

CHAPTER NINE



THE school was still completely deserted when Mildred arrived once more at the heavy iron gates. She hurried up the spiral staircase to her room and unpacked her bag so that no one would know she had tried to run away. Just as she was making her way to the door with the box in her arms, the door opened and Miss Hardbroom appeared.

‘Would you kindly tell me what you are doing, Mildred?’ she asked frostily. ‘I have just watched you creeping up the

corridor, complete with broomstick, cat, a bag and this cardboard box. Is it too much to ask for an explanation?’

‘Oh, no, Miss Hardbroom,’ replied Mildred, holding up the box for her form-mistress to see the contents. ‘You see, I found a crowd of witches on the mountain-side, and they were planning to take over the school and change you all into frogs, and they were making an invisibility potion so you wouldn’t be able to see them, so I turned them all into snails and brought ...’

Her words trailed into silence as she saw the expression on Miss Hardbroom’s face. Obviously, her form-mistress didn’t believe a word.

‘I suppose these are the witches?’ she asked bitterly, pointing to the snails which were all huddled up in one corner of the box.

‘Yes, they are!’ Mildred insisted des-

perately. ‘I know it sounds a peculiar story, Miss Hardbroom, but you must believe me. Their broomsticks and cauldrons and things are still in the clearing where I found them, really.’

‘Well, you had better show the creatures to Miss Cackle,’ said Miss Hardbroom, nastily. ‘Go and wait in Miss Cackle’s office while I fetch her – and I hope this isn’t any sort of joke, Mildred. I seem to remember that you are already in a considerable amount of trouble.’

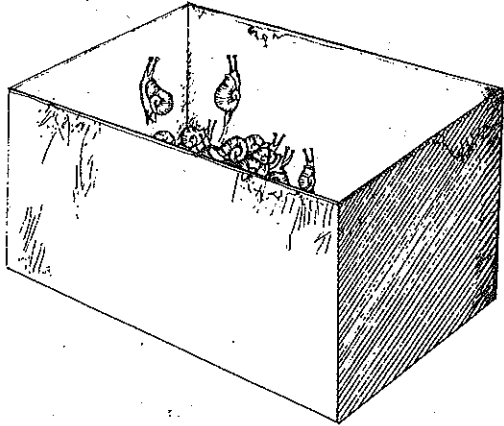
Mildred was perched nervously on the edge of a chair in the headmistress’s office when Miss Hardbroom returned with Miss Cackle, who was wearing a grey dressing-gown, and looked half asleep.

‘*These* are they,’ stated Miss Hardbroom, pointing to the box on the desk.

Miss Cackle sat down heavily in her chair and looked first into the box and then at Mildred.

'Mildred,' she said in dramatic tones, 'I am still suffering from my public humiliation last night. Because of you the reputation of this school now lies in the mud, and yet you expect me to believe an incredible story like this?'

'But it's *true!*' cried Mildred. 'I can even describe some of them. One was tall and thin with thick grey hair, and there was another who looked just like you, Miss Cackle, if you'll excuse me being personal.'



She had green horn-rimmed glasses —'

'Wait a moment!' said Miss Cackle, pushing her own glasses on to her nose. 'Did you say she had horn-rimmed glasses and looked like me?'

'Yes, Miss Cackle,' replied Mildred, blushing. 'Green ones. I'm sorry if you thought I was being rude.'

'No, no, child, it isn't that,' said Miss Cackle, peering into the box again. Then she turned to Miss Hardbroom. 'Do you know, I think the girl may be right after all. The person whom she described sounds exactly like my wicked sister Agatha who has always been extremely jealous of my position at this Academy!'

Miss Cackle stared over her glasses at the snails.

'Well, well, Agatha,' she chuckled. 'So we meet again. I wonder which of these beauties you are? What shall we do with them, Miss Hardbroom?'

'I suggest we change them back to their natural form again.'

'But we can't!' cried Miss Cackle in dismay. 'There are *twenty* of them.'

