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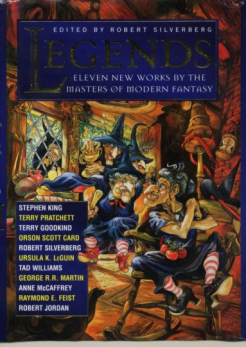
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The Sea and Little Fishes

BY TERRY PRATCHETT

Trouble began, and not for the first time, with an apple.

There was a bag of them on Granny Weatherwax's bleached and spotless table. Red and round, shiny and fruity, if they'd known the future they should have ticked like bombs.

'Keep the lot, old Hopcroft said I could have as many as I wanted,' said Nanny Ogg. She gave her sister witch a sidelong glance.

'Tasty, a bit wrinkled, but a damn good keeper.'

'He named an apple after you?' said Granny. Each word was an acid drop on the air.

'Cos of my rosy cheeks,' said Nanny Ogg. 'An' I cured his leg for him after he fell off that ladder last year. An' I made him up some jollop for his bald head.'

'It didn't work, though,' said Granny. 'That wig he wears, that's a terrible thing to see on a man still alive.'

'But he was pleased I took an interest.'

Granny Weatherwax didn't take her eyes off the bag. Fruit and vegetables grew famously in the mountains' hot summers and cold winters.

Percy Hopcroft was the premier grower and definitely a keen man when it came to sexual antics among the horticulture with a camel-hair brush.

'He sells his apple trees all over the place,' Nanny Ogg went on. 'Funny, eh, to think that pretty soon thousands of people will be having a bite of Nanny Ogg.'

'Thousands more,' said Granny, tartly. Nanny's wild youth was an open book, although only available in plain covers.

'Thank you, Esme.' Nanny Ogg looked wistful for a moment, and then opened her mouth in mock concern. 'Oh, you ain't jealous, are you, Esme?

You ain't begrudging me my little moment in the sun?'

'Me? Jealous? Why should I be jealous? It's only an apple. It's not as if it's anything important.'

'That's what I thought. It's just a little frippery to humor an old lady,' said Nanny. 'So how are things with you, then?'

'Fine. Fine.'

'Got your winter wood in, have you?'

'Mostly.'

'Good,' said Nanny. 'Good.'

They sat in silence. On the windowpane a butterfly, awoken by the unseasonable warmth, beat a little tattoo in an effort to reach the September sun.

'Your potatoes ... got them dug, then?' said Nanny.

'Yes.'

'We got a good crop off ours this year.'

'Good.'

'Salted your beans, have you?'

'Yes.'

'I expect you're looking forward to the Trials next week?'

'Yes.'

'I expect you've been practicing?'

'No.'

It seemed to Nanny that, despite the sunlight, the shadows were deepening in the corners of the room. The very air itself was growing dark. A witch's cottage gets sensitive to the moods of its occupant. But she plunged on. Fools rush in, but they are laggards compared to little old ladies with nothing left to fear.

'You coming over to dinner on Sunday?'

'What're you havin'?'

'Pork.'

'With apple sauce?'

'Ye -,

'No,' said Granny.

There was a creaking behind Nanny. The door had swung open.

Someone who wasn't a witch would have rationalized this, would have said that of course it was only the wind. And Nanny Ogg was quite prepared to go along with this, but would have added: why was it only the wind, and how come the wind had managed to lift the latch?

'Oh, well, can't sit here chatting all day,' she said, standing up quickly.

'Always busy at this time of year, ain't it?'

'Yes.'

'So I'll be off, then.'

'Goodbye.'

The wind blew the door shut again as Nanny hurried off down the path.

It occurred to her that, just possibly, she may have gone a bit too far.

But only a bit.

The trouble with being a witch - at least, the trouble with being a witch as far as some people were concerned - was that you got stuck out here in the country. But that was fine by Nanny. Everything she wanted was out here. Everything she'd ever wanted was here, although in her youth she'd run out of men a few times. Foreign parts were all right to visit but they weren't really serious. They had interestin' new drinks and the grub was fun, but foreign parts was where you went to do what might need to be done and then you came back here, a place that was real.

Nanny Ogg was happy in small places.

Of course, she reflected as she crossed the lawn, she didn't have this view out of her window. Nanny lived down in the town, but Granny could look out across the forest and over the plains and all the way to the great round horizon of the Discworld.

A view like that, Nanny reasoned, could probably suck your mind right out of your head.

They'd told her the world was round and flat, which was common sense, and went through space on the back of four elephants standing on the shell of a turtle, which didn't have to make sense. It was all happening Out There somewhere, and it could continue to do so with Nanny's blessing and disinterest so long as she could live in a personal world about ten miles across, which she carried around with her.

But Esme Weatherwax needed more than this little kingdom could contain. She was the other kind of witch.

And Nanny saw it as her job to stop Granny Weatherwax getting bored.

The business with the apples was petty enough, a spiteful little triumph when you got down to it, but Esme needed something to make every day worthwhile and if it had to be anger and jealousy then so be it. Granny would now scheme for some little victory, some tiny humiliation that only the two of them would ever know about, and that'd be that.

Nanny was confident that she could deal with her friend in a bad mood, but not when she was bored. A witch who is bored might do anything.

