

■ Sredni Vashtar

Conradin was ten years old and was often ill.

'The boy is not strong, 'said the doctor. 'He will not live much longer. 'But the doctor did not know about Conradin's imagination. In Conradin's lonely, loveless world, his imagination was the only thing that kept him alive.

Conradin's parents were dead and he lived with his aunt. The aunt did not like Conradin and was often unkind to him. Conradin hated her with all his heart, but he obeyed her quietly and took his medicine without arguing. Mostly he kept out of her way. She had no place in his world. His real, everyday life in his aunt's colourless, comfortless house was narrow and uninteresting. But inside his small, dark head exciting and violent thoughts ran wild. In the bright world of his imagination Conradin was strong and brave. It was a wonderful world, and the aunt was locked out of it.

The garden was no fun. There was nothing interesting to do. He was forbidden to pick the flowers. He was forbidden to eat the fruit. He was forbidden to play on the grass. But behind some trees, in a forgotten corner of the garden, there was an old shed. Nobody used the shed, and Conradin took it for his own.

To him it became something between a playroom and a church. He filled it with ghosts and animals from his imagination. But there were also two living things in the shed. In one corner lived an old, untidy-looking chicken. Conradin had no people to love, and this chicken was the boy's dearest friend. And in a dark, secret place at the back of the shed was a large wooden box with bars across the front. This was the home of a very large ferret with long, dangerous teeth and claws. Conradin had bought the ferret and its box from a friendly boy, who lived in the village. It had cost him all his money, but Conradin did not mind. He was most terribly afraid of the ferret, but he loved it with all his heart. It was his wonderful, terrible secret. He gave the ferret a strange and beautiful name and it became his god.

The aunt went to church every Sunday. She took Conradin with her, but to Conradin her church and her god were without meaning. They seemed grey and uninteresting. The true god lived in the shed, and his name was Sredni Vashtar.

Every Thursday, in the cool, silent darkness of the shed, Conradin took presents to his god. He took flowers in summer and fruits in autumn, and he made strange and wonderful songs for his god. Sometimes, on days when something important happened, Conradin took special presents. He stole salt from the kitchen and placed it carefully and lovingly in front of the ferret's box.

One day the aunt had the most terrible toothache. It continued for three days. Morning and evening Conradin put salt in front of his god. In the end he almost believed that Sredni Vashtar himself had sent the toothache.

After a time the aunt noticed Conradin's visits to the shed.

'It's not good for him to play out there in the cold, ' she said. She could always find a reason to stop Conradin enjoying himself. The next morning at breakfast she told Conradin that she had sold the chicken. She looked at Conradin's white face, and waited for him to cry or to be angry. But Conradin said nothing; there was nothing to say.

Perhaps the aunt felt sorry. That afternoon there was hot buttered toast for tea. Toast was usually forbidden. Conradin loved it, but the aunt said that it was bad for him. Also, it made extra work for the cook. Conradin looked at the toast and quietly took a piece of bread and butter.

'I thought you liked toast, ' the aunt said crossly.

'Sometimes, 'said Conradin.

In the shed that evening Conradin looked sadly at the empty corner where his chicken had lived. And, for the first time, he asked his ferret-god to do something for him.

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar, 'he said softly.

He did not say what he wanted. Sredni Vashtar was a god, after all. There is no need to explain things to gods. Then, with a last look at the empty corner, Conradin returned to the world that he hated.

And every night, in the shed and in his bedroom, Conradin repeated again and again.

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar. '

So Conradin's visits to the shed continued. The aunt noticed, and went to look in the shed again.

'What are you keeping in that locked box ? ' she asked. ' I'm sure you're keeping an animal there. It's not good for you.

Conradin said nothing.

The aunt searched his bedroom until she found the key to the box. She marched down to the shed. It was a cold afternoon, and Conradin was forbidden to go outside. From the window of the dining – room Conradin could just see the door of the shed. He stood and waited.

He saw the aunt open the shed door. She went inside. Now, thought Conradin, she has found the box. She is opening the door, and feeling about inside the box where my god lives.

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar, 'said Conradin softly. But he said it without hope. She will win, he thought. She always wins. Soon she will come out of the shed and give her orders. Somebody will come and take my wonderful god away-not a god any more, just a brown ferret in a box. Then there will be nothing important in my life... The doctor will be right. I shall sicken and die. She will win. She always wins... In his pain and misery, Conradin began to sing the song of his god :

Sredni Vashtar went into battle,

His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white,

his enemies called for peace but he brought them death,

Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful,

Suddenly he stopped singing and went nearer to the window. The door of the shed was still open. Slowly, very slowly the minutes went by. Conradin watched the birds on the grass. He counted them, always with one eye on that open door. The unsmiling housekeeper came in with the tea things. Still Conradin stood and watched and waited. Hope was growing, like a small, sick flower, in his heart. Very softly he sang his song again, and his hope grew and grew. And then he saw a very wonderful thing.

Out of the shed came a long, low, yellow – and – brown animal. There were red, wet stains around its mouth and neck,

'Sredni Vashtar ! ' said Conradin softly. The ferret – god made its way to the bottom of the garden. It stopped for a moment, then went quietly into the long grass and disappeared for ever.

