy this wonderful place to the full! Mark my words I am!'

‘Oh, all right then,’ she said slightly flustered. ‘But where shall we go?’

‘To the fountain, of course. I’m here to bathe, don’t forget!’

‘But which path, Marchwiggin? There are so many.’

‘Any one will do. It doesn’t matter,’ he said, sipping his wine.

Suddenly they heard a cheerful voice coming from a tall hedge. ‘Of course it matters!’ said the voice. ‘You’ve got to go along the right road. Very important, that is.’

The owner of that hidden voice, a thin man with a moustache and short hair, landed in front of them. He had jumped over the hedge, which was quite remarkable, bearing in mind that it must have been fifteen feet high. An ingratiating smile stretched tightly across his face as, with open palms, he quickly brushed down his yellow suit. ‘Now,’ he said. ‘How would you like a fire extinguisher?’

‘A *fire extinguisher*?’

‘Yes, my lady,’ said the man, taking one long step towards them. ‘*Imagine!* Just *imagine!* Imagine that your pram catches *fire*, and the baby here is *inside!* What would you *do* without a fire extinguisher?’

‘Well, I never thought...’ said Grace, covering her mouth with her hand in horror.

‘Oh, yes, my dear lady!’ said the man, moving very nimbly in a pirouette. ‘Oh, *yes, yes, yes!* Yes, it can, I regret to say. It can happen very often indeed. And lots of babies get burned to *death* in their prams, simply because mothers do not have fire extinguishers.’ He peered in at Marchwiggin, who remained impassive.

‘See,’ continued the man, slightly disturbed by Marchwiggins’s penetrating eyes. ‘He’s a lovely baby drinking pop - a young-un of character no doubt. Yes, yes. Terrible to lose him and this fine pram to the flames.’

Leaving this fearful statement to linger in the air like a deadly gas, the thin man ran away. He returned presently with a fire extinguisher, which was as big as a barrel.

‘Now here’s the best one we have,’ he said. ‘Normal price is - let me think - seven hundred and ninety pounds, but you can have it at ten per cent off - sale price. And that’s ... Now let me see.’ He pulled a calculator from his pocket and hammered the digits with terrifying ferocity. ‘Yes, ten percent of seven hundred and ninety is seventy-nine. Take that from seven hundred and ninety and you can have this lifesaver for only seven hundred and eleven pounds. A better bargain you’ll never have!’ He clapped his hands with one loud clap to mark what he considered to be the end of a wonderful business deal.

‘But I’ll never be able to carry it,’ said Grace. ‘It must weigh about a ton.’

A bee carrying a toffee flew past and Marchwiggins followed the buzzing insect’s flight path until it disappeared into the yellow funnel of a huge flower.

‘Ah!’ said the man, leaping into the air and landing somewhere behind the hedge. ‘You’ll need something else then,’ he said as he re-emerged from somewhere and presented Grace with a vast iron trolley that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a Soviet tractor factory. ‘See I have your needs at heart. It’s part of the professionalism of a salesman to have the customer’s needs at his heart, you understand? Now, all you need to do is pop the fire extinguisher on this trolley and Bob’s your uncle!’ He opened his arms wide and beamed.

‘Now, you listen here,’ Marchwiggins said as Grace reached for her purse. ‘We don’t need or want a fire extinguisher, nor that horrible thing to put it on, nor any of your wares. And I don’t believe you have anyone’s interests at heart, as you put it. So, Grace, put the purse away and we must get on to find the fountain.’

The salesman was absolutely flabbergasted that a baby, albeit one in a suit and top hat, could talk so directly and with such purpose. He was even more disarmed when, from a thick flowerbed and bushes, a gerbil waddled slowly towards them. It had such a huge body that there must have been something very wrong indeed.

The gerbil looked up at Grace and said, ‘Your baby’s right, you know. This man’s a nasty piece of work, I can tell you. The reason I’m so big is that when I told him I was hungry he told me I needed to eat a coat. He told me that all the nutrition magazines and experts are talking about how excellent coats are for good, wholesome healthy living. And, believe it or not, being a naive gerbil, I paid him two hundred pounds to eat this coat. Oh, yes! And when I got indigestion, he tried to sell me a tambourine!’

‘Right!’ said Grace very primly and very annoyed. ‘You can take your fire extinguisher and your iron trolley and get out of the way! Now, young Mr. Gerbil, please could you tell me which path I should take to get to the fountain.’

‘Of course,’ said the animal. ‘Taking the one in front is always the best.’

‘Right you are,’ she said. ‘And thank you.’ She ignored the salesman. ‘Thank goodness for that gerbil,’ she said. ‘I never knew they could be so helpful.’

‘Yes,’ said Marchwigin, raising his glass in a toast to the animal. ‘He was very helpful indeed.’

* * *

A family on a picnic rug flew past laughing and singing. They were at about tree-height. Then they swooped low past Marchwigin and Grace, waved and went on somewhere else.

‘Well I never!’ said Grace. ‘A flying picnic! My goodness! Marchwiggin don’t you think that the most astonishing things have happened since the poor Prime Minister died?’

‘Think?’ he said, laughing. ‘I *know*.’

As they were talking they came across two young men who were having a very animated discussion beneath an oak tree. In fact, they were so involved that they had no idea that Grace was approaching with the pram.

One of these fellows was tall, with short hair in a side parting. He was wearing a green sweater, very large shoes and a dunce’s cone. His hands were big and his head was disproportionately oversized. His eyes were slightly wider apart than they should have been. He was saying very little more than, ‘Yes. You’re probably right,’ which he repeated time and time again.

His friend was shorter than him, but by far the most charismatic. He wore a dark blue Oxford University scarf, purple trousers, and a pink silk shirt that was as big as a parachute. His hair had been arranged very carefully in a messy way. His nose was long, and at a haughty angle. His eyes were small, laughing, and he was continually aware of the attention he was receiving. Waving his arms about, he delivered each point he made with the most elaborate words ever heard in normal conversation.

Grace turned the pram around so that she and Marchwiggin could watch them together.

‘I was reading this most excellent composition by an Argentinean,’ said the exuberant one. ‘Religion versed *in toto*. It alluded to the hyperbole of God and that faith is just a gargantuan adjective for the grammar of existence. Take yourself as an example. You’re lost in this botanical garden, this *arboretum* of delights, and you would make a discovery of vast enormity if you were to be immediately inspired by transcendental considerations of theocracy.’

‘Ha ha ha,’ laughed the other one stupidly. ‘Yes, you’re probably right!’

‘Exactly,’ the exuberant one said. He turned to Grace and Marchwiggin. ‘Aha! We have fellow wanderers of the gardens! *Cognito ergo sum!* That’s what Descartes expounded. But Wittgenstein was an empiricist through and through. Please allow me to say who I am: I am Percy The Flying Saucer. And why such a profuse accumulation of denominations?’ He opened his arms and smiled, his eyes darting everywhere. ‘As simple as all optimums - I am the proprietor of a Flying Saucer, which is parked delicately next to that *arbor vitae* - that the evergreen conifer of the genus *Thuja, la bas.*’

And there it was - a flying saucer! Though it wasn’t flying, not even hovering. It was simply parked, as the good man had said. And, just as he had also indicated, it was indeed a saucer. Though, it was not a silver spaceship; rather, it was something upon which a huge cup would not have looked out of place. That is, as long as it was a blue cup. For it was a blue saucer.

‘Let me introduce you,’ said Percy The Flying Saucer, presenting his friend. ‘He is a self-deluded and misguided floating island, so he is lost in the Gardens and has been standing here for two hours, utterly perplexed as to which way to go. Thus I entered into a discussion concerning the psychological and metaphysical meaning of the self. Perhaps your approach to the current situation will, like potassium permanganate, propagate... er ... no... *catalyse* the manifestation of a decision into his bewildered head. But excuse me. As I was saying, *Dein freund, et mon ami*, Perdu The Lost Idiot.’ Percy The Flying Saucer’s shirt shimmered and inflated as he once again gestured expansively in the direction of his companion.

‘Hello,’ said Perdu nodding respectfully. ‘This bloke really knows his stuff. Honestly. He’s been to Oxford. He’s got a First in Classics. Also a First in Philosophy. I should think he knows more than anyone *you’ve* ever met.’

It was clear from his vacant expression that he did not intend to emphasize ‘*you’ve*’ with any malice.

'Hello, Perdu,' said Grace. '*Perdu?* Now, that's a French word. Are you French?'

'Er, no. Ha ha,' Perdu said as if it was a very uncomfortable question to answer. Self-consciously he adjusted the cone on his head. 'Actually. Like you say, it's just a French word. Percy told me it means *lost*. And I am *lost*. In these Gardens. That is.'

'Well, that's terrible,' said Marchwiggan, lighting his pipe, which burst into a healthy flame. 'Though it's a very lovely place to lose yourself in. Where are you trying to get to?'

'He doesn't have enough authentic self-realisation to have yet discovered where that might be,' said Percy with a frown.

'Well, there's probably little we can do, then,' said Marchwiggan patiently. 'Now, I was wondering if you could help us, and direct us to the fountain, where I might be able to bathe.'

'Oh! Indeed! The Font of Kew - a marvel with soothing qualities found nowhere else in the Cosmos,' said Percy. 'I agree with you that you must endeavour to visit that inspirational monument. But first there is something I must show you. I will deliver you a vision of the most intricate nonsense that you shall ever have the energy to behold! Yes, I shall take you on my flying saucer to witness *The Lovers*. So, come now! Will you follow us, Perdu?'

'Yes,' he replied suddenly. 'Of course.'

Percy arched his eyebrows. 'A veritable Mercurius dwells within!' he said.

* * *

They all climbed aboard the flying saucer.

Percy clapped his hands and said: 'To The Lovers!'

Then, before anything happened, a rare bird with a long colourful tail and an envelope in its mouth suddenly flew down and landed on Percy's nose.

'Aha!' said Percy, plucking the letter from the bird's beak. 'Aha! Aha! Aha! Now get off my proboscis, you pretty messenger.'

The bird flew away.

'Right,' said Percy. 'Now let's see what this missive from the gods has to say.'

Skilfully using a long thumb-nail, he opened the letter and read it:

*'Have you ever understood,
That some people say
The world's not very good?
They say it rots and stinks,
And that the answers are what **they** think!*

*La la la la la la.
The darkness of intellect can blind a man,
The razors of thought can chop off his hand.*

*Only fools and wise men,
Share temples in the sky,
Like Melancholy and Joy,
Standing proudly in the trees,
As tiny people flounder on their knees.*

*Wisdom of the mind,
And the floods of the heart,
With flames of inspiration,*

*You'll tear those concoctions
Of cold intellect,
Yes, tear them to pieces,
Tear them apart.*

*So, enjoy The Lovers,
The flowers,
The sky!*

‘A splendid verse!’ said Marchwiggan, blowing his pipe smoke into the curious shape of a castle. It even had battlements and a drawbridge.

‘Yes, indeed!’ said Percy. ‘What do you think about the poem, Perdu?’

Perdu did not have many opinions about anything and so, to avoid being left out, he gave exactly the same opinion as Marchwiggan’s.

Percy laughed.

Grace frowned and said: ‘What a baffling riddle!’

‘Yes,’ said Marchwiggan cheerily. ‘To those who would be baffled, it certainly is one of the most baffling thing ever written!’

Suddenly the saucer wobbled and they all nearly fell off. But it stabilized quickly enough to avoid catastrophe, shuddering once again before it slowly ascended into the sky.

Marchwiggan leant out of his pram and laughed as he watched the Magic Gardens shrink beneath them. He, Grace and his new friends were now flying at a great speed, which brought a distant smile to Perdu’s face.