People said things like 'we had to make our own amusements in those days' as if this signaled some kind of moral worth, and perhaps it did, but the last thing you wanted a witch to do was get bored and start making her own amusements, because witches sometimes had famously erratic ideas about what was amusing. And Esme was undoubtedly the most powerful witch the mountains had seen for generations.

Still, the Trials were coming up, and they always set Esme Weatherwax all right for a few weeks. She rose to competition like a trout to a fly.

Nanny Ogg always looked forward to the Witch Trials. You got a good day out and of course there was a big bonfire. Whoever heard of a Witch Trial without a good bonfire afterwards?

And afterwards you could roast potatoes in the ashes.

The afternoon melted into the evening, and the shadows in corners and under stools and tables crept out and ran together.

Granny rocked gently in her chair as the darkness wrapped itself around her. She had a look of deep concentration.

The logs in the fireplace collapsed into the embers, which winked out one by one.

The night thickened.

The old clock ticked on the mantelpiece and, for some length of time, there was no other sound.

There came a faint rustling. The paper bag on the table moved and then began to crinkle like a deflating balloon. Slowly, the still air filled with a heavy smell of decay.

After a while the first maggot crawled out.

Nanny Ogg was back home and just pouring a pint of beer when there was a knock. She put down the jug with a sigh, and went and opened the door.

'Oh, hello, ladies. What're you doing in these parts? And on such a chilly evening, too?'

Nanny backed into the room, ahead of three more witches. They wore the black cloaks and pointy hats traditionally associated with their craft, although this served to make each one look different. There is nothing like a uniform for allowing one to express one's individuality.

A tweak here and a tuck there are little details that scream all the louder in the apparent, well, uniformity.

Gammer Beavis's hat, for example, had a very flat brim and a point you could clean your ear with. Nanny liked Gammer Beavis. She might be a bit too educated, so that sometimes it overflowed out of her mouth, but she did her own shoe repairs and took snuff and, in Nanny Ogg's small world view, things like this meant that someone was All Right.

Old Mother Dismass's clothes had that disarray of someone who, because of a detached retina in her second sight, was living in a variety of times all at once. Mental confusion is bad enough in normal people, but much worse when the mind has an occult twist. You just had to hope it was only her underwear she was wearing on the outside.

It was getting worse, Nanny knew. Sometimes her knock would be heard on the door a few hours before she arrived. Her footprints would turn up several days later.

Nanny's heart sank at the sight of the third witch, and it wasn't because Letice Earwig was a bad woman. Quite the reverse, in fact.

She was considered to be decent, well-meaning and kind, at least to less-aggressive animals and the cleaner sort of children. And she would always do you a good turn. The trouble was, though, that she would do you a good turn for your own good even if a good turn wasn't what was good for you. You ended up mentally turned the other way, and that wasn't good.

And she was married. Nanny had nothing against witches being married. It wasn't as if there were rules. She herself had had many husbands, and had even been married to three of them. But Mr. Earwig was a retired wizard with a suspiciously large amount of gold, and Nanny suspected that Letice did witchcraft as something to keep herself

occupied, in much the same way that other women of a certain class might embroider kneelers for the church or visit the poor.

And she had money. Nanny did not have money and therefore was predisposed to dislike those who did. Letice had a black velvet cloak so fine that it looked as if a hole had been cut out of the world.

Nanny did not. Nanny did not want a fine velvet cloak and did not aspire to such things. So she didn't see why other people should have them.

"Evening, Gytha. How are you keeping, in yourself?" said Gammer Beavis.

Nanny took her pipe out of her mouth. 'Fit as a fiddle. Come on in.'

'Ain't this rain dreadful?' said Mother Dismass. Nanny looked at the sky. It was frosty purple. But it was probably raining wherever Mother's mind was at.

'Come along in and dry off, then,' she said kindly.

'May fortunate stars shine on this our meeting,' said Letice.

Nanny nodded understandingly. Letice always sounded as though she'd learned her witchcraft out of a not very imaginative book.

'Yeah, right,' she said.

There was some polite conversation while Nanny prepared tea and scones. Then Gammer Beavis, in a tone that clearly indicated that the official part of the visit was beginning, said,

'We're here as the Trials committee, Nanny.'

'Oh? Yes?'

'I expect you'll be entering?'

'Oh, yes. I'll do my little turn.' Nanny glanced at Letice.

There was a smile on that face that she wasn't entirely happy with.

'There's a lot of interest this year,' Gammer went on. 'More girls are taking it up lately.'

'To get boys, one feels,' said Letice, and sniffed. Nanny didn't comment.

Using witchcraft to get boys seemed a damn good use for it as far as she was concerned. It was, in a way, one of the fundamental uses.

'That's nice,' she said. 'Always looks good, a big turnout. But.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Letice.

'I said "but",' said Nanny, "cos someone's going to say "but", right? This little chat has got a big "but" coming up. I can tell.'

She knew this was flying in the face of protocol. There should be at least seven more minutes of small talk before anyone got around to the point, but Letice's presence was getting on her nerves.

'It's about Esme Weatherwax,' said Gammer Beavis.

'Yes?' said Nanny, without surprise.

'I suppose she's entering?'

'Never known her stay away.'

Letice sighed.

'I suppose you ... couldn't persuade her to ... not to enter this year?'

Nanny looked shocked.

'With an axe, you mean?'

In unison, the three witches sat back.