'Tea is ready, ' said the housekeeper. 'Where is your aunt ? '

'She went down to the shed, ' said Conradin.

And, while the housekeeper went down to call the aunt, Conradin took the toasting – fork out of the dining – room cupboard. He sat by the fire and toasted a piece of bread for himself. While he was toasting it and putting butter on it, Conradin listened to the noises beyond the dining room door. First there were loud screams-that was the housekeeper. Then there was the cook's answering cry. Soon there came the sound of several pairs of feet. They were carrying something heavy into the house.

'Who is going to tell that poor child ? ' said the housekeeper.

'Well, someone will have to, 'answered the cook. And, while they were arguing, Conradin made himself another piece of toast.

■ The Story-Teller

It was a hot, airless afternoon. The train was slow and the next stop was nearly an hour away. The people in the train were hot and tired. There were three small children and their aunt, and a tall man, who was a bachelor. The bachelor did not know the little family, and he did not want to know them.

The aunt and the children talked, but it was not a real conversation. It was more like a battle with a small housefly which will not go away. When the aunt spoke to the children, she always began with 'Don't... 'When the children spoke to her, they always began with 'Why...'The bachelor said nothing aloud.

The small boy opened his mouth and closed it again. It made an interesting little noise, so he did it again. Open. Close. Open. Close.

'Don't do that, Cyril, 'said the aunt. ' Come and look out of the window. 'The boy closed his mouth and sat next to the window. He looked out at the green fields and trees.

'Why is that man taking those sheep out of that field ? 'he asked suddenly.

'Perhaps he's taking them to another field where there is more grass, 'said the aunt. It was not a very good answer, and the boy knew it.

'But there is lots of grass in that field, ' he said. 'The field is full of grass, Aunt. Why doesn't the man leave his sheep in that field ? '

'I suppose the grass in the other field is better, ' answered the aunt.

'Why is it better ? 'asked Cyril at once.

'Oh, look at those cows ! 'cried the aunt. There were cows in nearly all the fields along the railway line. Cyril did not look at the cows. He wanted an answer to his question.

'Why is the grass in the other field better ? ' he said again.

The bachelor gave them an angry look. The aunt saw him. He's a hard, unkind man, she thought. He doesn't like children. She searched for a suitable answer to Cyril's question, but could not find one.

The smaller girl began to say some words from a song :

'On the road to Mandalay, where the happy children play, 'she began.

Then she stopped. She could not remember any more words, so she said the first words again, quietly but very clearly. Then she said them again. And again. And again.

The bachelor looked angrily at the girl, and then at the aunt.

'Come here and sit down quietly, 'the aunt said quickly to the children. 'I'm going to tell you a story. '

The children moved slowly towards the aunt's seat. They already looked bored. Clearly, the aunt was not a famous story-teller.

The story was horribly uninteresting. It was about a little girl. She was not a beautiful child, but she was always very, very good. Everybody loved her because she was good. Finally, she fell into a lake and her friends saved her because she was so good, and they loved her so much.

'Did they only save her because she was good ? ' asked the bigger girl. Shouldn't we save bad people too, if they fall in to a lake ? 'The bachelor wanted to ask the same question, but he said nothing.

'Well, yes, we should, ' said the aunt. 'But I'm sure the little girl's friends ran specially fast because they loved her so much. '

'That was the stupidest story that I've ever heard, 'said the bigger girl.

'I didn't listen after the first few words, ' said Cyril, 'because it was so stupid. '

The smaller girl was already quietly repeating the words of her song for the twentieth time.

'You're not very successful as a story-teller, ' the bachelor said suddenly from his corner.

The aunt looked at him in angry surprise. 'It's not easy to tell stories that children can understand, ' she answered coldly.

'I don't agree with you, ' said the bachelor.

'Perhaps you would like to tell them a story, 'said the aunt. She gave him a cold little smile.

'Yes— tell us a story, ' said the bigger girl.

'A long time ago, 'began the bachelor, 'there was a little girl called Bertha, who was extraordinarily good. She always worked well at school. She always obeyed her teachers and her parents. She was never late, never dirty, and always ate all her vegetables. She was polite, she was tidy, and she never, never told lies. '

'Oh, ' said the children. They were beginning to look bored already.

'Was she pretty ? ' asked the smaller girl.

' No, ' said the bachelor. 'She wasn't pretty. But she was horribly good. '

'Horribly good. I like that ! ' said Cyril. The children began to look more interested. The words 'horrible' and 'good'together was a new idea for them, and it pleased them.

'Bertha was always good, 'continued the bachelor. 'Because she was so good, Bertha had three medals. There was the "Never Late" medal. There was the

“Politeness” medal. And there was the medal for the “Best Child in the World”. They were very large medals. Bertha always wore them on her dress, and they clinked as she walked along. She was the only child in her town who had three medals. So everybody knew that she must be an extra good child. '

'Horribly good, ' repeated Cyril happily.

'Everybody talked about Bertha's goodness. The king of that country heard about her, and he was very pleased. “Because Bertha is so good, ”he said, “she may come and walk in my palace gardens every Friday afternoon. ”The king's gardens were famous. They were large and very beautiful, and children were usually forbidden to go in them. '

'Were there any sheep in the palace gardens ? ' asked Cyril.