To everyone on board, except Grace, who was terror-stricken, the whole experience was exhilarating. Meanwhile, Marchwigin lost the piece of willow tree that he had attached to his top hat. He held firmly onto that hat because the wind was trying to take it from his head.

Suddenly a poem entered his mind. But, alas! Owing to the prevailing extraordinary circumstances, he was unable to compose it.

Grace was almost sick as they approached a tall unusual building, above which was a bright light that was rather like the star on top of a Christmas Tree.

The flying saucer slowed when it was within one hundred yards of this phenomenon. As they drew closer they saw that the tall building was the famous Kew Gardens Pagoda. It was almost unrecognizable when approached in the air on a flying saucer. The light at its top was The Happy Buddha, sitting in the lotus position and floating on a cushion.

Perdu was immediately entranced by this shining man, and quickly asked: ‘Why am I... er... lost?’

The Happy Buddha shone eyes of compassion at Perdu and replied, ‘Life’s a matter of carefully unravelling what we will be, which is what we were. And so, we already know all that we need to know.’

‘But.. er... why is it so hard?’ Perdu continued.

‘Some find it so difficult to discover how easy it is,’ said The Happy Buddha, a shaft of soothing light coming out of his mouth in hoops with every word he spoke.

‘Can you enlighten us about The Lovers?’ asked Percy, in a most respectful manner.

‘You, Percy, I know, will find it difficult to understand The Lovers, which is why you pursue them so,’ said the dazzling Happy Buddha. ‘Chase their tears, Grace, and you will find the fountain.’

‘Whose tears?’ asked Grace.

‘The tears of The Lovers,’ answered the Buddha.

‘What shall I say to him?’ whispered Grace into Marchwiggin’s ear.

‘Say thank you,’ answered Marchwiggin quietly.

She nodded and braced herself. ‘Er, thank you Mr. Buddha. That’s very kind.’

‘Have a good journey,’ said the Happy Buddha with a smile and a wave, before changing into a sphere of light and shooting vertically upwards for several miles.

The flying saucer then went down, down, down, down, spiralling around the Pagoda all the way to a soft bed of straw. Everyone climbed off. Marchwiggin quickly scribbled the poem that had come to him earlier:

*Fresh from a tea-cup,
Fall over with a glass;
But have you not heard,
That it’s fun and a lark,
To sit in a saucer,
And fly over the park?*

Looking up and replacing his pad and pen into his pocket, Marchwiggin saw that Perdu was still ecstatic with the latest experiences.

‘That was fantastic!’ he exclaimed, dancing around in circles, his cheeks ruddy with excitement, his dunce’s cone changing from blue to red, from red to magenta. ‘I could

really get into talking to that Buddha more often. He's *really* wise. You're *clever*, Percy, but he was *wise*. Big difference. I think... But... I don't know.'

'Well,' said Percy, looking quite annoyed that he was no longer the centre of Perdu's attention. 'At least you are no longer beneath that oak tree. Come on,' he said to Grace and Marchwiggin. 'But, oh! Forgive me, I have not yet inquired of your names.' (Percy sometimes forgot basic manners - not because he intended to be rude, but because he was always so far ahead of himself).

'This is Grace.'

She curtseyed.

'And I'm Marchwiggin,' he said, smiling knowingly from behind a large puff of smoke, which this time was in the shape of a starfish.

'If you'll excuse my saying, Mr. Percy,' said Grace. 'We really must be going. Marchwiggin needs his bathe. And to be quite honest, I don't think we really want to look at The Lovers, or whatever they're called. I mean, it's intrusive. Rude, don't you think, Marchwiggin?'

But before he could answer, Percy said, 'Oh! You *absolutely* must! Come *on*! All you need to do is take a few paces. The Lovers are only behind these trees.' He gestured to a wood before them, its trees reaching out of a fine mist.

'Oh, goodness!' said Perdu looking longingly at the top of the Pagoda. 'I can't go. I've got to find that Buddha. I *must* to go and find him!'

'I'm sure it would be better if you didn't go chasing after him,' said Marchwiggin sagely. 'Just accept him as what he was, and remember what he said. Then think of something for yourself. For instance, many years ago when I was anxious I used to think of bears because they're big and very strong.'

‘No!’ cried Perdu. ‘I don’t want to think of bears! I want *Buddha!* Mr. Buddha! Where are you! Where are you!’

Then he ran away.

They waited until they could hear Perdu The Lost Idiot no more. Then, after Marchwiggin had extinguished his pipe, they made their way into the misty trees.

The mist was refreshingly cool, but, upon entering the wood, Grace found it extremely difficult to push the pram over the rough ground, what with all the brambles and twigs; but, with plenty of encouragement from Marchwiggin, they managed to go in deeper and deeper.

Eventually, Percy put his forefinger to his lips as if to say, ‘Hush now!’

Then he raised his palm as if to say ‘STOP!’

He then tiptoed lightly to a tree. As quietly as she could, Grace followed, hauling the pram behind her. When she got to Percy she stopped with a gasp. Marchwiggin craned his neck to see what all the excitement was about. When he saw it, he too let out a gasp.

Shining before them, with pale blue light, was a small, perfectly round lake. In the middle of it was a crumbling marble temple and the most pure, beautiful statue of Venus. On a stone bench, clasped in an embrace, were a young man and woman, both of whom were dressed in Shakespearean clothes. From somewhere there was the most enchanting harmony of pipes and harps.

‘See,’ said Percy, looking perplexed. ‘They are enclosing each other in each other’s arms. Surely a pact is being executed. The *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact* was inscribed between Germany and Russia involved such a sociability. I assure you.’

Grace ignored Percy's mix of difficult words and allowed herself to be seduced by the beautiful scene before her, plunging into romantic fantasy as she did.

However, Marchwiggin heard every word of what Percy had said, and glanced at him in disbelief. How could a man of such cleverness have such little empathy with the world around him? Or perhaps the cleverness was the reason.

'Percy,' he whispered.

'Yes, yes?'

'Can't you see what's in front of you for what it is?'

'Indeed!' snapped Percy, his wide eyes flashing defensively. 'Two people in a very indecipherable situation. About which, I hasten to add, I shall presently form a conclusion.'

Marchwiggin realised that there was little point in probing Percy, so he sat back, took out a cigar, but put it back. Clouds of cigar smoke wafting over the lake, he decided, would distract the Lovers.

All of a sudden, The Lovers started to weep and their clutch tightened. Tears rolled down their cheeks to become a tiny stream that soaked into their clothes. Gathering momentum, this stream turned into a waterfall, which began to shine and flicker into the surrounding water. Minutes later The Lovers had dissolved into a flood that would pour eternally into the lake. And so the lake began to fill, slowly at first, then faster and faster until a small river was cascading down the hill.

'They must be the tears the Buddha was talking about,' Grace whispered.

'Let's follow them,' said Marchwiggin.

'To where are you venturing?' asked Percy anxiously.

‘We are going to find the fountain,’ said Grace decisively, and pushed Marchwiggin’s pram towards the stream, which they then followed.

‘We shall confer when my conclusion has been made!’ called Percy with the flash of a confident smile.

Marchwiggin drew out a cigar, lit it and composed a poem.

*Playful Percy with his flying saucer:
A puffy shirt and a windy mind;
The dances of mermaids,
Are of a different kind;
If only he heard their delicate voices,
They would then seduce him to the rocks,
Severing him from all his choices,
Turning back time and turning back the clocks.*

* * *

The fountain at the end of the stream of tears was gigantic. It was made from green marble. In the middle was a massive broad-chested statue of Poseidon, with hundreds of silver nymphs dancing at his feet. His green net was lying across his knee and his trident was in his right hand. A thick jet of water blasted vertically upwards from a giant gold cup that he held high above his head. Smaller fountains shot at all angles from small gold cups held by the nymphs. The spray fell in a mist onto the surrounding lawns, hedges and flowerbeds. There it met with the sun and formed a rainbow.

Not far away, beneath a tree, was a stripy tent, with CHANGING ROOM written over its entrance.

‘I think we’ll go in there,’ said Grace. ‘Keep it all nice and decent. You can’t go and change in public, you see.’

‘It really doesn’t matter,’ Marchwiggin protested.

‘That’s for me to judge. Now, come on, off we go.’

Just as they were approaching the tent, they heard a *whoosh*, followed by lots of shouting and laughing. Looking up they saw the flying family picnic, being chased very quickly by a flock of pigeons. The family waved and laughed when they saw Marchwiggin and Grace, who waved back.

Grace muttered something, shook her head and blinked. She then pushed the pram into the tent.

Inside it was very quiet. There was a wooden bench and a chair next to a table, upon which was a bunch of flowers. It was a strange tent, first, because upon entering it, Marchwiggin had been magically changed into his swimming costume. It was a red and white striped costume, like a vest and trunks all in one and it fitted him perfectly (his hat was still on his head). Secondly, because on another table there was, sitting comfortably in a bird’s nest, a tiny donkey. The animal was reading a leather-bound book.

‘Don’t mind me,’ said the donkey, tearing his eyes from the page. ‘Poetry - visionary poetry, you see.’

‘Yes, right, I think we’ll be going outside,’ said Grace. She picked Marchwiggin up out of the pram and carried him outside.

‘This is just getting silly now,’ she said to Marchwiggin with an urgent whisper. ‘Everything’s just too *strange*. I would never be able to tell anyone about all this.’

‘Hmm,’ replied Marchwiggin. ‘Now if you could just drop me in the fountain’s water... yes. No don’t take my hat off.’

‘You can’t go in with it on!’

‘Oh, yes, I can, thank you very much.’

Reluctantly, Grace lowered him into the bubbling water.

‘Ah!’ said Marchwiggin. ‘Now that’s wonderful!’

Because he couldn’t swim, Marchwiggin immediately sank to the bottom. It was a wonderful experience; spinning headily, caressed by the cool water, he was taken on a powerful current, first down, down, down, where all was pale blue and rippling silver. Then he was drawn up, where it went dark. Then there was a rushing sound, and remarkable speed. And a bright light - small at first, but getting bigger (it reminded Marchwiggin of when he was born, or perhaps when he had died). A second passed, and he was in the light, tossed high into the air, high above Poseidon’s big golden cup and back down onto the rushing cushion of the top of the fountain, where he sat back and relaxed, laughing. He adjusted his hat, and looked down at Grace, who had not seen him, for she was rushing around and screaming with panic.

‘Oh! My God!’ she screamed. ‘Oh! God help me!’

Her cries disturbed the tiny donkey in the tent. So he placed aside his book of visionary poetry, stood up, climbed from his bird’s nest, and trotted outside.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘My little baby has drowned!’ she cried.

‘If he has done that, my dear, then why is he up there?’ asked the donkey, pointing with a well-manicured hoof.

Grace looked up and saw Marchwiggin waving at her from the top of the fountain's powerful jet of water.

'Oh! Thank goodness! Thank goodness!' she cried. 'But how are we going to get him down?'

The donkey thought for a moment. But this did not work. So he thought about something else, which gave him the answer they needed.

'A balloon!' He said delightedly. 'We need a balloon! Yes! I know! The Salesman must surely have a balloon to sell.'

'What, the salesman we saw earlier?'

'Most probably my dear lady,' replied the donkey. 'Keep an eye on your baby, and I shall fetch The Salesman.'

The donkey ran off.

'Don't worry about me!' shouted Marchwiggin. 'It's wonderful up here! The water keeps getting pumped around and around, but I stay up here! I mean, who wants to go around and around! It's far better to be above everything, watching you all from a nice high place!'

Grace waved him an acknowledgement, and paced about nervously. The minutes rattled on by, and her nerves were about to rip into a million pieces when she heard voices. Looking up she saw not just the donkey, not just The Salesman, but also Perdu The Lost Idiot, who was carrying not just a deflated balloon, but also the very large fire extinguisher she had seen earlier.