'You see -' Gammer began, a bit shamefaced.

'Frankly, Mrs. Ogg,' said Letice, 'it is very hard to get other people to enter when they know that Miss Weatherwax is entering. She always wins.'

'Yes,' said Nanny. 'It's a competition.'

'But she always wins!'

'So?'

'In other types of competition,' said Letice, 'one is normally only allowed to win for three years in a row and then one takes a back seat for a while.'

'Yeah, but this is witching,' said Nanny. 'The rules is different.'

'How so?'

'There ain't none.'

Letice twitched her skirt. 'Perhaps it is time there were,' she said.

'Ah,' said Nanny. 'And you just going to go up and tell Esme that? You up for this, Gammer?'

Gammer Beavis didn't meet her gaze. Old Mother Dismass was gazing at last week.

'I understand Miss Weatherwax is a very proud woman,' said Letice.

Nanny Ogg puffed at her pipe again.

'You might as well say the sea is full of water,' she said.

The other witches were silent for a moment.

'I daresay that was a valuable comment,' said Letice, 'but I didn't understand it.'

'If there ain't no water in the sea, it ain't the sea,' said Nanny Ogg. 'It's just a damn great hole in the ground. Thing about Esme is ...'

Nanny took another noisy pull at the pipe, 'she's all pride, see? She ain't just a proud person.'

'Then perhaps she should learn to be a bit more humble...'

'What's she got to be humble about?' said Nanny sharply.

But Letice, like a lot of people with marshmallow on the outside, had a hard core that was not easily compressed.

'The woman clearly has a natural talent and, really, she should be grateful for...

Nanny Ogg stopped listening at this point. The woman, she thought. So that was how it was going.

It was the same in just about every trade. Sooner or later someone decided it needed organizing, and the one thing you could be sure of was that the organizers weren't going to be the people who, by general acknowledgement, were at the top of their craft. They were working too hard. To be fair, it generally wasn't done by the worst, neither. They were working hard, too. They had to.

No, it was done by the ones who had just enough time and inclination to scurry and bustle. And, to be fair again, the world needed people who scurried and bustled. You just didn't have to like them very much.

The lull told her that Letice had finished.

'Really? Now, me,' said Nanny, 'I'm the one who's nat'rally talented.

Us Oggs've got witchcraft in our blood. I never really had to sweat at it. Esme, now ... she's got a bit, true enough, but it ain't a lot. She just makes it work harder'n hell. And you're going to tell her she's not to?'

'We were rather hoping you would,' said Letice.

Nanny opened her mouth to deliver one or two swearwords, and then stopped.

'Tell you what,' she said, 'you can tell her tomorrow, and I'll come with you to hold her back.'

Granny Weatherwax was gathering Herbs when they came up the track.

Everyday herbs of sickroom and kitchen are known as simples.

Granny's Herbs weren't simples. They were complicated or they were nothing. And there was none of the airy-fairy business with a pretty basket and a pair of dainty snippers. Granny used a knife. And a chair held in front of her. And a leather hat, gloves and apron as secondary lines of defense.

Even she didn't know where some of the Herbs came from. Roots and seeds were traded all over the world, and maybe further. Some had flowers that turned as you passed by, some fired their thorns at passing birds and several were staked, not so that they wouldn't fall over, but so they'd still be there next day.

Nanny Ogg, who never bothered to grow any herb you couldn't smoke or stuff a chicken with, heard her mutter, 'Right, you buggers - '

'Good morning, Miss Weatherwax,' said Letice Earwig loudly.

Granny Weatherwax stiffened, and then lowered the chair very carefully and turned around.

'It's Mistress,' she said.

'Whatever,' said Letice brightly. 'I trust you are keeping well?'

'Up till now,' said Granny. She nodded almost imperceptibly at the other three witches.

There was a thrumming silence, which appalled Nanny Ogg. They should have been invited in for a cup of something. That was how the ritual went. It was gross bad manners to keep people standing around.

Nearly, but not quite, as bad as calling an elderly unmarried witch 'Miss'.

'You've come about the Trials,' said Granny. Letice almost fainted.

'Er, how did -'

"Cos you look like a committee. It don't take much reasoning," said Granny, pulling off her gloves. 'We didn't used to need a committee. The news just got around and we all turned up. Now suddenly there's folk arrangin' things.' For a moment Granny looked as though she was fighting some serious internal battle, and then she added in throwaway tones: 'Kettle's on. You'd better come in.'

Nanny relaxed. Maybe there were some customs even Granny Weatherwax wouldn't defy, after all. Even if someone was your worst enemy, you invited them in and gave them tea and biscuits. In fact, the worser your enemy, the better the crockery you got out and the higher the quality of the biscuits. You might wish black hell on 'em later, but while they were under your roof you'd feed 'em till they choked.

Her dark little eyes noted that the kitchen table gleamed and was still damp from scrubbing.

After cups had been poured and pleasantries exchanged, or at least offered by Letice and received in silence by Granny, the self-elected chairwoman wriggled in her seat and said:

'There's such a lot of interest in the Trials this year, Miss . . . Mistress Weatherwax.'

'Good.'

'It does look as though witchcraft in the Ramtops is going through something of a renaissance, in fact.'

'A renaissance, eh? There's a thing.'

'It's such a good route to empowerment for young women, don't you think?'