'No, ' said the bachelor, 'there were no sheep. '

'Why weren't there any sheep ? 'asked Cyril at once.

The aunt gave a little smile, and waited with interest for the bachelor's answer.

'There were no sheep in the king's gardens, ' explained the bachelor, 'because the king's mother had once had a dream. In her dream a voice said to her, “Your son will be killed by a sheep, or by a clock falling on him. ” Thst is why the king never kept a sheep in his gardens or a clock in his palace. '

The aunt thought secretly that this was a very clever answer, but she stayed silent.

'Was the king killed by a sheep, or by a clock ? asked the bigger girl.

'He is still alive, ' said the bachelor calmly, 'so we don't know if the dream was true or not. But, although there were no sheep, there were lots of little pigs running around everywhere. '

'What colour were the pigs ? asked the smaller glrl.

'Black with white faces, white with black faces, all balck, grey and white, and some were all white. '

The bachelor stopped for a moment, while the children's imaginations took in these wonderful pictures. Then he went on again.

'Bertha was sorry that there were no flowers in the palace gardens. She had promised her aunts that she would not pick any of the kind king's flowers. She wanted very much to be good and to keep her promise. So she was very cross when she found that there were no flowers to pick. '

'Why weren't there any flowers ? '

'Because the pigs had eaten them all, ' said the bachelor immediately. ' The gardeners had told the king that he couldn't have pigs and flowers, because pigs eat flowers. So the king decided to have pigs, and no flowers. '

The children thought that this was an excellent idea.

'Most people choose flowers, ' said Cyril. He looked very pleased. 'But of course, pigs are much better than flowers. '

'There were lots of other wonderful things in the palace gardens, 'the bachelor continued. 'There were lakes with gold and blue and green fish in them. There were trees with beautiful birds that could talk and say clever things. There were also birds that could sing popular songs.

'Well, on the first Friday afternoon in May, Bertha came to the king's gardens, the king's soldiers saw her beautiful white dress and her three medals for goodness, and they opened the doors to the gardens at once.

'Bertha walked up and down and enjoyed herself very much. As she walked along, the three medals on her beautiful white dress clinked against each other. She heard them clinking, and she thought : "I'm here in these lovely gardens because I am the Best Child in the World. "She felt pleased and happy and very, very good.

'Just then a very big, hungry wolf came into the gardens. It wanted to catch a fat little pig for its supper. '

'What colour was the wolf ? asked the children, who were listening to the story with great interest.

'He was grey, 'said the bachelor, 'with a black tongue and angry yellow eyes. He had long black claws and big, strong, yellowish teeth. The wolf was hungry. He smelled the ground with his long grey nose. Then he saw Bertha's beautiful, clean white dress and began to move quietly towards her.

'Bertha saw the wolf and she wished she had not come to the gardens. Oh, why did I come here ? 'she thought. "All the bad children are safe at home. I wish I wasn't an extraordinarily good child ! Then I could be safe at home too. "She ran as hard as she could, and the wolf came after her on his long grey legs.

'At last Bertha managed to reach some big, sweet smelling myrtle bushes, and she hid herself in the thickest bush. The wolf walked round and round the bushes, with his angry yellow eyes and his long black tongue. But he couldn't see Bertha because the bushes were too thick, and he couldn't smell her because the smell of the myrtle was too strong. So after a while the wolf became bored, and decided to go and catch a little pig for his supper.

'Bertha was terribly frightened. Her heart beat very fast and her body shook with fear. Her arms shook and her legs shook. Her three medals for goodness shook too. And as they shook, they clinked together. The wolf was just moving away, when he heard the medals clinking, and he stopped to listen. The medals clinked again. The wolf's yellow eyes shone, and he ran into the myrtle bushes, pulled Bertha out, and ate her. He ate everything except her shoes, a few small pieces of her dress, and the three medals for goodness. '

'Were any of the little pigs killed ? ' asked Cyril.

'No, they all escaped. '

'The story began badly, ' said the smaller girl, 'but it finished beautifully. '

'It is the most beautiful story that I have ever heard, 'said the bigger girl.

'It is the only beautiful story I have ever heard, ' said Cyril.

The aunt did not agree. 'It was a most improper story ! 'she said angrily. 'You mustn't tell children stories like that ! You have destroyed years of careful teaching. '

'Well, ' said the bachelor. He put on his coat and picked up his bags. 'The children sat still and were quiet for ten minutes while they listened to the story. And they didn't do that for you. '

'I feel sorry for that woman, ' thought the bachelor as he stepped down from the train at the next station. 'What will people think when those children ask her for an improper story ! '

■ Gabriel Ernest

Cunningham had spent an agreeable week in the country with his friend Van Cheele. Now Van Cheele was driving his guest back to the station. Cunningham was unusually quiet on the journey, but Van Cheele talked all the time, so he did not notice his friend's silence.

Suddenly Cunningham spoke. 'There is a wild animal in your woods, ' he said.

'A wild animal ? A few rabbits, perhaps. Nothing very terrible, surely, ' said Van Cheele. Cunningham said nothing.