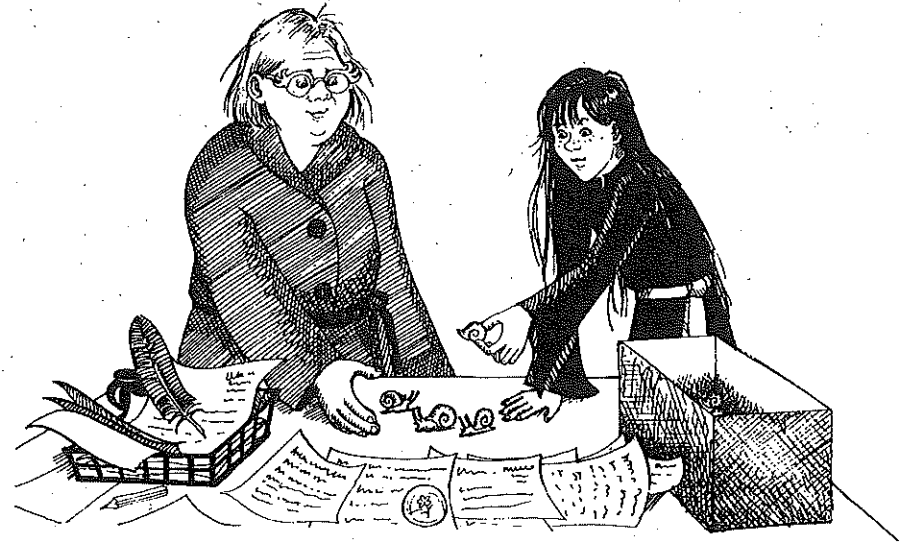
Miss Hardbroom looked faintly amused.

'May I point out,' she said, 'paragraph five of rule number seven in the Witches' Code, which states that anyone having been changed into any type of animal by another witch, for purposes of self-defence, cannot, on being changed back again, practise any form of magic against their captor. In other words, they must admit defeat.'

Miss Cackle looked embarrassed.

'Oh, yes!' she said brightly. 'I remember now. It slipped my mind for the moment. Did you hear that, Agatha? Do you think they can hear us, Miss Hardbroom?'

'Most certainly,' replied Miss Hard-



broom. 'Perhaps you could line them up on your desk, and ask your sister to step forward?'

'What a splendid idea,' said Miss Cackle, who was beginning to enjoy herself. 'Help me, Mildred, my dear.'

They lined the snails up on the desk and Miss Cackle asked Agatha to step forward. One snail shuffled rather reluctantly out of line.

'Listen, Agatha,' said Miss Cackle.

'You must admit that you don't really have much choice. If you will agree to abide by the Witches' Code, then we can change you back, but not otherwise. If you agree, go back into line so that we know what you want us to do.'

The snail shuffled back into line again.

Miss Hardbroom spoke the words of the spell which released them, and suddenly the room was full of witches, all looking furious and talking angrily at the same time. The noise was terrible.

'Will you be quiet at once!' commanded Miss Cackle.

She turned to Mildred who was still perched on her chair. 'You may go back to bed, Mildred, and in view of what you have done for the school this morning, I think we will have to forget about the interview you were to have had with Miss Hardbroom and myself this afternoon. Don't you agree, Miss Hardbroom?'

Miss Hardbroom raised one eyebrow and Mildred's heart sank.

'Before I agree, Miss Cackle, if you'll forgive me,' she said, 'I would just like to ask Mildred what she was doing wandering about on the mountain when she should have been in bed?'

'I - I was out for a walk, Miss Hardbroom,' replied Mildred.

'And you just happened to have your spell book with you.'

'Yes,' agreed Mildred, unhappily.

'Such devotion to the school!' said Miss Hardbroom, smiling in a most unpleasant way. 'Taking your spell book with you wherever you go. I expect you were also singing the school song as you rambled along, weren't you, my dear?'

Mildred looked at the floor. She could feel all the other witches staring at her.

'I think we must let the child go to bed,'



said Miss Cackle. 'Run along now, Mildred.'

Mildred shot out of the room before her form-mistress could say anything else, and was in bed in five seconds!