Many people could say things in a cutting way, Nanny knew. But Granny Weatherwax could listen in a cutting way. She could make something sound stupid just by hearing it.

'That's a good hat you've got there,' said Granny. 'Velvet, is it? Not made local, I expect.'

Letice touched the brim and gave a little laugh.

'It's from Boggi's in Ankh-Morpork,' she said.

'Oh? Shop-bought?'

Nanny Ogg glanced at the corner of the room, where a battered wooden cone stood on a stand. Pinned to it were lengths of black calico and strips of willow wood, the foundations for Granny's spring hat.

'Tailor-made,' said Letice.

'And those hatpins you've got,' Granny went on. 'All them crescent moons and cat shapes -',

'You've got a brooch that's crescent-shaped, too, ain't that so, Esme?' said Nanny Ogg, deciding it was time for a warning shot. Granny occasionally had a lot to say about jewellery on witches when she was feeling in an acid mood.

'This is true, Gytha. I have a brooch what is shaped like a crescent.

That's just the truth of the shape it happens to be. Very practical shape for holding a cloak is a crescent. But I don't mean nothing by it. Anyway, you interrupted just as I was about to remark to Mrs. Earwig how fetchin' her hatpins are. Very witchy.'

Nanny, swiveling like a spectator at a tennis match, glanced at Letice to see if this deadly bolt had gone home. But the woman was actually smiling. Some people just couldn't spot the obvious on the end of a ten-pound hammer.

'On the subject of witchcraft,' said Letice, with the born chairwoman's touch for the enforced segue, 'I thought I might raise with you the question of your participation in the Trials.'

'Yes?'

'Do you... ah... don't you think it is unfair to other people that you win every year?'

Granny Weatherwax looked down at the floor and then up at the ceiling. 'No,' she said, eventually. 'I'm better'n them.'

'You don't think it is a little dispiriting for the other contestants?'

Once again, the floor to ceiling search.

'No,' said Granny.

'But they start off knowing they're not going to win.'

'So do I.'

'Oh, no, you surely -'

'I meant that I start off knowing they're not goin' to win too,' said Granny witheringly. 'And they ought to start off knowing I'm not going to win. No wonder they lose, if they ain't getting their minds right.'

'It does rather dash their enthusiasm.'

Granny looked genuinely puzzled. 'What's wrong with 'em striving to come second?' she said.

Letice plunged on. 'What we were hoping to persuade you to do, Esme, is to accept an emeritus position. You would perhaps make a nice little speech of encouragement, present the award, and ... and possibly even be, er, one of the judges...

'There's going to be judges?' said Granny. 'We've never had judges. Everyone just used to know who'd won.'

'That's true,' said Nanny. She remembered the scenes at the end of one or two trials. When Granny Weatherwax won, everyone knew. 'Oh, that's very true.'

'It would be a very nice gesture,' Letice went on.

'Who decided there would be judges?' said Granny.

'Er... the committee... which is. . . that is.. . a few of us got together. Only to steer things'.

'Oh. I see,' said Granny. 'Flags?'

'Pardon?'

'Are you going to have them lines of little flags? And maybe someone selling apples on a stick, that kind of thing?'

'Some bunting would certainly be -'

'Right. Don't forget the bonfire.'

'So long as it's nice and safe.'

'Oh. Right. Things should be nice. And safe,' said Granny.

Mrs. Earwig perceptibly sighed with relief. 'Well, that's sorted out nicely,' she said.

'Is it?' said Granny.

'I thought we'd agreed that -',

'Had we? Really?' She picked up the poker from the hearth and prodded fiercely at the fire. 'I'll give matters my consideration.'

'I wonder if I may be frank for a moment, Mistress Weatherwax?'

said Letice. The poker paused in mid-prod.

'Yes?'

'Times are changing, you know. Now, I think I know why you feel it necessary to be so overbearing and unpleasant to everyone, but believe me when I tell you, as a friend, that you'd find it so much easier if you just relaxed a little bit and tried being nicer, like our sister Gytha here.'

Nanny Ogg's smile had fossilized into a mask. Letice didn't seem to notice.

'You seem to have all the witches in awe of you for fifty miles around,' she went on. 'Now, I daresay you have some valuable skills, but witchcraft isn't about being an old grump and frightening people any more.'

I'm telling you this as a friend -'

'Call again whenever you're passing,' said Granny.

This was a signal. Nanny Ogg stood up hurriedly.

'I thought we could discuss -' Letice protested.

'I'll walk with you all down to the main track,' said Nanny, hauling the other witches out of their seats.

'Gythal' said Granny sharply, as the group reached the door.

'Yes, Esme?'

'You'll come back here afterwards, I expect.'

'Yes, Esme.'

Nanny ran to catch up with the trio on the path.

Letice had what Nanny thought of as a deliberate walk. It had been wrong to judge her by the floppy jowls and the over-fussy hair and the silly way she waggled her hands as she talked. She was a witch, after all. Scratch any witch and ... well, you'd be facing a witch you'd just scratched.

'She is not a nice person,' Letice trilled. But it was the trill of some large hunting bird.

'You're right there,' said Nanny. 'But -'

'It's high time she was taken down a peg or two!'

'We-ell ...'

'She bullies you most terribly, Mrs. Ogg. A married lady of your mature years, too!'

