

CHAPTER THREE

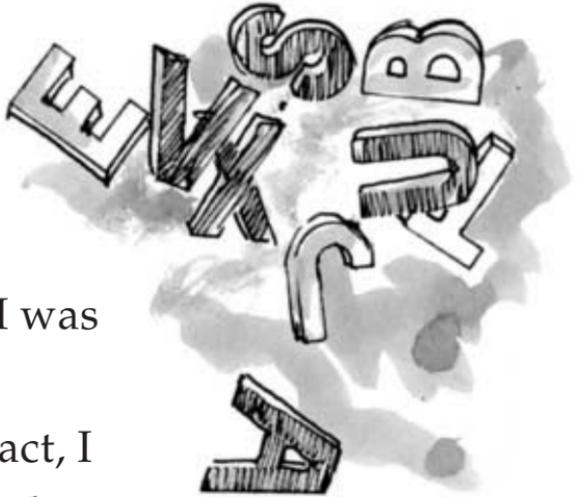
*A Gremlin in the Works*

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‘I’ll never get the hang of this alphabet,’ moaned Laurence, when Phoebe tried to teach him to read. ‘The letters are such odd shapes.’

‘No they’re not,’ said Phoebe. ‘They’re easy. *I’ve* been able to read since I was six.’

‘I used to be quite good at Ogham when I was younger,’ said Laurence. ‘In fact, I was reading and





writing when I was about ninety. But that was much easier. All nice straight lines in places where you'd expect.'

'What's Ogham?'

Phoebe asked.

'It's an ancient script we used to

use in Ireland long ago.' And Laurence drew a few words in Ogham on her blackboard to show her.

'Hey, that's like a secret code!' said Phoebe. 'We could use it for private messages.'

'Only you can't write in English in it,'

warned Laurence. 'You'd better work harder at your Irish!'

'Yes, and you'd better work harder at learning to read ordinary writing,' said Phoebe.

And so he did. Before very long, Laurence was able to read whole sentences.

His favourite book was Phoebe's dictionary.

Phoebe explained to him that people don't actually *read* dictionaries; they just read a little bit about a single word when they want to know what it means.

Laurence thought this was a terrible waste. 'What about all the words you would never think of looking up? You might never find out about them at all!

No, no. That's a very bad way to use a dictionary,' he said. 'I'm going to start at the beginning and read it all right through to the end.'

So he started at the letter A and every day he read a page or two.

Before long, he had got to the letter G.



And there he found a word that *really* interested him.

‘I think I’ve found myself a new career,’ he announced to Phoebe that evening.

‘Well?’ said Phoebe. ‘Go on. What is it?’

‘Guess.’

‘Hmm ... for a person such as yourself. For a very, very small person.’

‘If you want to put it so unkindly, yes,’ said Laurence haughtily. ‘And of a certain character and background.’

‘Let me see. An elf? A pixie? A gnome? That’s it! You’d make quite a nice garden gnome, you know. You could sit by someone’s pond all day and fish.’

'Don't be absurd, child,' said  
Laurence. 'Garden gnomes are slightly  
more awful even than leprechauns. No.



My new career is much more modern than that.'

'Well, what then? A TV announcer?'

'No. Guess again.'

'A waiter?' Phoebe was guessing wildly. 'A tax inspector? A bee-keeper? A fireman?'

'The bee-keeping idea isn't bad,' said Laurence. 'Maybe I'll keep that in reserve. But *I'm* going to be a *gremlin*.'

'A what?'

'A gremlin,' said Laurence. 'Isn't that a good idea?'

'Emm, is that something in Russia?' asked Phoebe.

'Russia? No. You can be a gremlin anywhere,' said Laurence. 'That's the beauty of it, you see.'