'What did you mean about a wild animal ? ' asked Van Cheele later, at the station.

'Nothing. It was my imagination. Here is the train, 'said Cunningham.

That afternoon Van Cheele went for a walk through his woods. He knew a little about plants and animals, and he enjoyed walking through the woods around his house and looking at the birds and flowers there. He also enjoyed telling everyone about them afterwards. Of course, he never saw anything very surprising—until that afternoon.

During his walk Van Cheele came to a deep pool under some tall trees. He knew it well : after all, it was his pool. But today, he saw a boy of about sixteen lying on a large rock beside the pool. The boy was drying his wet, naked brown body in the sun. His hair was wet too, and he had long, golden, wolfish eyes. He turned those eyes towards Van Cheele with a look of lazy watchfulness.

Van Cheele was surprised to see the boy. Where does this wild – looking boy come from ? he thought. Can he be the miller's son ? He disappeared two months ago. People say he fell into the river. It's a fast-running river, and nobody ever found his body. I wonder ? But the miller's boy was only a young child...

'What are you doing here ? asked Van Cheele.

'Enjoying the sunshine, of course, ' said the boy.

'Where do you live ? '

'Here, in these woods. '

'You can't live in these woods, ' said Van Cheele.

'They are very nice woods, ' said the boy politely.

'But where do you sleep at night ? '

'I don't sleep at night. That's my busiest time. '

Van Cheele began to feel cross. What did the boy mean ?

'What do you eat ? he asked.

'Meat, ' said the boy. He opened his mouth, showing very white teeth.

'Meat ? What kind of meat ?

'Well, if you must know, I eat rabbits, wild birds, chickens from the farm and young sheep from the hills. I like children when I can find them. But they 're usually too well locked in at night. It's two months since I tasted child meat. '

The boy is joking about the children, thought Van Cheele. But perhaps he really is stealing animals from the woods and farms. I must find out more about this.

Aloud he said, 'You catch rabbits ? You must be joking. Our rabbits are much too fast for you. '

'At night I hunt on four feet, ' was the boy's surprising replp.

'You mean that you hunt with a dog ? ' guessed Van Cheele.

The boy sat up suddenly and laughed a strange, low laugh. To Van Cheele that laugh sounded horribly like a growl.

'I don't think any dog would like to hunt with me, ' the boy said. 'Not at night...'

There is something horrible about this boy, thought Van Cheele. I don't like the way he looks and I don't like the way he talks.

'I can't let you stay in my woods, ' he said aloud.

'Very well then— shall I come and live in your house ? 'replied te boy.

Van Cheele thought about his quiet, tidy house. No, he did not want this strange, wild boy at all. Of course, the boy was joking...but Van Cheele was not amused.

'If you don't go away, ' he said, 'I shall have to call the police. '

At once the boy turned and jumped head-first into the pool. A moment later, his shining, wet body landed half-way up the grassy bank where Van Cheele was

standing. Van Cheele stepped backwards. His foot slipped on the wet grass and he fell. He found himself lying on the grass with those wolfish yellow eyes uncomfortably near to his. He felt a moment of horrible fear. The boy laughed again, a laugh that was like the growl of a wild animal, then disengaged among the bushes.

'What an extraordinarily wild animal ! ' said Van Cheele as he picked himself up. And then he remembered Cunningham's words about a wild animal in his woods.

As he walked slowly home, Van Cheele thought about several things which had happened in and around the village recently. Perhaps this boy knows something about them, he thought...Something has been killing rabbits and birds in the woods lately. Something has been stealing the farmer's chickens and carrying off the young sheep from the hills. Is it possible that this wild boy is hunting at night with a fast, intelligent dog ? The boy talked of hunting on four feet at night...But he also said that dogs did not like to hunt with him at night...Very strange indeed.

As Van Cheele walked along, he turned the questions over and over in his head. Suddenly he stopped. The miller's son ! he said to himself. The child disappeared two months ago. Everyone thought that he had fallen into the river and been carried away. But the child's mother did not believe this. She said she had heard a scream—— and the scream came from the hill, a long way away from the water.

It's impossible, of course, said Van Cheele to himself. But the child disappeared two months ago, and the boy talked about child meat. He was joking, of course...but what a horrible joke !

Van Cheele usually talked to his aunt about the birds, plants and animals he saw on his walks. But today he said nothing. He was an important man in his village. If there was a thief living in his woods, he did not want anyone to know. If people hear about the boy, he thought, perhaps they will want me to pay for their lost chickens and their disappearing sheep.

He was unusually quiet at dinner. 'What's the matter with you ? 'joked his aunt. 'Did you see a wolf on your walk ? '

At breakfast the next morning Van Cheele realized that he still felt uncomfortable about yesterday's adventure. I know what I'll do, he said to himself. I'll take the

train to London and I'll go and see Cunningham. I'll ask him If he was joking when he said there was a wild animal in my woods.

After he had decided this, Van Cheele felt better. He sang a happy little song as he walked to the sitting-room for his morning cigarette. His fat old dog walked beside him.

As Van Cheele entered the sitting-room, the song died on his lips and his dog ran away with his tail between his legs. There on the day-bed, with his hands comfortably behind his head, lay the boy from the woods. He was drier than yesterday, but he was still naked.