Just for a moment, Nanny's eyes narrowed.

'It's her way,' she said.

'A very petty and nasty way, to my mind!'

'Oh, yes,' said Nanny simply. 'Ways often are. But look, you -'

'Will you be bringing anything to the produce stall, Gytha?' said Gammer Beavis quickly.

'Oh, a couple of bottles, I expect,' said Nanny, deflating.

'Oh, homemade wine?' said Letice. 'How nice.'

'Sort of like wine, yes. Well, here's the path,' said Nanny.

'I'll just, I'll just nip back and say goodnight -'

'It's belittling, you know, the way you run around after her,' said Letice.

'Yes. Well. You get used to people. Goodnight to you.'

When she got back to the cottage Granny Weatherwax was standing in the middle of the kitchen floor with a face like an unmade bed and her arms folded. One foot tapped on the floor.

'She married a wizard,' said Granny, as soon as her friend had entered.

'You can't tell me that's right.'

'Well, wizards can marry, you know. They just have to hand in the staff and pointy hat. There's no actual law says they can't, so long as they gives up wizarding. They're supposed to be married to the job.'

'I should reckon it's a job being married to her,' said Granny.

Her face screwed up in a sour smile.

'Been pickling much this year?' said Nanny, employing a fresh association of ideas around the word 'vinegar' which had just popped into her head.

'My onions all got the screwfly.'

'That's a pity. You like onions.'

'Even screwflies've got to eat,' said Granny. She glared at the door. 'Nice,' she said.

'She's got a knitted cover on the lid in her privy,' said Nanny.

'Pink?'

'Yes.'

'Nice.'

'She's not bad,' said Nanny. 'She does good work over in Fiddler's Elbow. People speak highly of her.'

Granny sniffed. 'Do they speak highly of me?' she said.

'No, they speaks quietly of you, Esme.'

'Good. Did you see her hatpins?'

'I thought they were rather ... nice, Esme.'

'That's witchcraft today. All jewellery and no drawers.'

Nanny, who considered both to be optional, tried to build an embankment against the rising tide of ire.

'You could think of it as an honor, really, them not wanting you to take part.'

'That's nice.'

Nanny sighed.

'Sometimes nice is worth tryin', Esme,' she said.

I never does anyone a bad turn if I can't do 'em a good one, Gytha, you know that. I don't have to do no frills or fancy labels.'

Nanny sighed. Of course, it was true. Granny was an old-fashioned witch. She didn't do good for people, she did right by them.

But Nanny knew that people don't always appreciate right. Like old Pollirt the other day, when he fell off his horse. What he wanted was a painkiller. What he needed was the few seconds of agony as Granny popped the joint back into place. The trouble was, people remembered the pain.

You got on a lot better with people when you remembered to put frills round it, and took an interest and said things like 'How are you?' Esme didn't bother with that kind of stuff because she knew already.

Nanny Ogg knew too, but also knew that letting on you knew gave people the serious willies.

She put her head on one side. Granny's foot was still tapping.

'You planning anything, Esme? I know you. You've got that look.'

'What look, pray?'

'That look you had when that bandit was found naked up a tree and cryin' all the time and goin' on about the horrible thing that was after him. Funny thing, we never found any pawprints. That look.'

'He deserved more'n that for what he done.'

'Yeah ... well, you had that look just before ole Hoggett was found beaten black and blue in his own pigsty and wouldn't talk about it.'

'You mean old Hoggett the wife-beater? Or old Hoggett who won't never lift his hand to a woman no more?' said Granny. The thing her lips had pursed into may have been called a smile.

'And it's the look you had the time all the snow slid down on ole Milison's house just after he called you an interfering old baggage,' said Nanny.

Granny hesitated. Nanny was pretty sure that had been natural causes, and also that Granny knew she suspected this, and that pride was fighting a battle with honesty -

'That's as may be,' said Granny, noncommittally.

'Like someone who might go along to the Trials and... do something,' said Nanny.

Her friend's glare should have made the air sizzle.

'Oh? So that's what you think of me? That's what we've come to, have we?'

'Letice thinks we should move with the times -'

'Well? I moves with the times. We ought to move with the times.'

No one said we ought to give them a push. I expect you'll be wanting to be going, Gytha. I want to be alone with my thoughts!

Nanny's own thoughts, as she scurried home in relief, were that Granny Weatherwax was not an advertisement for witchcraft. Oh, she was one of the best at it, no doubt about that. At a certain kind, certainly. But a girl starting out in life might well say to herself, is this it? You worked hard and denied yourself things and what you got at the end of it was hard work and self-denial?

Granny wasn't exactly friendless, but what she commanded mostly was respect. People learned to respect stormclouds, too. They refreshed the ground. You needed them. But they weren't nice.

Nanny Ogg went to bed in three flannelette nightdresses, because sharp frosts were already pricking the autumn air. She was also in a troubled frame of mind.

Some sort of war had been declared, she knew. Granny could do some terrible things when roused, and the fact that they'd been done to those who richly deserved them didn't

make them any the less terrible. She'd be planning something pretty dreadful, Nanny Ogg knew. She herself didn't like winning things. Winning was a habit that was hard to break and brought you a dangerous status that was hard to defend.

You'd walk uneasily through life, always on the lookout for the next girl with a better broomstick and a quicker hand on the frog.