'Good morning!' exclaimed The Salesman with a leap into the air. 'I knew we'd bump into each other again! How wonderful it is when our expectations meet reality!'

But,’ he said, looking up at Marchwiggin, ‘I see you have a problem. Which I am sure this balloon will solve. All we need to do is inflate it, and up we go to the rescue!’

‘Good,’ said Grace.

‘Hello,’ said Perdu.

‘Hello,’ said Grace. ‘I thought you were going after that Buddha.’

‘Oh, yes, I was,’ said Perdu. ‘I went all over the place to find him. And then I fell down a well, and was rescueded by The Salesman, who is the most wonderful man I have *ever* met! Honestly, his skills at selling are just like you would never have seen ever before in your life! Not only that!’ he enthused, patting the fire extinguisher. ‘He’s also very forward thinking! I never had any idea that *everyone* is in danger of fire *all the time*, and *should...* Shouldn’t they, Mr. Salesman?’

The Salesman nodded proudly, guessing exactly what Perdu was about to say.

‘Yes,’ continued Perdu. ‘Everyone *should* carry a fire extinguisher about with them at all times. To protect themselves - and others - from fire. There’s no doubt about that! None whatsoever! The world would be such a safe place if everyone had this foresight.’

He glanced at The Salesman for confirmation that what he had said was correct. The Salesman nodded, with the delighted smile of a piano.

‘Right, well, that’s all well and good,’ said Grace, mildly irritated by Perdu’s astonishing gullibility. ‘Now, we must get Marchwiggin down.’

The tiny donkey had taken the initiative to inflate the balloon with a fiery device and was attaching the basket to the ropes. He jumped in.

'Hang on! You haven't paid for that yet!' cried The Salesman running at the tiny donkey and the balloon.

But he was too late because the tiny donkey had already taken off and was slowly approaching Marchwiggin.

'Come back down at once!' cried The Salesman in vain.

The balloon was now hovering over Marchwiggin, close enough for the donkey to drop him a rope.

'It's a shame to be going,' said Marchwiggin, catching the rope. 'It was good fun on that fountain. I could have been up there forever.'

In a moment the balloon floated gently to the lawn. It was a very funny sight to see, with Marchwiggin in his top hat and bathing costume, hanging on the end of the rope. In fact it was so funny that The Salesman actually started to laugh - genuinely, that is. He laughed louder and louder, his lungs getting fuller and fuller, until, all of a sudden, he popped, disappeared into nothing.

Grace didn't notice what had happened to The Salesman because she was dashing over to pick up Marchwiggin from the grass.

'Thank you so much!' she said to the tiny donkey, cradling Marchwiggin in her arms.

'Back to my visionary poetry,' said the tiny donkey, with a brief smile.

'Synchronicity!' shouted a voice from above.

Grace looked up and saw Percy looking down at her from his flying saucer.

'Ah, hello,' said Grace.

The flying saucer landed close by, and Percy stepped off.

‘Oh, hi, Percy!’ said Perdu enthusiastically. ‘What do you think of this fire extinguisher? I bought it from the greatest salesman in the world, who’s just exploded. Honestly, it’s great to meet people like him.’

Percy looked at Perdu then at the fire extinguisher and laughed. ‘What, may I ask, do you intend to do with that receptacle?’

Perdu explained, which made Percy laugh. ‘Perdu,’ he said, ‘you are on a psychological helter skelter.’

‘Really?’ said Perdu, placing the fire extinguisher aside, and now gazing at Percy with renewed adoration. ‘What should I do?’

Grace decided not to watch this conversation any longer, so she carried Marchwiggin to the tent. As soon as they went inside, he was magically dressed, clean and smart in his suit. She placed him in the pram. When he was comfortable he took out a cigar and a glass of champagne.

‘Thank you, once again,’ she said to the tiny donkey.

‘Pleasure,’ said the animal from his bird’s nest. Then he resumed his reading.

Grace pushed the pram outside. Percy was talking to Perdu, waving his arms about as he had done before.

‘Good bye,’ Grace called. ‘We’re going now!’

‘I shall endeavour to catch you up in a *soupcou*! It’s the Boat Race today!’

Marchwiggin and Grace very soon found the exit of The Gardens, and saw that Ian the Dinosaur was still guarding the raft.

‘Welcome back,’ Ian said in the most charming voice Grace had ever heard. ‘All is well. I haven’t seen *anyone*.’

‘Thank you,’ said Marchwiggan as he and Grace settled themselves back onto the raft.

‘No bother,’ said Ian, handing over the rope to Grace. ‘I’ll give you a big push!’

Chapter 5.

The Boat Race comes to an illustrious end.

Ian wanted to send Marchwiggan, Grace and the raft in the direction of Chiswick, a part of London that is closer to Westminster, closer to the mouth of the Thames, where the river joins with the oceans of the world. But the tide had turned, which meant that the current was against them. So, because his little arms were not the strongest part of his body, and because he would need all his strength to give them a push, he decided to use his big powerful tail.

‘Hold on now!’ he said, and with one sweep of that tail he sent them on their way. ‘Goodbye!’ he called.

For the first quarter of a mile or so the raft skimmed the water like a flat pebble thrown by a child over a flat lake. Marchwiggan watched the dinosaur diminish into a tiny, distant dot as he and Grace more or less flew to Chiswick. Yes, their speed was exciting enough, but it was a shame in a way, because it was impossible to enjoy the picturesque view of the riverbank as it whizzed by in a blur.

It was just after they had passed under Kew Bridge that the raft began to slow, and Grace eased her firm grip of the pram.

‘Ohh! My Godfathers!’ she sighed, placing her hand on her forehead as if she was going to pass out. ‘And I thought he was such a gentle thing. We could have crashed into the river wall, or into that bridge, and have been smashed to pieces. Don’t you think, Marchwiggan?’

‘No, I don’t think that at all. I found it exhilarating!’ said Marchwiggan happily.

‘And I nearly fell off when we went around that bend,’ Grace persisted. ‘What if I’d have fallen off and hit that oak mooring post at God knows how many miles an hour? Who would have looked after you then - when I was dead and bashed to bits?’

Marchwiggan was not listening. Instead he looked ahead, squinting and leaning forward to get a better look. He was also straining his ears. A large crowd on both sides of the bank at Chiswick Bridge came into view, and he suddenly remembered that Percy The Flying Saucer had mentioned something about The Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race.

‘Are you listening to me!’ Grace demanded angrily. ‘Heavens! Sometimes, talking to you is like talking to room full of coal!’ She huffed and went into the hut.

The current was slowing them so much that Marchwiggan anticipated they would be just about able to reach the bridge. And he was right, because they stopped at a stony beach that was very close to its left arch. There were crowds of people, most of whom were students, wearing the light and dark blue colours of their universities, Cambridge and Oxford. Marchwiggan felt slightly self-conscious to be amongst them, sitting in his pram on a raft with a hut on it. Fortunately, however, the crowds had something far more interesting to think about, something that made them cheer wildly, wave their arms about, jump and roar, and drink beer. They were at the finishing line of the race, so Marchwiggan thought that their excitement must have because the two competing boats must now be close.

But he was mistaken. Instead of two racing eights being pulled by powerful dedicated young oarsmen, their coxes yelling them on to the end of a grueling and wonderful race, he saw that Doctor Purge and his acolytes were trying to canvass the students on the banks of the river. The Doctor was once again high up in his boat on his tower of scaffolding and shouting through his megaphone:

‘This is all a waste!’ he declared tinnily. ‘You are students at good universities! So you know it’s just a diabolical waste! It’s just two boats! Just two silly boats! Trying

to beat each other in puerile competition! And when it's over, what difference does it make! I ask you that! So I ask you to consider that we in the *No Humanity Party* will put an end to idling such as this! Yes, my friends we shall fill the Thames with gravel, and soot and slag from the mines! There will be dams! And we will turn this river into land for houses - *homes*, I should say! Yes, *homes*! Our priorities must be considered! *Home not waste*! That's our...'

Doctor Purge was unable to finish off this profound statement. An unruly student with nothing better to do had put a stop to the illustrious wheels of democracy by throwing a bun into Purge's megaphone. And, as we all know, if such behaviour is unchecked by an army or a heavily equipped police force, it always encourages a riot. Hence, you will not be surprised that more buns were launched from both riverbanks at Purge and his friends. The buns were quickly followed by cakes, sandwiches, tomatoes and other missiles, including a shoe and a tiny, hard, rubber elephant.

The crowd roared even louder when Percy The Flying Saucer appeared hovering over Doctor Purge. After squirting Purge with a large red fire extinguisher, Percy dropped the hard receptacle on the sinister politician's head.

Marchwiggin then watched his political adversary once again fall from his scaffolding tower. But this time he landed headfirst onto Smug, who had no choice but to throttle down. Percy then waved at Marchwiggin, and zoomed off towards Putney, presumably to see the race in progress.

It was not long before the crowd's excitement reached another high pitch, heralding the approach of the two boats, with Percy flying overhead, waving his arms with excitement. Loud speakers announced that Oxford were approximately three feet ahead, with only four hundred metres to go. Another huge roar. Marchwiggin jumped about excitedly and craned his neck for a better view. The suspension on his pram squeaked emphatically.

'What's happening?' asked Grace, coming from the hut with a cup of tea in her hand.

‘The Boat Race is just about to finish!’

‘Well I never! Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Not now, thank you!’

‘I could make you a ginger bread man.’

‘That’s kind, but no thanks.’

Grace’s jaw dropped and gazed at her beloved Marchwigin. ‘I just thought,’ she said slowly. ‘I just thought that I don’t like to argue with you, so I made you a cup of tea. You see I didn’t really mind going fast in the raft.’

‘Yes, yes. Wait a minute, please!’

‘THEY’RE LEVEL!’ said the loud speakers. ‘WITH ONLY ONE HUNDRED METRES TO GO! TEN MORE STROKES! AND CAMBRIDGE ARE BREAKING THROUGH!’

The crowd roared.

‘AND CAMBRIDGE HAVE DONE IT! CAMBRIDGE HAVE WON BY A CANVASS! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN - WHAT A MARVELLOUS FINISH!’

Percy was, of course, an Oxford supporter. He turned up his palms as if to say, ‘Oh, well! Never mind.’ He then waved and shot off into the sky towards Kew.

‘Ah! That was wonderful,’ Marchwigin sighed as he adjusted his hat. He turned to Grace, ‘Yes, now I think I will have that cup of tea. Thank you. And if there’s a sandwich?’

‘Yes, it is approaching lunch time, isn’t it?’ she laughed. ‘I’ll go and make you one.’

While she was preparing this snack, the tide changed, caught hold of the raft and took them slowly on their way. Soon they were floating off on the silent river into the early afternoon sunshine.

Marchwiggin composed a poem:

*Broad shouldered Victory glides on by,
A passing moment pulling earth from sky,
And Percy the Tot,
Has had his lot.*

*Though he'll be back again,
And things'll be the same,
But he's too clever to know,
That Perdu runs his show,
So a lovely shirt, flying saucer and sparkling eyes,
Spinning like a top, he's in for a big surprise.*

*Two and two is five,
Three and one is six,
Cattle live in bee hives,
And pancakes made of sticks;
It's the law of the Lost Idiot,
And the unfeeling mind:
Both very different,
But of the same kind.*

Chapter 6.

The mob at a pub in Chiswick.

With Grace settling down to some more golden knitting, and Marchwiggin sipping at a glass of champagne in between puffs of a newly lit cigar, their raft slipped along the shining mind of the Thames. They muttered to each other, enjoying their aimless conversation, until Grace observed that they were approaching the jetty outside the *Blue Anchor* pub next to Hammersmith Bridge. Many of the pub's patrons spilled out into the sunshine, half-drunk after the morning's Boat Race revellery.