'What are you doing here?' asked Van Cheele angrily.

'You told me I couldn't stay in the woods,' said the boy calmly.

'But I didn't tell you to come here. What if my aunt sees you? What will she think?'

Van Cheele hurriedly covered his unwanted guest's nakedness with a newspaper. At that moment his aunt entered the room.

'This is a poor boy,' explained Van Cheele quickly. 'He has lost his way—and lost his memory too. He doesn't know who he is, or where he comes from.'

Miss Van Cheele was very interested. 'Perhaps his name is on his underclothes,' she said.

'He has lost his underclothes too,' said Van Cheele. The newspaper was slipping off the boy's naked body. Van Cheele hurried to replace it.

Miss Van Cheele was a kind old lady. She felt sorry for this naked, helpless child.

'We must help him,' she said. She sent the housekeeper to a neighbour's house to borrow some clothes.

Soon the boy was clean and tidy, and dressed in shirt, trousers and shoes. Van Cheele thought he looked just as strange and wolfish as before. But Miss Van Cheele thought he was sweet.

'We must give him a name until we know who he really is,' she said. 'Gabriel Ernest, I think. Those are nice, suitable names.'

Van Cheele agreed. But he was not sure that the boy was a nice, suitable boy. Van Cheele's old dog, when he saw the boy, had run away in fear and would not come back into the house. Van Cheele decided to go and see Cunningham at once.

As he got ready to go to the station, his aunt was busily arranging a children's tea party in the church hall.

'Gabriel Ernest will help me with the little ones, ' she said happily.

When Van Cheele got to London, Cunningham did not want to talk at first. 'You'll think I'm crazy, ' he said.

'But what did you see ? ' asked Van Cheele.

'I saw something—something unbelievable. On the last evening of my visit to you I was standing half-hidden in the bushes, watching the sun go down. Suddenly I noticed a naked boy. He has been swimming in a pool somewhere, I said to myself. He was standing on the hillside and he too was watching the sun go down. Then the sun disappeared behind the hill and its light was gone. At the same moment a very surprising thing happened—the boy disappeared too. '

'What ? He disappeared just like that ? ' said Van Cheele excitedly.

'No. It was much more horrible than that. On the open hillside where the boy had been, I saw a large, blackish-grey wolf with long white teeth and yellow eyes. You'll think I'm crazy—'

But Van Cheele did not wait. He was running towards the station as fast as he could. He did not know what he could do. 'I can't send my aunt a message, he thought. What can I say ? Gabriel Ernest is a werewolf ? My aunt will think I'm joking. I MUST get home before sundown.

He caught his train. With painful slowness it carried him to the station a few miles from his home. He took a taxi to his village.

'Take me to the church hall— and hurry ! 'he ordered. The taxi drove along the quiet country roads, and the sky turned pink and purple as the sun got lower and lower in the west.

His aunt was putting away some uneaten cakes and sandwiches when he arrived.

'Where is Gabriel Ernest ? ' screamed Van Cheele.

'He's taking little Jack Toop home, ' said his aunt calmly. 'It was getting so late. I didn't want to send the dear little boy home alone. Isn't the sky beautiful this evening ? '

But Van Cheele had no time to talk about the beautiful sky. He ran like the wind down the narrow road that went to the Toops' house. On one side was the fast-running river, on the other was the dark hillside. In a minute I'll catch up with them, Van Cheele thought.

Then the sun went down behind the hill and the whole world became grey and cold. Van Cheele heard a short scream of fear, and he knew he was too late.

Nobody ever saw little Jack Toop or Gabriel Ernest again. Gabriel Ernest's clothes were found lying in the road.

'Poor littler Jack fell into the river, ' said Miss Van Cheele. 'And dear Gabriel Ernest took off his clothes and jumped into the river to try to save him. '

Mrs Toop had eleven other children and did not cry too long for her lost son. But Miss Van Cheele was terribly sad about Gabriel Ernest.

'He must have a memorial in the church, ' she said. She chose the words herself :

GABRIEL ERNEST, AN UNKNOWN BOY
WHO BRAVELY GAVE HIS LIFE
FOR ANOTHER.

Van Cheele usually did what his aunt wanted. But he refused to give any money at all for Gabriel Ernest's memorial.

■ Tobermory

It was a cold, rain – washed afternoon in late August. Lady Blemley and her guests were sitting round the teatable. Everyone was listening open – mouthed to Mr Cornelius Appin.

Although he was one of her guests, Lady Blemley did not know Mr Appin well. She had invited him to stay at Blemley House because she had heard that he was clever. But until teatime that day he had not done or said anything clever. He did not play tennis, or sing, or make intelligent conversation. But now Mr Appin was describing a most extraordinary discovery and the other guests were listening with deep interest. 'Are you

telling us that you have found a way of teaching animals to talk ? 'Sir Wilfrid was saying. 'And our dear old Tobermory is your first successful student ? '

'I have studied this problem for seventeen years, 'said Mr Appin, 'but I didn't have any real success until eight or nine months ago. Of course, I have studied thousands of animals, but recently I have worked only with cats. A cat, of course, is a wild animal who agrees to live with you. All cats are intelligent, but naturally some cats are more intelligent than others. When I met Tobermory a week ago, I realized at once that here was an extraordinarily intelligent cat, a very special cat indeed. In Tobermory, I found the student I needed. With him I have succeeded in my plan. '

Nobody laughed, and nobody actually said 'Rubbish', although Clovis's lips moved silently...