She turned over under the mountain of eiderdowns.

In Granny Weatherwax's world-view was no room for second place.

You won, or you were a loser. There was nothing wrong with being a loser except for the fact that, of course, you weren't the winner. Nanny had always pursued the policy of being a good loser. People liked you when you almost won, and bought you drinks. 'She only just lost' was a much better compliment than 'she only just won'.

Runners-up had more fun, she reckoned. But it wasn't a word Granny had much time for.

In her own darkened cottage, Granny Weatherwax sat and watched the fire die.

It was a grey-walled room, the colour that old plaster gets not so much from dirt as from age. There was not a thing in it that wasn't useful, utilitarian, earned its keep. Every flat surface in Nanny Ogg's cottage had been pressed into service as a holder for ornaments and potted plants.

People gave Nanny Ogg things. Cheap fairground tat, Granny always called it. At least, in public. What she thought of it in the privacy of her own head, she never said.

She rocked gently as the last ember winked out.

It's hard to contemplate, in the grey hours of the night, that probably the only reason people would come to your funeral would be to make sure you're dead.

Next day, Percy Hopcroft opened his back door and looked straight up into the blue stare of Granny Weatherwax.

'Oh my,' he said, under his breath.

Granny gave an awkward little cough.

'Mr Hopcroft, I've come about them apples you named after Mrs Ogg,' she said.

Percy's knees began to tremble, and his wig started to slide off the back of his head to the hoped-for security of the floor.

'I should like to thank you for doing it because it has made her very happy,' Granny went on, in a tone of voice which would have struck one who knew her as curiously monotonous. 'She has done a lot of fine work and it's about time she got her little reward. It was a very nice thought.

And so I have brung you this little token -' Hopcroft jumped backwards as Granny's hand dipped swiftly into her apron and produced a small black bottle '- which is very rare because of the rare herbs in it. What are rare. Extremely rare herbs.'

Eventually it crept over Hopcroft that he was supposed to take the bottle. He gripped the top of it very carefully, as if it might whistle or develop legs.

'..... . thank you ver' much,' he mumbled.

Granny nodded stiffly.

'Blessings be upon this house,' she said, and turned and walked away down the path.

Hopcroft shut the door carefully, and then flung himself against it.

'You start packing right now!' he shouted to his wife, who'd been watching from the kitchen door.

'What? Our whole life's here! We can't just run away from it!'

'Better to run than hop, woman! What's she want from me? What's she want? She's never nice!'

Mrs Hopcroft stood firm. She'd just got the cottage looking right and they'd bought a new pump. Some things were hard to leave.

'Let's just stop and think, then,' she said. 'What's in that bottle?'

Hopcroft held it at arm's length. 'Do you want to find out?'

'Stop shaking, man! She didn't actually threaten, did she?'

'She said "blessings be upon this house"! Sounds pretty damn threatening to me! That was Granny Weatherwax, that was!'

He put the bottle on the table. They stared at it, standing in the cautious leaning position of people who were ready to run if anything began to happen.

'Says "Haire Reftorer" on the label,' said Mrs Hopcroft.

'I ain't using it!'

'She'll ask us about it later. That's her way.'

'If you think for one moment I'm -'

'We can try it out on the dog.'

'That's a good cow.'

William Poorchick awoke from his reverie on the milking stool and looked around the meadow, his hands still working the beast's teats.

There was a black pointy hat rising over the hedge. He gave such a start that he started to milk into his left boot.

'Gives plenty of milk, does she?'

'Yes, Mistress Weatherwax!' William quavered.

'That's good. Long may she continue to do so, that's what I say. Good-day to you.'

And the pointy hat continued up the lane.

Poorchick stared after it. Then he grabbed the bucket and, squelching at every other step, hurried into the barn and yelled for his son.

'Rummage! You get down here right now!'

His son appeared at the hayloft, pitchfork still in his hand.

'What's up, Dad?'

'You take Daphne down to the market right now, understand?'

'What? But she's our best milker, Dad!'

'Was, son, was! Granny Weatherwax just put a curse on her! Sell her now before her horns drop off!'

'What'd she say, Dad?'

'She said ... she said ... "Long may she continue to give milk...'

Poorchick hesitated.

'Doesn't sound awfully like a curse, Dad,' said Rummage. 'I mean ... not like your gen'ral curse. Sounds a bit hopeful, really,' said his son.

'Well . . . it was the way . . . she . . . said . . . it . . .'

'What sort of way, Dad?'

'Well . . . like . . . cheerfully.'

'You all right, Dad?'

'It was . . . the way . . .' Poorchick paused. 'Well, it's not right,' he continued. 'It's not right! She's got no right to go around being cheerful at people! She's never cheerful! And my boot is full of milk!'

Today Nanny Ogg was taking some time out to tend her secret still in the woods. As a still it was the best-kept secret there could be, since everyone in the kingdom knew exactly where it was, and a secret kept by so many people must be very secret indeed. Even the king knew, and knew enough to pretend he didn't know, and that meant he didn't have to ask her for any taxes and she didn't have to refuse. And every year at Hogswatch he got a barrel of what honey might be if only bees weren't teetotal. And everyone understood the situation, no one had to pay any money and so, in a small way, the world was a happier place. And no one was cursed until their teeth fell out.