The moment the raft bumped into the jetty, Marchwiggin told Grace to tie the raft to a post so they could visit the pub and talk to some of the locals.

'I'll give you a hand!' shouted a big voice.

Marchwiggin looked up and saw a huge man. He was wearing a leather apron and leaned so far out of one of the pub windows that it looked very much like he would fall out. His face was as round as Jupiter and his hair wild and grey; his hands, which had a firm grip on the windowsill, were like great big sausages.

Marchwiggin was correct to presume that this man was the pub landlord, because, in a second, the man had jumped from the window and was with them, tying a firm nautical knot that would hold the raft securely in all weathers. He then said, 'Welcome to my public house! Welcome! Welcome! Come inside and have a drink! I am The Landlord!'

The big man had been celebrating as much as anyone else, for he immediately intoxicated Grace by breathing the fumes of seven barrels of good ale all over her. 'Come on! Please, come inside!' he said, leaning back and placing his hands on his belly.

Grace was now drunk on The Landlord's breath. But she still managed to push the pram with Marchwiggin in it up the slope to the pub. And as she did this, the crowd cheered and whirled their glasses above their heads. In fact, they were so excited that a small fight started on the periphery. The Landlord begged to be excused for a moment and, towering over everyone, pushed his way to the combatants. He picked them up one by one and threw into the Thames.

'Think about what you're doing around my hostelry!' bellowed The Landlord, and let out a huge laugh.

Returning with an apology, he led Marchwiggin and Grace into the pub. Behind the bar was an equally colossal woman with breasts as large as rubber dinghies. She had wide blonde hair. Her red cheeks were big and round, like the swollen bellies of women in the bloom of their pregnancy. She also wore a leather apron. The Landlord introduced her as his wife, The Landlady. The crowd cheered at this announcement.

'Beer all round!' shouted The Landlady.

'HOORAH!' yelled the mob.

Many pulls on the pumps later, and everyone's glasses were filled. Even Grace proudly clasped a jug of ale and sipped at it thirstily. Meanwhile, the Landlady hurrahed and mopped the sweat from her brow.

'Well done, my love!' roared The Landlord, clasping his wife firmly around her huge waist. 'And welcome to our new guests! Let us all know your names!'

'I'm Grace!' she blurted out, suddenly aware of how drunk she was. 'And this is Marchwiggin. He's going to win the parliamentary seat of the River Thames! Believe me he will! And it's been a very good campaign so far!'

‘Well, well!’ shouted The Landlord. ‘A politician in our midst! A young one, too and one who likes an ale, and a laugh no doubt!’ He raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, Marchwiggin loves to drink, don’t you dear?’ said Grace.

‘Of course,’ said Marchwiggin, holding his tankard above his head. He smiled to all those who had gathered around the pram. ‘We all love it! Mirth and merriment in good measure is a wonderful thing!’

‘HOORAH!’ screamed the crowd and they jumped in the air.

‘If you’re the politician you say you are,’ said The Landlord testily, ‘then give us a speech and win our hearts! Not long ago we were visited by a Doctor Purge, who gave us an address and won little other than several dozen rotten eggs and a hundred filthy cabbages! So, what do you say?’

‘He’ll do it!’ cried Grace, taking hold of Marchwiggin. She lifted him from the pram and placed him on the bar. And it was a very special moment, because it was the one when he stood for the very first time ever in his little black boots. ‘My goodness!’ cried Grace. ‘Look at you! *Standing!*’ She thrust her tankard of ale into the air. ‘Hoorah! All on your own two feet! How utterly wonderful!’

There was a four-piece jazz band in the back of the pub - four old men with four old instruments: drums, banjo, clarinet and saxophone. They were a messy bunch, with unshaven faces and big moustaches, but they were enjoying themselves as much as everyone else. And when they heard that Marchwiggin had stood for the first time ever on his own two little black boots, the drummer, a fat man with an old straw hat, gave a roll of such remarkable dexterity on the skins that everyone was impressed and fell into silent adoration. Encouraged by this, the drummer then performed an astonishing drum solo, which made everyone wonder how a man of his age could move his arms so very fast and create a sound so powerful that it could be heard on the outskirts of London. Needless to say, this amazing performance elicited unrivalled

applause and cheers. The other musicians then joined in, and everyone started to dance - slowly at first then faster and faster, like ants on a red-hot sheet of steel.

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! RATTLE! BANG! CRASH! THUMP! SMASH! THUMP!
BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

It went on like this for a long time. Girls and boys, women and men were leaping high and landing with a crash on the wooden floor. Then the drummer's hat fell off and his performance ended abruptly. Immediately the crowd fell into a silence and gazed at Marchwiggin.

'Speak up, then!' said The Landlady. 'And make sure it's good!'

'Oh! It'll be good!' said Grace fiercely from a rocking chair she had captured when everyone was dancing. She rocked so furiously that she could have been used as a metronome for the recent demonstration of lively music. She spilled a lot of her beer.

Marchwiggin cleared his throat. 'Our old Prime Minister who died only a week ago said that the journey to parliament can be a tough one.' Marchwiggin spoke clearly, wrapping his mouth around every word as if it were a special sweet. 'And we all loved our old Prime Minister!'

'HOORAH!' screamed the crowd.

'But, our old Prime Minister said that it depended entirely on the people!'

'HOORAH!'

'And I say, float with the people! Like along the Thames! And they'll float with you!'

'HOORAH!'

‘But there are many issues that need strong parliamentary guidance. And living is one of them. But it is not up to parliament to force living on you. Parliament is there to show that living can be *achieved*. But how can we ever do this if we have no interest in parliament? And there are two parliaments - one at Westminster and one within ourselves. And all is the same. So, know one and you will know the other. Vote one in and you will vote in the other. Then if you vote in the *right* one to guide you, you’ll achieve life. Like birds achieve flight. So all I’m asking you to do is recognise that you have a parliament within yourselves, and to look to it from time to time! Then we’ll have a clear river to a truly happy nation! But there is one caution - you need presence of mind enough to cast the right vote, and that’s the fun of life!’

‘HOORAY!’ shouted most of the crowd. ‘HOORAY! HOORAY! HOORAY!’

But there was a couple of people who disagreed.

‘That’s as may be,’ said one of them - a determined looking man, who had heavy features, thick lips and tidy black hair. He wore a dark blue suit that didn’t quite fit him around his expanding belly. ‘You can talk of life and nonsense about birds, baffling us with idiot words and silly ideas. But I want things that *work*. I want targets *met*. I want shops, factories, and offices, so that you and me can get what we want *here and now*, whatever the cost. Yes! I want shops open for twenty four hours a day! Every day! Everywhere! If I want a television at eleven o’clock at night, then I should be able to get one there and then. I want us to work more and more, to be more *productive*! I want you to have what you want as soon as you want it – televisions and cars. But we must *work* for it! Yes, *work* all the hours available. We must make *sacrifices*! Taxes will be raised to build more and more for the state! Taxes will be raised so that we can employ more and more people to police the increase of work, which will keep even more people busy! And I want *pointless* thinking like Marchwiggin’s stamped out!’

‘BOO!’ shouted the crowd.

‘No, let him have his say,’ said Marchwiggin, raising his cigar like a magic wand.

‘Yes! You are right I will!’ shouted the man, victoriously turning to the mob. The smile he had practiced in the mirror for months disappeared as easily as it appeared. ‘It sickens me to see a daft baby annoying us with all sorts of senseless ideas!’ He glared at Marchwiggin. ‘We’re nothing without all the things I’m talking about! Let us therefore fill the river with soot and gravel so we can build factories, airports, airport runways, more houses, offices and car parks on it, just as promised by the great Doctor Purge. Then this ugly flow of water will at least have a *purpose*! A *function*! Everything needs a FUNCTION!’

‘HOORAH!’ screamed the crowd, suddenly in his favour.

‘Yes, see NOW you see sense!’ said the man, stretching his arms wide open in a messianic gesture as tears came to his eyes. ‘And now do you not think it was a poor idea to throw those eggs at Doctor Purge!’

Suddenly Marchwiggin’s voice split the air like a bolt from the heavens: ‘Eggs are a generous offering to a tiny world where nothing leaks and nothing flows, and where nothing will be given back in return. Not for eggs, not even for a for the nation’s reserve of gold bars.’ Marchwiggin gazed for a powerful moment at the crowd, drew a long puff on his cigar, adjusted his hat, smiled and continued. ‘Nothing ever happens where life is caged in Death’s great iron casket. Oh, and you tell me of your *wants*. You want *airports*, and you want *runways* and *televisions* and you want to fill the River with *gravel* and *soot*! But what do you know about *desire* and *yearning*? Yes, where’s you’re *desire* and what of your *yearning*...’

‘HOORAH!’

‘Don’t give me that!’ shouted the man, buoyant with his sense of correctness.

‘No! Listen to *me* now!’ boomed Marchwiggin, his face suddenly red with rage, his voice momentarily so loud that it lifted the roof from the pub. ‘You unnatural thing!’

You self-deceiving Malvolio! My blood is up I say, and I shall do you an injury if you say anything more out of turn!’

‘I shall say what I want! And when we are in power, you and the likes of you will be *watched* and *arrested!*’ said the man, crossing his arms in defiance.

Marchwiggin slowly extinguished his cigar in the ashtray that The Landlady had passed to him. With a publican’s innate sensitivity she had known the exact moment when to make this gesture. It was also her way of showing her support for this remarkable baby.

Meanwhile, the pub went absolutely quiet. The only sound was that of Marchwiggin taking out his pipe and tobacco. But not for one second did he take his penetrating eyes from his adversary. He deftly filled up his pipe and lit it with the strike of a match that sounded like the heavens ripping apart.

There was a second - perhaps two. Then, from the pipe flew a shining yellow flame that seemed to fill the pub with the wings of an angel. The blazing being swooped towards the man. With arms of white light it lifted him high into the air. The man tried to look away as the heavenly being gazed deeply into his eyes. In an instant the being took the man outside, where everything flashed like a magnesium flare.

More silence followed as everything went back to normal. That is, all except the fact that Marchwiggin’s adversary was now kneeling, holding his eyes and moaning.

He had been blinded.

The crowd gasped.

‘Now! As I said, my blood was up!’ said Marchwiggin. ‘That disciple of Purge called for his *wants*. He *wanted* to surround himself with his *wants*: wants that ruin everything for everyone else, man and beast and fish. He has no idea of true desire which goes as deep into the sky as it does into the eternal currents of yearning that

flow at the bottom of the sea.’ Marchwiggin’s stopped. ‘Need I say more?’ He took a sip of ale. ‘But alas for the fellow’s eyes. They have burst with his hatred of anything happy, anything foolish, anything light, anything free, anything alive. They have burst with his need to control. And the fiery angel from my pipe will take the sight of anyone like him away until they learn to see.’

‘Will he see again?’ asked a young woman from the crowd.

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ said Marchwiggin. ‘He will see in time. His eyesight will most certainly return. But he will never again see the person he was; for when he can see again, that person will have long gone.’

The throng was silent as something new entered their heads.

‘Please let *me* speak!’ cried The Landlord suddenly in a voice that sounded meek alongside Marchwiggin’s.

‘BOO!’

‘Let him say his part!’ said Marchwiggin confidently.

‘HOORAH!’

‘Thank you!’ The Landlord said. ‘Let me add something to Marchwiggin’s words. As your landlord, as your provider of ale and tomfoolery, I say look into your glasses! And there you’ll see a lot of the fun you can all have! Then look beyond your glasses and see us having a great time! Living like *people*! If you forgive me, Marchwiggin, but your words may be a little difficult for *everyone* to take in and that’s why I *must* translate some of them into the language of a pub on the Thames. But I know they are *visionary* words. And the proof of it is you standing for the first time in your little black boots! And,’ he said turning to the crowd, ‘did Marchwiggin need to fill up the Thames with gravel and soot for new airports, new runways, new motorways and

offices to do that! Did he need to control his whole environment and all who live in it to do that? No! Of course he didn't!