'And have you really taught Tobermory, 'asked Miss Resker, 'to say and understand short, easy words ? '

'My dear Miss Resker, 'said Mr Appin patiently, 'we teach little children and very slow, stupid adults in that way. But Tobermory is a most intelligent cat. He can speak English as well as you or I can. '

This time Clovis said 'Rubbish ! 'aloud.

Sir Wilfrid was more polite, but it was clear that he did not believe Mr Appin's story.

'Shall we bring the cat in here and hear him for ourselves ? 'said Lady Blemley.

Sir Wilfrid went off to look for Tobermory.

'Mr Appin will try to be clever, 'said Miss Resker happily, 'but if we watch him carefully, we shall see his lips move. '

In a minute Sir Wilfrid returned, looking very excited.

'It's true, you know ! 'he said. 'I found Tobermory sleeping in the smoking-room, and called out to him to come for his tea. He lifted his head and opened one eye. I said, "Come on, Toby, don't keep us waiting ! " and he said calmly, "I'll come when I'm ready ! " I couldn't believe my ears ! '

The guests all started talking at once, while Mr Appin sat silently and looked very pleased with himself indeed.

Then Tobermory entered the room and calmly walked over to the tea table. The conversation stopped. Nobody knew what to say to a talking cat. At last Lady Blemley spoke :

'Would you like some milk, Tobermory ? 'she asked in a high, unnatural voice.

'I don't mind if I do, 'answered Tobermory. Lady Blemley's hand shook with excitement and some of the milk went onto the carpet.

'Oh dear ! I'm so sorry, 'she said.

'I don't mind. It isn't my carpet, after all, 'replied Tobermory.

There was another silence, then Miss Resker asked politely, 'Did you find it difficult to learn English, Tobermory ? '

Tobermory looked straight through her with his bright green eyes. Clearly, he did not answer questions that did not interest him.

'What do you think of the intelligence of people ? 'asked Mavis Pellington.

'Which people's intelligence ? 'asked Tobermory coldly.

'Well, my intelligence, for example, 'said Mavis with a little laugh.

'You make things very uncomfortable for me, 'said Tobermory, although he did not look at all uncomfortable. 'When Lady Blemley wanted to invite you here, Sir Wilfrid was not pleased. "Mavis Pellington is the stupidest woman I know, "he said. "That's why I want to invite her, "Lady Blemley replied. "I want her to buy my old car, and she's stupid enough to do that. "'

'It isn't true ! 'cried Lady Blemley. 'Don't believe him, Mavis ! '

'If it isn't true, 'said Mavis coldly, 'why did you say this morning that your car would be just right for me ? '

Major Barfield did his best to help. He tried to start a new conversation. 'How are you getting on with your little black and white lady friend in the garden ? 'he asked Tobermory.

Everybody realized at once that this was a mistake.

Tobermory gave him an icy look. 'We do not usually discuss these things in polite company,' he said. 'But I have watched you a little since you have been in this house. I think perhaps you would not like me to discuss your lady friends.'

The Major's face became very red, and all the other guests began to look worried and uncomfortable. What was Tobermory going to say next?

'Would you like to go down to the kitchen now, Tobermory,' asked Lady Blemley politely, 'and see if the cook has got your dinner ready?'

'No, thank you,' said Tobermory. 'I've only just had my tea. I don't want to make myself sick.'

'Cats have nine lives, you know,' said Sir Wilfrid with a laugh.

'Possibly,' answered Tobermory. 'But only one stomach.'

'Lady Blemley!' cried Mrs Cornett, 'Don't send that cat to the kitchen. He will talk about us to the cook!'

Everyone was very worried now. They remembered uncomfortably that Tobermory moved freely all over the house and gardens, at all hours of the day and night. He could look into any of the bedrooms if he wanted to. What had he seen? What had he heard? Nobody's secrets were safe now.

'Oh, why did I come here?' cried Agnes Resker, who could never stay silent for long.

'You know very well why you came here,' said Tobermory immediately. 'You came for the food, of course. I heard you talking to Mrs Cornett in the garden. You said that the Blemleys were terribly boring people, but they had an excellent cook.'

'You mustn't believe him!' cried Agnes. 'I never said that, did I, Mrs Cornett?'

'Later, Mrs Cornett repeated your words to Bertie van Tahn,' said Tobermory. 'She said, "That Resker woman will go anywhere for four good meals a day," and Bertie said—'

Just then Tobermory looked out of the window and saw the doctor's big yellow cat crossing the garden. Immediately he disappeared through the open window.

Everyone started talking at once, and Mr Appin found himself in a storm of angry questions.