Nanny was dozing. Keeping an eye on a still was a day and night job.

But finally the sound of people repeatedly calling her name got too much for her.

No one would come into the clearing, of course. That would mean admitting that they knew where it was. So they were blundering around in the surrounding bushes. She pushed her way through, and was greeted with some looks of feigned surprise that would have done credit to any amateur dramatic company.

'Well, what do you lot want?' she demanded.

'Oh, Mrs Ogg, we thought you might be... taking a walk in the woods,' said Poorchick, while a scent that could clean glass wafted on the breeze.

'You got to do something! It's Mistress Weatherwax!'

'What's she done?'

'You tell 'er, Mister Hampicker!'

The man next to Poorchick took off his hat quickly and held it respectfully in front of him in the ai-senior-the-bandidos-have-raided-our-villages position.

'Well, ma'am, my lad and I were digging for a well and then she come past -'

'Granny Weatherwax?'

'Yes'm, and she said -' Hampicker gulped, "'You won't find any water there, my good man. You'd be better off looking in the hollow by the chestnut tree.'" An' we dug on down anyway and we never found no water!'

Nanny lit her pipe. She didn't smoke around the still since that time when a careless spark had sent the barrel she was sitting on a hundred yards into the air. She'd been lucky that a fir tree had broken her fall.

'So ... then you dug in the hollow by the chestnut tree?' she said mildly.

Hampicker looked shocked. 'No'm! There's no telling what she wanted us to find there!'

'And she cursed my cow!' said Poorchick.

'Really? What did she say?'

'She said, may she give a lot of milk!' Poorchick stopped. Once again, now that he came to say it...

'Well, it was the way she said it,' he added, weakly.

'And what kind of way was that?'

'Nicely!'

'Nicely?'

'Smilin' and everything! I don't dare drink the stuff now!'

Nanny was mystified.

'Can't quite see the problem -

'You tell that to Mr Hopcroft's dog,' said Poorchick. 'Hopcroft daren't leave the poor thing on account of her! The whole family's going mad!

There's him shearing, his wife sharpening the scissors, and the two lads out all the time looking for fresh places to dump the hair!'

Patient questioning on Nanny's part elucidated the role the Haire Reftorer had played in this.

'And he gave it . . .

'Half the bottle, Mrs Ogg.'

'Even though Esme writes "A right small spoonful once a week" on the label? And even then you need to wear roomy trousers.'

'He said he was so nervous, Mrs Ogg! I mean, what's she playing at? Our wives are keepin' the kids indoors. I mean, s'posin' she smiled at them?'

'Well?'

'She's a witch!'

'So'm I, an' I smiles at 'em,' said Nanny Ogg. 'They're always runnin' after me for sweets.'

'Yes, but ... you're ... I mean ... she ... I mean ... you don't ... I mean. Well -,

'And she's a good woman,' said Nanny. Common sense prompted her to add, 'In her own way. I expect there is water down in the hollow, and Poorchick's cow'll give good milk, and if Hopcroft won't read the labels on bottles then he deserves a head you can see your face in, and

if you think Esme Weatherwax'd curse kids you've got the sense of a earthworm. She'd cuss 'em, yes, all day long. But not curse 'em. She don't aim that low.'

'Yes, yes,' Poorchick almost moaned, 'but it don't feel right, that's what we're saying. Her going round being nice, a man don't know if he's got a leg to stand on.'

'Or hop on,' said Hampicker darkly.

'All right, all right, I'll see about it,' said Nanny.

'People shouldn't go around not doin' what you expect,' said Poorchick weakly. 'It gets people on edge.'

'And we'll keep an eye on your sti -' Hampicker said, and then staggered backwards grasping his stomach and wheezing.

'Don't mind him, it's the stress,' said Poorchick, rubbing his elbow.

'Been picking herbs, Mrs Ogg?'

'That's right,' said Nanny, hurrying away across the leaves.

'So shall I put the fire out for you, then?' Poorchick shouted.

Granny was sitting outside her house when Nanny Ogg hurried up the path. She was sorting through a sack of old clothes. Elderly garments were scattered around her.

And she was humming. Nanny Ogg started to worry. The GrannyWeatherwax she knew didn't approve of music.

And she smiled when she saw Nanny, or at least the corners of her mouth turned up. That was really worrying. Granny normally only smiled if something bad was happening to someone deserving.

'Why, Gytha, how nice to see you!'

'You all right, Esme?'

'Never felt better, dear.' The humming continued.

'Er ... sorting out rags, are you?' said Nanny. 'Going to make that quilt?'

It was one of Granny Weatherwax's firm beliefs that one day she'd make a patchwork quilt. However, it is a task that requires patience, and hence in fifteen years she'd got as far as three patches. But she collected old clothes anyway. A lot of witches did. It was a witch

thing. Old clothes had personality, like old houses. When it came to clothes with a bit of wear left in them, a witch had no pride at all.

'It's in here somewhere .. .' Granny mumbled. 'Aha, here we are ... '

She flourished a garment. It was basically pink.

'Knew it was here,' she went on. 'Hardly worn, either. And about my size, too.'

'You're going to wear it?' said Nanny.

Granny's piercing blue cut-you-off-at-the-knees gaze was turned upon her. Nanny would have been relieved at a reply like 'No, I'm going to eat it, you daft old fool'. Instead her friend relaxed and said, a little concerned:

'You don't think it'd suit me?'