'HOORAH! HOORAH! HOORAH!'

'BOOM! BOOM! BANG!' The drummer was back in form. 'BANG! RATTLE! CRASH! BANG! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! RATTLE! BANG! CRASH! THUMP! SMASH! THUMP! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!'

The mood immediately lifted and everyone started to dance again. Marchwiggan thanked The Landlord and The Landlady for their help.

'Don't you mention it,' boomed The Landlord. 'Now let me lead you to your raft.'

Still rather drunk, Grace placed Marchwiggan back in his pram and pushed him through the delighted mob.

Both The Landlady and The Landlord saw them off at the jetty. The Landlord undid the nautical knot, and wished Marchwiggan good luck on his journey to parliament. He added that he would get his vote.

'Good bye, and thank you all!' shouted Marchwiggan, waving to the crowd, as the current beckoned him and Grace for the remainder of their journey.

And as they drifted away Grace said, 'It was a wonderful speech you gave. I knew you could do it. I have always known.'

Then they both fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 7.

The family in Putney.

The raft ran ashore with a scraping jolt.

‘Dear me!’ said Grace. ‘What a lovely little sleep.’ She looked about. ‘Ah, now *this* is a lovely place.’

Marchwiggin yawned, smiled and looked about, taking in the scenery.

Waking up in Putney was, for Marchwiggin and Grace, like waking up in their favourite bedroom in their favourite home. Familiar floral wallpaper designs were the trees on both banks, where blossom fell in swirling puffs, expanding as they scattered themselves on the ground. And the boathouses of the rowing clubs were like old furniture, each one wrinkled and steady, having watched several generations come and go over decades and centuries.

‘Shall we go ashore for a walk?’ Grace suggested.

‘A superb idea,’ Marchwiggin said. ‘But we’ll have to eat. I’m starving.’

‘We’ll find somewhere,’ said Grace, wheeling the pram onto the bank. ‘Do you think the raft will float off if we leave it?’

Marchwiggin glanced down at the raft. ‘No it looks secure enough.’

A family was nearby. The father and mother watching restfully as their two children, a girl and a boy played with a green ball that was slightly larger than both of them put together.

As Marchwiggan and Grace passed, the mother looked up and smiled serenely. She was pregnant, and by the look of it, very close to giving birth. Her large fertile body was slow to catch up with her movements as she shifted to a more comfortable position. A breeze carried some blossom and dropped it in her hair.

‘Hello,’ she said, dreamily. ‘It’s a wonderful day for the family.’ She patted her picnic hamper. ‘If you had passed earlier I would have offered you a sandwich, or a roll.’

‘Well, that’s very kind of you,’ said Grace, warming immediately to this woman, who looked so wonderful, dressed in her magnificent brown and green clothes.

‘And that’s kind of you to say that I am kind,’ replied the woman. ‘In return for your generosity, I suggest you come to our house for tea. We only live there.’ She pointed to a curiously shaped mansion that overlooked the river. ‘What do you think, Palmeston?’

Palmeston was her husband, and a fine looking man of about thirty-five, who wore a pair of fine lace-up leather boots, and a blue cape. He sat on a wooden throne close to the water’s edge, watching proudly as his children played. He turned to look at Grace and Marchwiggan and smiled, his waxed moustache pointing upwards.

‘Aha!’ he said. ‘You were in Kew Gardens only a few hours ago!’

His wife looked at Marchwiggan and Grace, her hand moving to her mouth in slow motion. ‘And so it is!’ she said.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Marchwiggan with an amused frown.

‘Don’t you recall when we flew over you on that very rug?’ asked Palmeston, standing up, and pointing at a rolled up carpet that was tucked under his throne.

Marchwiggan and Grace did indeed now remember and were very pleased. Yes, it was the family who flew about on a rug in the Magic Gardens.

They all introduced themselves, the mother said her name was The Empress, their son was called Fun and the daughter’s name was Hilarity. The children’s names suited them well, because they couldn’t stop playing with their ball. Fun wore a jester’s outfit, half of which was black and the other half white. On her head Hilarity wore a hat that looked like a blue bell, with bells on it, ringing with her every move. She also wore magenta tights and a jacket with colours as vibrant as an electro-magnetic spectrum. Her eyes were wide and alive.

‘Let’s go for tea!’ said Palmeston, lifting his wooden throne, his children and their ball, all in one deft movement. This enlivened Fun and Hilarity so much that they took hold of their ball and tossed it higher and higher until it looked as if it would go into orbit and never come back!

‘This will be very interesting!’ Grace said to Marchwiggan quietly. ‘Get this family’s vote and you’re more than half way to the constituency, I’ll say.’

Marchwiggan told her he was surprised to hear her talk like this.

‘Well, my dear, when we slept I had such lovely dreams about you fulfilling yourself that it quite changed the way I think.’

The family’s home was magical, with turrets reaching up very high. The front garden was immaculately kept, and had some obscure flowers that looked like drops of silver or platinum, perhaps white gold. There was a row of talking cabbages that welcomed them, opening up to show that inside each of them was a huge ruby. The front door was polished night blue, with a knocker shaped like the moon. The door was much bigger than the front of any normal house, but it opened with silent ease, allowing

them into the colourful hallway. The walls seemed to reach higher than the ceilings, which were painted purple with golden suns, silver moons and little planets. Tall mirrors with frames like oak trees a thousand years old were scattered about the walls. As they passed one of these, Marchwiggin looked into one and frowned when he saw his distorted reflection.

Palmeston put down his children and they dashed into the living room, where there was a silver horse with muscular shoulders. ‘Look!’ cried Fun; ‘This is our dog!’

‘Ha, ha!’ Laughed The Empress. ‘Yesterday they called him a tortoise! It’s just not nice when he’s so kind to them.’

‘Precisely!’ said The Horse with a good-humoured smile. ‘Now I’d better take them to the Playroom.’ He looked at Marchwiggin. ‘Would you like to come, too?’

‘Yes, I think I will,’ replied Marchwiggin, looking at Grace and almost forgetting his hunger with excitement. ‘If you don’t mind, that is. I mean, I haven’t played with any toys for a while.’

‘All right,’ said Grace. ‘Go on!’

‘Pop him on my head,’ said The Horse.

‘On your head?’ said Marchwiggin.

‘And why not?’ asked The Horse. ‘It’s a nice high view, and you can hold on to my ears.’

So Grace placed Marchwiggin on The Horse’s head, and off he went down the hall, with Hilarity’s bells ringing all the way, and Fun’s fast feet tapping with miraculous speed.

At the end of the long polished corridor they went up a high white spiral staircase. It was surrounded by glass panels, so as they went higher and higher, they had a superb view of the garden, and eventually the rest of Putney, then London and then the world.

‘It’s a long way,’ observed Marchwiggin, now feeling very relaxed. ‘Do you mind if I smoke?’

‘What in front of the kids?’ asked The Horse, watching Fun and Hilarity race ahead.

‘Perhaps not,’ said Marchwiggin, returning his cigar to his inside pocket.

‘Yes,’ said The Horse. ‘We’re almost there anyway.’

Suddenly in front of them was a door with *PLAYROOM* written on it in swirling letters. Hilarity opened it and in they went.

Inside it smelled of plasticine and painted wood. There were toys everywhere. A train-set stretched from one end of this giant room to another, passing under tunnels and over crossings. There were dolls and teddy bears of varying sizes scattered about, some on stools, some on little wooden chairs and two or three on armchairs. There was a ten-foot glider resting at an angle next to the Wendy House into which Fun had just vanished, locking the door behind him.

‘See!’ cried Hilarity, stamping her foot. ‘He’s off in one of his funny moods! Hiding in his Wendy House and not coming out to play.’

‘Why don’t you open the windows in the play room – let some air in?’ asked The Horse, giving her a momentary distraction.

Forgetting Fun’s funny mood, Hilarity immediately dashed about the playroom, opening its windows. She was laughing wildly, her bells ringing like six Christmases.

‘You see,’ said The Horse to Marchwiggin. ‘She gets irritated when Fun just goes off like that. The reason for it is that Fun can actually have fun whether he’s happy or sad, and sometimes that can mean the darkest and most miserable moods. He usually has these when he goes into his Wendy House. Hilarity can’t understand it, and it frustrates her.’

‘Hmm,’ said Marchwiggin, now very comfortable, balancing on The Horse’s head. ‘Is there no way they can meet half way?’

‘Yes,’ said The Horse. ‘There is. But it’s almost as if they like to be polarised at times.’

‘But how do you think they can get together?’

‘See that music box over there?’ said The Horse nodding Marchwiggin in the direction of an up-turned box with a diamond for a handle.

‘Yes.’

‘See that key sticking out of it?’

‘Yes.’

‘The last time that key was turned was one hundred and nine years ago. And both of these children know that if it’s turned and the music box is wound up and then opened, there will be such beautiful music that they will have to dance together, neither with just hilarity nor with just fun. They will enter into the new element of being happy. And they’re frightened of losing themselves to this happiness.’

‘Why don’t you just wind it up?’ asked Marchwiggin.

‘Because I have hooves and can’t hold the key.’

‘Why don’t their parents wind it up?’

‘Because they don’t know about the problem.’

‘Why don’t you tell them?’

‘There’s no point.’ The Horse shook his head. ‘They wouldn’t believe me. They think their children are very happy, and, like many parents, would find it very insulting if a horse took away the very pretty cover that hid all the things they don’t want to face.’

‘Then I shall do it,’ Marchwiggin announced.

Without any warning, the Wendy House door flew open. A tiny steam powered traction-engine came out, puffing away and towing a trolley, upon which was a plasticine effigy of Hilarity, carrying her own head. The door shut quickly. There was a chuckle from within. Hilarity laughed with such a scream when she saw the little model of herself, that she was close to shattering all the windows she had just opened.

Surrounded by this piercing noise, The Horse lowered Marchwiggin to the floor. When he was low enough Marchwiggin climbed off The Horse’s head, tried to walk, thought better of it, and crawled rapidly over to the music box. He hid behind a doll’s house when Hilarity asked where he was.

‘He’s gone to buy some *Lego*,’ The Horse lied whitely.

Marchwiggin came from his hiding place and a window shutter on the Wendy House opened. Fun stuck his head out and looked straight at Marchwiggin. He didn’t appear to be very happy at all. ‘What’s going on!’ he demanded. ‘You’re not going anywhere near that music box! I hope you’re not!’

But Marchwiggin was already there, his hand on the key, winding it as fast as he could. Hilarity was running towards him to stop him, but Marchwiggin quickly

opened the box, and out of it, accompanying a beautiful ballet dancer, came the most exquisite music. The dancer, a beautiful girl, wearing a white Swan Lake costume landed on a top and spun slowly around and around.

Marchwiggin watched as Hilarity stopped in her tracks. Fun then came out of the Wendy House and the two of them started to dance in elegant unity, smiling peacefully. One of them said: 'Marchwiggin you're a wizard! Thank you!'

The Horse lowered his head to Marchwiggin. 'Climb aboard,' he said, smiling with admiration and relief. Marchwiggin grabbed hold of a furry ear and pulled himself up.

'You've done it!' continued The Horse. 'Let's leave them here to dance, while we go downstairs and see if anything's happening. I have a feeling that something has already done so.'

And The Horse was right. Because in the middle of the living room floor, on a round carpet, The Empress had just given birth to a child, which was now sitting in Grace's arms. Palmeston looked on with a proud smile, his moustache twitching madly. He had celebrated by putting on a yellow top hat, which, like the walls in the room, was higher than the ceiling.