'You must stop this at once, 'everyone said to him.'What will happen if Tobermory teaches other cats to talk ? We shall never have a moment's peace ! '

'It's possible that he has taught the gardener's cat, 'replied Mr Appin thoughtfully, 'but I don't believe he has had time to teach any other cats. '

'Then, 'said Mrs Cornett, 'although Tobermory is a valuable cat, he and the gardener's cat must die. Don't you agree, Lady Blemley ? '

'You're right, 'said Lady Blemley sadly.'My husband and I love Tobermory—well, we did before this afternoon—but now, of course, he must die as soon as possible. "We will poison his dinner, 'said Sir Wilfrid, 'and I will kill the gardener's cat myself. The gardener won't like it, but I'll say it has some kind of disease—'

'But what about my discovery ? 'cried Mr Appin. 'What about all my years of work ? Are you going to destroy my only successful student ? '

'You can go and teach the cows on the farm, 'said Mrs Cornett coldly, 'or the elephants at the zoo. Elephants are very intelligent, they tell me, and elephants don't hide behind chairs or under beds and listen to people's conversations. 'Mr Appin knew when he was beaten.

Dinner that evening was not a success. Sir Wilfrid had had a difficult time with the gardener's cat and later with the gardener. Agnes Resker refused to eat anything, while Mavis Pellington ate her meal in silence. Everyone was waiting for Tobermory. A plate of poisoned fish stood ready for him in the dining-room, but he did not come home. Nobody talked much, and nobody laughed. It was a most uncomfortable meal.

After dinner the Blemleys and their guests sat in the smoking-room. Everyone was quiet and worried and nobody wanted to play cards. At eleven o'clock the cook and the housekeeper went to bed. They left the kitchen window open for Tobermory as usual, but he did not come.

At two o'clock Clovis spoke :

'He won't come home tonight. He's probably in the newspaper office selling them his story. They'll love it. The story will be the excitement of the year. '

After that everyone went to bed, but nobody slept.

In the morning Tobermory had still not come home.

Breakfast was another quiet, uncomfortable meal. Then, half – way through the coffee, the gardener brought in Tobermory's blood-stained body.

'Look at his claws ! 'cried Clovis. 'He's been fighting ! 'And there, on Tobermory's claws, was the yellow hair of the doctor's cat.

By lunchtime most of the guests had left Blemley House. Lady Blemley began to feel better. She took out her pen and paper and wrote a very angry letter to the doctor about the death of her valuable cat.

Tobermory was Mr Appin's only successful student. A few weeks after Tobermory's death an elephant escaped from the Dresden Zoo and killed an English visitor.

The zoo keeper said that the elephant had always been a calm and gentle animal before. But suddenly it seemed to be – come very angry with the English visitor, who was talking to it.

The dead man's name was reported in the newspapers as Oppin, but his first name was Cornelius.

'If Appin was trying to teach the poor elephant to speak German, 'said Clovis, 'I'm not surprised it killed him. '

■ The She-Wolf

To Leonard Bilster the real world was not very agreeable or interesting. He preferred to live in an 'unseen world' of his imagination. Children are often very good at this, but they are happy in their own dream worlds and do not try to make other people believe them. Leonard Bilster talked about 'the unseen world' to anyone who would listen to him. Nothing very strange happened to Leonard, until one year he travelled by train across Eastern Europe. He had a long conversation with a Russian passenger, who talked about mag – ic and 'hidden powers' in a most interesting way. Leonard listened excitedly. He came home with many stories about the strange, dark mysteries which he called Siberian Magic. His aunt, Cecilia Hoops, was deeply interested in Leonard's Siberian Magic. When she told her friends about it ('My dears, he took a garden vegetable and changed it into a bird in front of my eyes ! '), her friends realized that she also had a wonderful imagination.

Leonard, together with his hidden powers, was invited to Mary Hampton's house – party. Several other people were also staying in the house, and they all had to listen to Leonard talking about the mysteries of the unseen world.

'Do please change me into a wolf, Mr Bilster, 'said Mrs Hampton during lunch on the day of his arrival.

'My dear Mary, 'said her husband. 'What a strange idea ! '

'A she-wolf, of course, 'continued Mrs Hampton. 'I don't want to change into a man as well as an animal ! '

'We should not joke about the unseen world, 'said Leonard.

'Oh, I'm not joking, I promise you. But don't change me into a wolf tonight. I want to play cards, and there are only eight of us in the house today. I've invited some more people to come here tomorrow. Wait until tomorrow night. '

Leonard was not amused. 'Mrs Hampton, you really must not laugh at these dark mysteries. They can be stronger and more dangerous than we realize. '

Clovis Sangrail listened silently to this conversation, and after lunch he spoke to Lord Pabham in the smoking – room.

'Tell me, Lord Pabham, 'began Clovis. 'Have you got a she – wolf in your zoo at Pabham Park ? A quiet, friendly she – wolf ? '

'There's Louisa, 'said Lord Pabham thoughtfully. 'She's very quiet and gentle. Why do you ask ? '

'I'd like to borrow her tomorrow evening, 'said Clovis lightly. 'May I, please ? '

'Tomorrow night ? 'repeated Lord Pabham in surprise.