'Look at this lovely baby,' said Grace, her pupils dilated like new moons.

The Empress sighed, sitting back on the rug beneath a blanket.

'We're going to call the child Happiness,' said Palmeston proudly.

The Horse and Marchwiggin gave each other a knowing look.

* * *

They all celebrated with cakes, sandwiches, milk, tea and some big ripe apples, which was enough to remove Marchwiggin's hunger for quite some time. So, feeling nice

and full he explained to his hosts that he was a candidate for the Constituency of the River. This information prompted a positive response and promises of support, especially from Fun and Hilarity, who had since come down from the Playroom and were inseparable.

‘So where are you going to next?’ asked Palmeston.

‘With the flow of the river,’ replied Marchwiggin.

‘Which means beyond Putney Bridge!’ said The Empress, almost dropping her new baby.

‘Well, yes, of course,’ said Marchwiggin from his high chair, which had been kindly provided for the meal. He spilled a dash of milk on his suit. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘But it’s too *dangerous!*’ said Palmeston, leaning forward emphatically. ‘There are devils and goodness knows what horrors on the other side of that bridge. I tell you! No one has ever come back! If it means going beyond that bridge, forget your position as a candidate, and live a peaceful life in Putney. With us - I’m sure Fun and Hilarity - and Happiness - will love you to be here.’

‘Come on! What on earth are you talking about?’ Marchwiggin said. ‘This is nonsense, surely. What do you think, Grace?’

‘Well, I think we are amongst some of the best people, the most honest people, and I think we should listen to them,’ said Grace, unable to hide a touch of apprehension in her voice.

‘Well,’ said The Horse steadily. ‘I think you must go. I am sure you have the courage and wherewithal to survive.’

The Empress shook her head. ‘I really don’t know about this.’

‘Can’t you tell us what happens?’ Grace said.

‘Since no one has come back, there are only rumours, and all of them bad,’ said Palmeston. He breathed in slowly through clenched teeth, making a quiet hiss. ‘Let’s put it this way, I wouldn’t do it.’

‘Then perhaps that is why we *must* do it,’ said Marchwiggin gravely. ‘I have set my mind on the Constituency of the River. And I must believe in that River, for if I did not, then how could I represent it? So, although I love Putney and could stay here forever, it would be like the being one of the lotus eaters and I would never leave. Which means that I would never keep that Purge away from this parliamentary seat. And that would mean catastrophe.’

‘Yes, I think we must go ahead,’ said Grace with sudden conviction as she gazed at Happiness. It was as if the newly born child was speaking his mind through her.

‘Then that’s it! We must depart,’ said Marchwiggin, emphatically placing both hands down on his high chair table, and doing a good job of hiding the trace of doubt in his voice.

And so, once tea was finished they all went out to the raft. The sun had fallen, and they were sinking into a beautiful evening.

‘Good luck,’ said Palmeston as Grace pushed Marchwiggin in his pram onto the raft.

Hilarity and Fun spoke in unison. ‘And we promise! You’ve got our votes!’

‘Yes, keep your courage,’ said The Horse, now gently pushing the raft into the stream of the river with his hoof.

They all waved as Marchwiggin and Grace drifted slowly towards Putney Bridge. Marchwiggin glanced up at the sky and saw the moon climbing, pregnant with the sun. So, after anxiously lighting a cigar, he wrote a poem:

*Every gardener knows the enchanting moon,
Her silver light never too bright,
For the meandering soul,
Whose fear's thick like lava,
Is losing himself in the cold.*

*But Everything must be done,
So we'll leave Hilarity and her Fun;
Let the new child Happiness shine as their sun;
Else we'll stay in Putney forever,
Perhaps drift back on our raft,
To do something we've done,
Or something that's daft.*

*Under the middle arch we'll go,
Into the land we don't know,
Whence no one has returned,
But it's time to let go.*

Chapter 8.

On the way to the bridge.

Marchwiggin put his pen back in his pocket. He puffed on his cigar and looked ahead at the approaching bridge. Grace stood next to him, her hand on the pram.

‘Do you think it’ll be all right?’ she asked.

‘I hope so,’ he puffed. ‘I hope so.’

Now only the moon illuminated them. The river slid silently beneath them.

Suddenly, appearing before them, was The Cloud, all white and happy. He was carrying the old woman – the one they met right at the beginning of their journey on the river – the one whose raft it was. Then Postleswaite, a crown still on his head, landed on the raft.

‘It’s The Cloud!’ Grace exclaimed with delight. ‘*And* the old woman; *and* the duck! Oh, please say you have come to take the raft away so we don’t have to go under the bridge!’

Even Marchwiggin secretly shared this sentiment. He smiled a welcome.

‘I can take the raft if you wish,’ said the old woman. She was still no taller than a rolling pin. ‘But winning the Constituency of the River is your real wish, Marchwiggin. And it can not all be easy. Can it?’

‘No,’ replied Marchwiggin. ‘But, Grace if you want to get off now...’

‘Don’t be a silly baby! I’m doing nothing of the sort!’ Grace snapped, lifting her chin slightly. ‘I may be granted the freedom to be afraid, but I’m not backing out now.’

‘What does Postleswaite say?’ asked Marchwiggin.

‘I’ve said what I’ve had to say,’ replied the oracular bird. ‘But I want to wish you good luck! You will not be alone if you don’t want to be.’ Postleswaite then reached forward, extending a long wing and handing something to Marchwiggin. It was a tiny model of the Prime Minister’s horses and yellow chariot.

‘It’s beautiful!’ said Marchwiggin, taking it into his tiny hands.

‘Keep it for good luck.’

‘It’s a marvellous piece of work,’ said Marchwiggin, examining it closely. ‘And what’s this?’

He was referring to a diamond on one of the coach’s seats.

‘That is the Star of Hope, plucked by my beak from the heavens,’ said Postleswaite. ‘Don’t lose it.’

‘Thank you,’ said Marchwiggin. ‘I won’t.’

Grace smiled indulgently, like a mother when someone has been kind to her child.

‘Good luck!’ said The Cloud as he shot into the air. He was still carrying the old woman. She also wished them good luck. Postleswaite took off.

As their friends disappeared, Marchwiggin and Grace could just about hear them shout in unison, ‘It’s just a state of mind! It’s just a state of mind! It’s just a state of mind!’

Grace took a deep breath. It went so far into her lungs that when she exhaled quietly her soul nearly glided out of her mouth in an effort to escape the forthcoming torment.

Marchwiggin cleared his throat.

Suddenly there was a voice in the dark.

‘Hello!’ it called. ‘What’s going on here? I said *hello!*’

Grace and Marchwiggin saw the outline of two figures and a coffin in a rowing boat.

‘Hello,’ said Marchwiggin, admirably hiding the tremor in his voice. ‘Who is it?’

‘Oh! Come *on!*’ said the voice.

At this moment the moon shone an intense beam on the newcomers; and, as they approached, it was easy to see that it was Lord Cablecar and Allan. Incidentally, it wasn’t a coffin - it was a grandfather clock.

‘Hey! Listen!’ said Allan. ‘It looks like you’re going past Putney Bridge. And so I got to say this. Don’t chicken out now! It’s only time! I’ve done my time, and now it’s your turn!’

The rowing boat gently bumped into the raft. Marchwiggin glanced at Lord Cablecar, who seemed very happy, was still wearing his flowery hat, but was he a touch pre-occupied with the precision of his rowing technique?

‘And!’ said Allan. ‘As you know, after doing so much time and all that, I’m a master of time, and I know it’s an illusion. Cos when I came out of prison, it seemed only yesterday I went in! But it seemed a long time when there were a few years to go, know what I’m saying? And I’ve been trying to tell this to Viscount Pottle - Lord Cablecar - who hasn’t, by the way, quite got over his fixation with clocks! Not yet, anyway.’

Lord Cablecar glared at Allan. 'It's not *that* bad,' he said.

'Yes, well he's coming round!' said Allan, smiling. 'Like the hands of a clock, in fact!' His voice echoed in the darkness. 'So, what I say is this. When you go past that bridge, don't think about clocks! Least of all their accuracy!'

At this, Lord Cablecar looked up and smiled. 'I wanted to give you both a clock for the remainder of your journey,' he said quietly. 'But Allan said, no. So that's that, I'm afraid.'

A swan, a duck and a heron popped their heads out of Lord Cablecar's boat. 'Good luck!' they trilled.

'Yes,' said Allan and Lord Cablecar in unison. 'Good luck! We'll see you at Westminster!'

Then Lord Cablecar took two strokes with his oars. His precision was so remarkable, and his energy transference from his muscles to the movement of the boat was so efficient that he, the boat, Allan, the grandfather clock and the birds disappeared rapidly towards Hammersmith.

A few moments of silence followed. Then there was a splash of water. Marchwigin and Grace looked in its direction.

It was The Human Fish, golden and resplendent, his face glowing in the dark water.

They sighed with pleasure.

'How nice to see you again,' said Grace. 'Nice, in fact, to see everyone again, don't you think, Marchwigin?'

'Yes, it certainly is,' he said from behind a puff of smoke.

‘I want to tell you that you will be in my thoughts,’ said The Human Fish. ‘I also want to say that when Marchwiggin pulled my filthy tank into the water in Twickenham, I was terrified for a tiny moment. But it was only for a moment. Fear always passes, you see; and when it goes it’s nearly always followed by good things. So if you go through with it, I’m sure you’ll win the constituency. Perhaps even all of Westminster will be yours!’

‘Will you come with us?’ Marchwiggin asked. ‘We shall need confidence like that.’

‘No, I can’t come with you,’ replied the Fish. ‘Even if I tried, the River would never allow it. I am as fulfilled as I could be.’

‘What will we see?’ said Marchwiggin, trying once again to hide another wave of anxiety.

‘Death is first,’ said The Human Fish impassively. He nodded his magnificent head and heavy locks towards a gigantic cloaked figure that now stood astride the bridge like Colossus of Rhodes. ‘But I must go. Good luck, and, as I said, my thoughts are with you.’ The Human Fish then slipped silently under the smooth surface of the water.

The moonlight was just bright enough to catch the shadow of Death’s bony jaw, and the dark caves from which his eyes had once looked at everything, before it had to live, and thus die. Beneath Death’s hood there must have been some long hair, as some fell into the river and dissolved with a hiss. From beneath the black cloak, the Lord of Death withdrew a scythe with a blade as long as the horizon. It flashed in the moonlight as he lifted it above his head.

Suddenly Marchwiggin and Grace heard the sound of a boat engine, and, turning around, they saw Doctor Purge and his acolytes.

‘Afraid? Afraid, are you?’ Purge asked through his loud hailer as Smug drove him past. ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’

The terrible man then went under the left arch of Putney Bridge and disappeared. Within seconds, the river had taken Marchwigin and Grace through the middle arch. There was a whoosh of air as the scythe passed over them, and everything was darkness.

Puffing at his cigar, Marchwigin felt for his model horses and carriage. Grace was still.

Chapter 9.

The phantoms of fear.

Blue-black sky left nothing but silhouettes and shadows and everything horrible for the mind to create. There was an eerie presence of silent nothing that went far beyond where the stars had ever even thought of going.

Then there was the sound of a harpsichord, echoing from the water and the stone of the bridge, before disappearing into the dark sky. The delicate musical notes faded, briefly bringing images of angels to Marchwiggin's mind.

But the glorious winged babies slipped away, and he was left wide-eyed - though his misgivings were firmly under control and his mind was alert. He could hear that Grace's breathing was forced. He looked at her and saw that her head was lost in the darkness, leaving just a white uniform sitting dimly on the mattress. Turning away, he saw that on each side of the river were the pitch shapes of the two churches. Then there was a rumble.