'Yes. Wolves usually sleep during the day, don't they ? So a night-time journey won't hurt her. Could you ask one of your men to bring Louisa here when it is dark ? Then he can take her quietly into the conservatory at the same time as Mrs Hampton leaves the dining – room. '

Lord Pabham looked at Clovis in surprise. Then he smiled. 'I understand ! 'he said. 'You're going to try a little Siberian Magic. And has Mrs Hampton agreed to help you ? ' "Mary has promised—if your she – wolf is quiet and gentle."

'Louisa won't give you any trouble, 'said Lord Pabham. The next day several more guests arrived. Leonard Bil-siter enjoyed telling them all about Siberian Magic and hidden powers. He talked all through dinner. When the coffee arrived at the end of the meal, Leonard's aunt spoke.

'Dear Leonard, 'she said, 'please show us your powers. Change something into another shape. 'She turned to the other guests. 'He can do it if he wants to, 'she told them. 'Oh, please show us, 'said Mavis Pellington excitedly. 'Well...'began Leonard. 'If somebody will give me a small coin...'

'Oh, surely you aren't going to do stupid things with disappearing coins?' said Clovis. 'We want to see something really surprising. '

'That's right, 'said Mary Hampton. 'Why don't you change me into a wolf? You promised ! 'She got up from the table and walked into the conservatory with a bowl of fruit for her macaws.

'I have already warned you, 'said Leonard seriously. 'It is dangerous to joke about these things.'

'I don't believe you can do it ! 'laughed Mary from the conservatory. As she spoke, she disappeared behind a large green plant.

'Mrs Hampton—'began Leonard seriously. Then a icy wind seemed to fill the dining-room, and at the same time Mrs Hampton's macaws began to scream.

'What's wrong with those stupid birds, Mary?' asked her husband. Just then, a big grey wolf stepped out from behind the large green plant.

Leonard's aunt saw it first. 'Leonard ! 'she screamed. 'Bring Mrs Hampton back at once ! We don't want a dangerous wild animal in here ! '

'I—I don't know how to bring her back, 'said Leonard in a small, frightened voice.

'Rubbish ! 'shouted Mr Hampton. 'You changed my dear wife into a wolf. Now you must bring her back again ! '

'Please believe me, 'said Leonard. 'I didn't change your wife into a wolf. '

'Then where is she, and how did that animal get into the conservatory?' asked Mr Hampton angrily.

'Of course, we must believe you when you say that you didn't change Mrs Hampton into a wolf, 'said Clovis politely. 'But you must agree that it all looks very strange. '

'How can you stand there arguing, 'cried Mavis Pelling – ton, 'with a wild animal in the house ? '

'Lord Pabham, 'began Mr Hampton, 'you know a lot about wild animals...'

'I buy all my animals, 'said Lord Pabham. 'I have nev-er found one in a conservatory before. But this is a wolf, I am sure of that. I think it's probably a North American she – wolf_'

'Oh, who cares where it came from ! 'screamed Mavis, as the wolf came a few steps further into the room. 'Can't you offer it some food, and take it away safely somewhere before it bites somebody ? '

'If this animal is really Mrs Hampton, 'said Clovis, 'she's just had an excellent dinner. She won't be interested in food. '

'Oh, Leonard, 'cried his aunt, 'can't you use your wonderful powers to change this terrible animal into something small and gentle, like a rabbit ? '

'I don't think Mr Hampton would like that, 'said Clovis.

'You're right ! 'shouted Mr Hampton. 'I forbid it ! '

'All my wolves love sugar, 'said Lord Pabham. 'If you like, I'll offer this one a piece. 'He took a piece of sugar from the table and pushed it along the floor towards Louisa. She ate it quickly and then, clearly hoping for more sugar, she followed Lord Pabham out of the room.

The guests left the table thankfully and hurried into the conservatory. It was empty. Mrs Hampton had disappeared.

'The door to the garden is locked on the inside ! 'said Clovis. (He had quickly turned the key while he was pretending to try the lock.)

Everyone turned towards Leonard Bilshire.

'If you have not changed my wife into a wolf, 'said Mr Hampton, 'will you please explain where she has gone ? Clearly she could not go out through a locked door—so where is she ? '

'I tell you, I had nothing to do with it ! 'repeated Leonard again and again. But nobody believed him.

'I'm leaving, 'said Mavis Pellington. 'I refuse to stay another hour in this house. '

Just then Mary Hampton entered the room.

'What happened ? 'she asked crossly. 'Someone has been playing a stupid game with me. I found myself in the kitchen, eating sugar from Lord Pabham's hand. I hate stupid games, and my doctor has forbidden me to eat sugar. '

'Well, my dear...'began Mr Hampton. Mrs Hampton listened excitedly as he explained.

'So you really did change me into a wolf, Mr Bilsiter ? 'cried Mrs Hampton.

'No, no, 'said Leonard. 'It's all a mistake. ' 'Actually, I did it, 'said Clovis. 'You see, I spent two years in Russia, and I know a little about Siberian Magic. Of course, I don't like to talk about it. But when other people talk a lot of rubbish about hidden powers, I like to show what Siberian Magic can really do... May I please have a drink ? I feel a little tired now. '

Leonard Bilsiter looked at Clovis with hate in his eyes. At that moment he wished strongly that he could change Clovis into some small helpless animal, and then step on him very hard.