'What's that?' said Grace's uniform.

'Shhhh.'

The sound came from deep in the earth, miles beneath the river. It grew louder, thundering from under everything and into the air with a force that shook the pram. Marchwiggin looked at the Star in his toy Prime Minister's carriage. It pulsed - bright, then dim, bright and dim again.

Suddenly there was a huge bang, and the two churches blew up, releasing huge winds, sending the rock from their ancient walls to splash around the raft. Grace grabbed the pram and tried to pull it into the hut, but it didn't quite fit, so half of it was still outside, and she screamed.

The wind swirled around, roaring, frustrated, grasping at the hut with rubbery fingers.

'Relax, Grace. Please relax,' said Marchwiggin as soothingly as he could. 'Haven't you noticed that although all the rocks are raining everywhere, even very close, none have actually landed on us?'

'How do you know? You're facing me in here.'

'Grace, please don't bewilder me with irrelevant rubbish! It's very obvious - there are splashes all around, but nothing has hit us!'

She sighed irritably and asked, 'And what does that mean?'

'I've an idea,' said Marchwiggin. 'Push me back out. I want to see what's going on.'

'I can't. I absolutely refuse. It'll be too irresponsible.'

'But, listen,' he urged, holding up one finger which shone for a moment, and immediately lit the little chamber in the hut. 'The rocks have stopped falling. Now there is only the wind, the rain of rock has finished! There are no more splashes.'

Grace listened to the wind.

'If you go out into that gale,' she said, 'you'll be blown off into the water, where you'll be swallowed up like a fly when it's eaten by a whale.'

'Whales don't eat flies!' he snapped. 'Now just push me out!'

And she did.

The wind was still at a mighty storm level, and after a moment, when Marchwiggin almost lost his hat, they saw a new threat. In the sky, in the water, everywhere, even within themselves, Marchwiggin and Grace saw the most grotesque visions they had ever seen: six thousand shadows of varying size - some as tall as hills, others smaller, but faster moving. Many had sharp chins and huge cloaks, and their faces were dimly lit so you could see their tight grinning lips and deep-set eyes. A few were riding on spiders as big as Yew trees; but they were all gliding at a remarkable speed on the wind towards Marchwiggin and Grace. And it was enough to frighten anyone to death, perhaps even out of their skin. But Marchwiggin, after taking a quick glance at the star in his toy carriage, shouted, 'Don't forget! Don't forget what Postleswaite said before he took off with the little woman and The Cloud!'

Grace could not remember so she screamed very loudly, perhaps louder than she had ever screamed before.

The repulsive fiends were closing in, the spiders' legs moved mechanically and faster and faster. Marchwiggin, who actually had the courage to look at them with a steady gaze, saw that the ones with sharp chins were carrying pitchforks. For some reason he thought that if the spiders had hands on the end of their hard legs they could carry eight forks; but these considerations was shattered by another of Grace's screams, which caused him to leap in the air in surprise.

'Grace! Please don't do that!' He took a deep breath and continued more gently. 'You see, Grace, they get closer when you scream.'

'I'm going to jump in the water!' she announced, suddenly seized by panic.

'No! Remember what Postleswaite said!' shouted Marchwiggin, holding up his hand. 'He told us, "It's just a state of mind!" Yes, it's just a state of mind!'

As he reminded her of their friend's advice, the smaller horrors and some of the spiders peeled away, disappearing into the darkness. Encouraged, Marchwiggin urged Grace to look at the largest creature. Then he repeated, louder this time, 'It's just a state of mind!'

Grace managed to look up and see that the thing was diminishing, its grimace turning into the terror of its own destruction.

'Now go away!' shouted Marchwiggin.

And it melted away without trace.

All the spiders had gone too.

The wind immediately died, and everything was calm. It had even grown lighter, as if it was dusk on a mid December day.

Marchwiggin reached for a cigar, but there were none left, which irritated him.

Chapter 10.

Doctor Purge's anger.

'Well, that was awful,' said Grace, sitting down on the huge feather, which had, surprisingly, not been blown away by the winds. 'Never seen anything like it in all my life. Terrifying. Enough to drive you out of your senses.'

'Exactly. Exactly!' said Marchwiggan. 'And we would have been out of our senses if we had let those things drive us out of them. But they weren't there, were they? And I think that our knowledge of that will help get us through this peculiar journey.'

'Well, I hope so. They won't be frightening me again, I can tell you,' she said resolutely. 'Now, where's my knitting. Ah! Here it is! And it's nearly finished.'

At this moment a small sign lit up, very visible in the darkness, on the bank saying: WONDERFUL CUBAN CIGARS - ALL FREE TO THE DISCERNING TRAVELLER. A closer look showed that it stood outside an old shop, its window packed with a most marvellous selection of cigars, some of which were as long and as thick as oak table legs.

'Can we just pop in there?' asked Marchwiggan, looking at Grace. 'I've run out of cigars.'

'I don't think so, do you?' she replied disapprovingly, her knitting needles clattering loudly.

'I know,' said Marchwiggin, his desire for the smoke burning more fiercely at this denial. 'But we have just endured some remarkable difficulties. We've just conquered the ravages of the mind, and I think I deserve something as a reward.'

The sign suddenly grew brighter and bigger, and a man in an apron appeared at the shop door. He was smoking one of the larger cigars. Its smoke curled thickly, reaching for Marchwiggin and stroking his cheek.

'Look!' said Marchwiggin, suddenly feeling irritable, and rocking his pram in frustration. 'I simply do not see why we can't just stop off and get a cigar!'

'Let me remind you, dear, that it's all in the head,' said Grace, slightly piqued. 'You don't need a cigar any more than I need to eat a ball of wool. Besides, it's very dark, and very treacherous, and I think the sooner we're away from that horrid looking man, the better.'

Suddenly the man at the shop put his cigar in a huge ashtray and picked up a megaphone.

'Don't listen to her!' he shouted. 'It's *you* that matters! Just stop off and get your cigars! You'll love them! They'll help you get to Westminster, no trouble at all!'

'Did you hear what the man said?' asked Marchwiggin. 'He's only trying to help. I want a cigar.'

Grace had been watching the man closely, and had recognised the megaphone. She had also seen through his thin disguise of apron and false moustache, and it was without doubt Doctor Purge! So, she told Marchwiggin immediately.

Although Marchwiggin had fallen into an uncharacteristic fury of frustration, he did take Grace's advice, and took a closer look. In doing so, he not only recognised the Doctor, but also, hiding in the shadows, he saw his acolytes; and they were waiting next to a gallows! Marchwiggin intuitively knew that they were trying to trap him and

hang him! He picked up his carriage and gazed at the Star. It soothed his nerves instantly.

‘So, come on!’ called The Doctor. ‘Have a cigar!’

More smoke wafted over, seductively, thick, aromatic and heavy. Marchwiggin looked again at the Star; and again it glowed, this time brighter than ever. Then he looked at Grace, whose face he could now see quite clearly in the gloom, and her expression was determined.

‘Ignore him,’ said Marchwiggin with a grim smile.

‘That’s my good man!’ said Grace with a smile.

‘Come on! Aren’t you having one!’ shouted the Doctor, suddenly turning red - glowing so much that his acolytes and their gallows were clearly visible. ‘You WILL have a cigar! You disgusting baby! Hey! Look at you! You’ll never win! NEVER! NEVER!’

The cigar he had been smoking suddenly burst into flames, which leapt into the air furiously and embraced The Doctor, who grew into a fuming, red monster. ‘You DISGUST ME!’ shouted the monster, rooted in his angry flames. ‘Everything disgusts me! AND I WILL STOP EVERYTHING! IT WILL BE MINE OR IT WILL BE DESTROYED!’ The beast was raging and bubbling like a stew in hell. Lava was pouring from his mouth, burying his followers all at once. And he laughed. ‘THEY DISGUST ME! YOU DISGUST ME!’ He pointed at Marchwiggin and Grace, but for some reason was still glued to his flames. Then he grew and grew, his red skin stretching, before tearing with a high pitched rip. And he exploded.

Lava and pieces of his body hissed in the water around them, but both Marchwiggin and Grace were unharmed. In fact, they laughed. Grace danced on her feather. They didn’t even notice that light was beginning to break of the eastern horizon.

Chapter 11.

Always remaining on top of being on the bottom.

Once they had dealt with the angry Doctor Purge, they believed they had conquered the difficult stretches beyond Putney Bridge. The light in the east was spreading its outstretched arms, higher and higher. It was Grace's opinion that they would now simply drift to Westminster, where the votes would be counted easily in their favour. Her optimism was at its zenith as they slipped past Battersea Park on their right. In fact, she was so happy about everything that she made some sandwiches, fetched a glass for herself and asked Marchwigin to open a bottle of champagne. He did as she suggested immediately, and they sat back to enjoy themselves. Though it has to be said that Marchwigin did miss a nice cigar to go with the celebration.

Perhaps it was the pop of the cork, or Grace's laughter that made things change just before they went under Battersea Bridge.

There was a huge cracking sound that tore the silence apart, followed by a breeze, then a wind.

Marchwigin looked over the brim of his champagne glass, and was amazed when he saw the four chimneys of Battersea Power Station leaning over and converging, pointing their white funnels at the surface of the Thames. A terrifying blast was coming from them, striking the water's surface with such a force that it was whipping it up into waves, round and round and round.

Round and round! The chimneys were creating a whirlpool as big as a black hole! Heavens! It was the end now! Oh! How complacent they had been!

It took a few moments for Grace to realise what was going on, and, with a panic that had been eased slightly by six glasses of champagne, she screamed and fell over. But there was no stopping their raft as it was drawn slowly to the rim of this terrible, awful vortex.

Marchwigin looked for his carriage, but it was lost somewhere under his covers.

‘Damn!’ he said. ‘Where’s my Star!’

‘Oh! No! You haven’t lost it have you!’ cried Grace, slurring her words.

Closer and closer they went to the whirling rim. The bowed chimneys continued their thrusting blast of air.

Then suddenly Marchwigin saw something, a bright light above them.

‘Look!’ he said, pointing.

The glowing object approached, and they saw it was the tiny donkey from Kew Gardens, except that now he had a pair of humming kingfisher wings. He still held its book of visionary poetry.

‘Please be at peace!’ shouted the donkey as he hovered above them. ‘Do not fear this part of the journey. You can conquer fear, for you have conquered fear. Now just go with the whirlpool, flow with it. Marchwigin! Treat it like the fountain at Kew, where you first sank to the bottom, before floating on top. Here is a poem to help you.’ And the donkey read from his book:

*Blazing hearts, soon burning with life,
A clear wind sings, heedless of strife;
For striving is over - let it be so,
And down you are going, and down you must go;
To the bottom - the cool depths of the River,*

Where all is roaring, agitated, but do not falter.

*And remain on top of the bottom,
To rise up again,
To rich soils and castles,
Where your eyes have the flickering orbs
Of eternal fires,
Reflected in the purity of the sky,
And the calmest waters,
Over the oceans stretching;
And you will know not just the heights,
When you have met your depths.*

*Know then that Love will grow;
For you have passed along the Great River;
And fought for your rightful place,
At the glorious Palace -
The Glorious Palace Of Westminster.*

So down, down you must go!

‘Now, my friends,’ shouted the donkey after this mesmerising recital. ‘Think of that poem! Be aware of that verse! Because you are about to forget this dark journey, and only a golden awareness will bring you to your goal!’

Marchwiggin moved and felt something by his feet. He reached for it. It was the carriage! And just before they fell over the edge of the vortex, he took hold of it and held it aloft.

‘I’ve found it!’ he shouted, with full excitement and glowing cheeks.

Grace was delighted when she saw its glowing Star.

Then, with the harmony of the Star, and the donkey's visionary words, Marchwiggin and Grace tumbled fearlessly into the swirling, roaring darkness within.

Chapter 12.

The Sorcerer's wand changes all.

Marchwigin knew they were going at the most remarkable speed. It was too dark to see anything, but he was calm and utterly unafraid. He couldn't see Grace, so he thought of her and, although he was not touching her, he felt her closeness - a comforting sense of wholeness. He did not need to say anything.

On they went. On and on. Asleep, but awake. Wide awake, but with the relaxation, the immortal sense, of the deepest slumber.

Were they spinning, twisting down? Perhaps. But there was no up and no down, no spinning. And it didn't matter.

Then a light appeared ahead - like the tiniest star in the farthest sky. It had a pure, clear brilliance and remained in the same place on the horizon, suggesting that they were not spinning after all.

While gazing at the point of light on the horizon, watching it grow brighter and bigger, Marchwigin wondered vaguely where his model Prime Minister's carriage had gone (in his relaxed state he had let it go).

Suddenly they were in a tunnel with a golden mosaic on its walls. The glorious tiles added to their sense of speed as the tiny patterns zoomed past.

Within seconds the pin-prick of light was a window, through which Marchwigin could see a perfect circle, cut from a magnificent lawn. And suddenly they were on it. Nine horses stood before them, all black except for the one at the front, who turned around and smiled - he was The Horse from the family in Putney, his muscular shoulders rolling with energy and power.

Before looking around at his new surroundings, Marchwiggin smiled at The Horse. Then he realised he was sitting in a high leather seat, surrounded by polished yellow wood. He was in the Prime Minister's coach! And the horses were preparing to pull him somewhere! He turned to where he believed Grace would be, and saw that her face was hidden beneath a frightening white veil. Her starched nurses' uniform had gone, and she was wearing a long dress that poured onto the clean yellow carpet within. She sat upright and motionless, her hands... Her hands! They were beautiful, delicate, perfectly formed! The left was placed over the right.

Marchwiggin tried to move. Impossible. He tried to speak. Impossible.

Another dazzling light appeared, hovering overhead. As it drew closer, Marchwiggin saw Percy The Flying Saucer, holding a huge flaming wand.

But Percy corrected his thinking.

He said, 'No, no longer Percy The Flying *Saucer*, Marchwiggin. You, young baby, soon to be Prime Minister, master, man of Yourself! And I am no longer Percy The Flying Saucer! Things never stay the same, which is the only thing that stays still,' he said, smiling, his puffy shirt almost as huge as a Zeppelin. 'As you can see, I am no longer on a saucer, but flying, flying, flying by myself.' He waved his arms around, producing an arc of sparks. 'I am now Percy The Flying *Sorcerer*! Now please follow me, like the fastest thought you have ever had in the blazing infinity of your mind!'

After this magnetic speech, Percy The Flying Sorcerer, spun and flew ahead, towards another bright light. The horses heaved, and the chariot left the circle. They galloped very quickly, not on lawns, but through nothing, their long manes flying like capes on a windy night.

Marchwiggin was transfixed by the growing incandescence ahead of them. He looked harder, and he thought he could see Whitehall, at the end of which was Big Ben, The Houses of Parliament – The Palace of Westminster. The street itself was covered by a

huge golden carpet, which he now knew was what Grace had been knitting on their journey. A thrill sprinted across his chest. He thought of having a cigar, but the pleasure of that would add nothing to how he felt. Nor indeed would a flagon of champagne.

On they went, faster. He looked harder and saw that the buildings were burnished with gold, silver and platinum. Then he felt a hand on his knee. It was Grace. He looked at her. The veil had gone! And there she was! But younger, elegant, softer. Her eyes were bright and ever lasting.

‘Now look at *yourself*,’ she said, almost in a whisper.

And he did, gasping when he saw fine limbs, a well-cut suit of dark blue satin, and elegant shoes, polished and sharpened to a most exquisite point. A sky blue cloak was over his shoulders. On his head was a hat, but no longer a little top hat fit for a baby, but a fine purple hat, with a brim as wide as a table. His hands were broad, strong, fit for pottery, painting, carpentry.

Suddenly the horses drew the two of them into the glory of Whitehall, and Percy flew off somewhere. The horses’ hooves were muffled by the golden carpet. Crowds lined the street, throwing rolled gold streamers and blowing tiny brass trumpets or huge coiled French horns. Ian the Dinosaur from Kew was standing by the gates of 10 Downing Street, banging a drum as big as Mars itself. He smiled as they galloped by and sucked at a bottle of champagne the landlord from Hammersmith had just thrust into his mouth. Then there was The Salesman. He had miraculously recovered from popping in Kew Gardens and was waving with the help of a machine. In fact, many people who had bought this useful item (which he called ‘The Waving Machine’) were also using it for the same purpose - to give a lovely swinging wave. Then there was the family from Putney, hovering on their flying rug.

‘I knew you’d do it!’ cried Palmeston, the father, his three children climbing ladders up his yellow top hat and each blowing trumpets in sheer delight.

At the end of Whitehall stood the King and Queen, sitting in diamond thrones held in a basket that was attached to a golden hot air balloon in the shape of the Buddha they had seen in Kew. The horses halted before them, bowing their heads.

The king smiled like the dawn, his eyes first looking directly into Marchwiggin's then into Grace's.

'So, you have seen the natural order of my country,' he said.

'Indeed you have,' said the Queen, her voice like the tune of the freshest stream.

'I give you the position of Prime Minister in this realm - *your* realm,' said the King.

'Thank you,' said Marchwiggin, feeling too powerful and too full of understanding to be overwhelmed by flighty emotions. He turned to Grace and with all the sincerity in his profound heart, he asked her to marry him.

'I will,' she said, looking at him steadily, with all the love he had ever seen.

Then they heard a voice from the Thames.

'Don't forget us!'

It was The Human Fish - now freed even from the confines of Putney Bridge - he had the radiance of the father of all mermen, and with outstretched watery arms the river held him high like a divine trophy. There was also The Cloud who was laughing merrily. Then there was the tiny old woman, who was still only as tall as a rolling pin. And there was Postleswaite. He had foreseen everything and was, once again, surrounded by his glowing egg, his beak squeaking into a smile. Their raft was being pulled gently by a boat made with the utmost perfection, skill and attention to detail. Inside this marvel sat Lord Cablecar. He was still wearing his flowery hat. Then there was Allan, now holding a golden crossbow, which he fired into the air. The bolt flew, perhaps for six million miles. Then it exploded into a super nova.

This glorious sight was seen somewhere else by Perdu, who had lost his way after believing he had seen the Buddha from Kew dancing with a cow on the brow of a hill. While in pursuit of this spectacle he passed a tall concrete building in the middle of a car park with fences around it. Then a man with a dark suit and seductive eyes leant very far out of a window, so far in fact that Perdu wondered whether or not the poor fellow was a huge snake. The man then called: 'Come and join The Strange Church - so called because it is not strange at all - not for me anyway. And if you come inside the fence, you'll never be going in search of Buddhas and cows ever again! For I will give you all the answers you need!'

'Do you know the answers, sir?' asked Perdu, still unsure about the situation.

'Yes, my little idiot,' the man continued. 'I have written a lovely set of rules about them. And what is even better is that they fit perfectly with what I want. The first is that you should do my washing up for me, and all other little chores. The second is that I shall think for you. The third is that God is unaware of you unless I tell him about you. It's all so simple!' The serpent-like man then started to clap his long hands vigorously.

But Perdu was no longer listening, because he was gazing up at the super nova from Allan's exploding bolt, which had grown to twice its original size. And suddenly Perdu realised something, something even farther beyond the excellent rules of The Strange Church.

So he removed his dunce's cone, and was surprised to see it suddenly take off from his hands only to land on the serpent-like man's head, where it stuck like glue. And Perdu was immediately free to know his way to Westminster, where he quickly found Percy amongst the throng. Then he bought a bunch of flowers for Marchwiggin and Grace.

'I feel much better,' he said to Percy.

In celebration, Percy blew a trumpet and waved his flaming wand.

Chapter 13.

How it all ends up.

And so the country had a new Prime Minister - Marchwiggin, who was loved and adored by not just Great Britain, but the whole world, and possibly the Universe as well. Next to him was his wife, Grace, a picture of perfect femininity, and she had three children - she and Marchwiggin called them The Trinity, naming them after the children he had met in Putney: Fun, Hilarity and Happiness.

Sometimes there was news of a terrible man called Doctor Purge, who wandered about the country, or appeared as an apparition near motorways and derelict land. Sometimes he was seen in the countryside, wailing at its beauty, demanding for roads or shopping centres to be built on it. Or he was seen weeping by streams, muttering that the nation needed dams. Once he was seen near the pub in Hammersmith, insisting that ale and wine should be banned along with all lewd words, but The Landlord threw a barrel of beer at his head, so he never returned.

There was also occasional news about a mad woman who sat in trees, behind bushes and in other obscure places. She was said to disturb people's privacy, until one day she was so excited by what she had overheard in her eavesdropping that she trembled so much that a snake thought she was a fly and ate her. It was a sad end to a miserable woman.

Chapter 14.

Marchwiggin's first and last chapter.

Every year, on the day that Marchwiggin had been appointed as Prime Minister by the King and Queen in Whitehall, there were celebrations. Cigars were given out free, as were bottles of champagne and brass trumpets and colourful flags.

On one of these days, many years later, Marchwiggin was on his death-bed, covered in flowers, surrounded by Grace, his family and his closest friends. As he waited for the Rainbow of Death to show him some new babyhood elsewhere, he heard the pops of champagne in the streets outside. And he smiled. Then, when he heard trumpets being raised to happy lips and puffed out cheeks, he laughed.

In fact, he was inspired so much by the festivity outside that he suddenly considered the wonderfulness of his funeral and his rocket to the sun. Then he sang a long and beautiful song, which he invented on the silver spur of the moment.

After the first line of verse his words were accompanied by the divine notes of a harpsichord that came from nowhere.

In the highest and sweetest notes, the song went like this:

I remember when everything began:

I was seeking the river that nourished my mind

A soothsayer I saw, shaped like an egg

Shining like heaven and everything alive

But I didn't go far, had no need to beg.

The old man had gone,

Headlong into the sun,

In the Rocket of Death,

And one last breath.

*Now my country is happy,
Like it was before,
No threat of misery,
And no real law,
Because Honesty says:
There's no need to die,
On the anvil of duty,
Or in chains of rights,
And cold suicide.*

*Drink and be merry is what I say,
Follow your soul and avoid affray,
But there are liars and deceivers,
Who are always abroad,
Like Purge and his toilers who were put to the sword -
The furious blade from which Lord Death does run,
His scythe over his shoulder,
As he chases a bun.*

*And thank you for your votes;
Now it's your turn to try,
So imagine you're a baby,
Who wishes not to cry.*

*Start where it starts,
Never beyond,
There's a lot to do,
But it won't take long.*

*And love you'll need,
A lot of it too;
But, as Grace has shown me:*

It often takes two.

*Soon I will die,
And take off for the sun,
Because old age is nigh,
And my time has come.*

*So look to yourselves and your loved ones too,
And take to the forests where little violets grow,
Or sing to the rivers where kindness flows,
Or call to the skies where golden eagles show:
That with fiery wings, my friend, you'll never be alone.*

The last word was sung at a note that was so high it could never have been reached by even the best singing nightingale, with the finest lungs and the shiniest beak.

And thus Marchwiggin The Prime Minister died, a moment which brightened the room with dazzling lights and flames of Heaven, and left everyone - including the fox in his pipe - in a torrent of tears that fell so happily they sparkled and danced to the great River Thames beyond.

THE END.