There was lace around the collar. Nanny swallowed.

'You usually wear black. Well, a bit more than usually. More like always.'

'And a very sad sight I look too,' said Granny robustly. 'It's about time I brightened myself up a bit, don't you think?'

'And it's so very... pink.'

Granny put it aside and to Nanny's horror took her by the hand and said earnestly, 'And, you know, I reckon I've been far too dog-in-the-manger about this Trials business, Gytha -'

'Bitch-in-the-manger,' said Nanny Ogg, absent-mindedly.

For a moment Granny's eyes became two sapphires again.

'What?'

'Er ... you'd be a bitch-in-the-manger,' Nanny mumbled. 'Not a dog.'

'Ah? Oh, yes. Thank you for pointing that out. Well, I thought, it is time I stepped back a bit, and went along and cheered on the younger folks. I mean, I have to say, I . . . really haven't been very nice to people, have I... '

'Er...

'I've tried being nice,' Granny went on. 'It didn't turn out like I expected, I'm sorry to say.'

'You've never been really ... good at nice,' said Nanny.

Granny smiled. Hard though she stared, Nanny was unable to spot anything other than earnest concern.

'Perhaps I'll get better with practice,' she said.

She patted Nanny's hand. And Nanny stared at her hand as though something horrible had happened to it.

'It's just that everyone's more used to you being . . . firm,' she said.

'I thought I might make some jam and cakes for the produce stall,' said Granny.

'Oh ... good.'

'Are there any sick people want visitin'?'

Nanny stared at the trees. It was getting worse and worse. She rummaged in her memory for anyone in the locality sick enough to warrant a ministering visit but still well enough to survive the shock of a ministering visit by Granny Weatherwax. When it came to practical psychology and the more robust type of folk physiotherapy Granny was without equal; in fact, she could even do the latter at a distance, for many a pain-racked soul had left their beds and walked, nay, run at the news that she was coming.

'Everyone's pretty well at the moment,' said Nanny diplomatically.

'Any old folk want cheerin' up?'

It was taken for granted by both women that old people did not include them. A witch aged ninety-seven would not have included herself. Old people happened to other people.

'All fairly cheerful right now,' said Nanny

'Maybe I could tell stories to the kiddies?'

Nanny nodded. Granny had done that once before, when the mood had briefly taken her. It had worked pretty well, as far as the children were concerned. They'd listened with open-mouthed attention and apparent enjoyment to a traditional old folk legend. The problem had come when they'd gone home afterwards and asked the meaning of words like 'disembowelled'.

'I could sit in a rocking chair while I tell 'em,' Granny added. 'That's how it's done, I recall. And I could make them some of my special treacle-toffee apples. Wouldn't that be nice?'

Nanny nodded again, in a sort of horrified reverie. She realised that only she stood in the way of a wholesale rampage of niceness.

'Toffee,' she said. 'Would that be the sort you did that shatters like glass, or that sort where our boy Pewsey had to have his mouth levered open with a spoon?'

'I reckon I know what I did wrong last time.'

'You know you and sugar don't get along, Esme. Remember them all-day suckers you made?'

'They did last all day, Gytha.'

'Only 'cos our Pewsey couldn't get it out of his little mouth until we pulled two of his teeth, Esme. You ought to stick to pickles.

You and pickles goes well.'

'I've got to do something, Gytha. I can't be an old grump all the time. I know! I'll help at the Trials. Bound to be a lot that needs doing, eh?'

Nanny grinned inwardly. So that was it.

'Why, yes. I'm sure Mrs Earwig will be happy to tell you what to do.' And more fool her if she does, she thought, because I can tell you're planning something.

'I shall talk to her,' said Granny. 'I'm sure there's a million things I could do to help, if I set my mind to it.'

‘And I’m sure you will,’ said Nanny heartily. ‘I’ve a feelin’ you’re going to make a big difference.’

Granny started to rummage in the bag again.

‘You are going to be along as well, aren’t you, Gytha?’

‘Me?’ said Nanny. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for worlds.’

Nanny got up especially early. If there was going to be any unpleasantness she wanted a ringside seat.

What there was, was bunting. It was hanging from tree to tree in terrible brightly-coloured loops as she walked towards the Trials.

There was something oddly familiar about it, too. It should not technically be possible for anyone with a pair of scissors to be unable to cut out a triangle, but someone had managed it. And it was also obvious that the flags had been made from old clothes, painstakingly cut up.

Nanny knew this because not many real flags have collars.

In the trials field, people were setting up stalls and falling over children. The committee were standing uncertainly under a tree, occasionally glancing up at a pink figure at the top of a very long ladder.

‘She was here before it was light,’ said Letice, as Nanny approached. ‘She said she’d been up all night making the flags.’

‘Tell her about the cakes,’ said Gammer Beavis darkly.

‘She made cakes?’ said Nanny. ‘But she can’t cook!’

The committee shuffled aside. A lot of the ladies contributed to the food for the Trials. It was a tradition and an informal competition in its own right. At the centre of the spread of covered plates was a large platter piled high with ... things, of indefinite colour and shape. It looked as though a herd of small cows had eaten a lot of raisins and then been ill. They were Ur-cakes, prehistoric cakes, cakes of great weight and presence that had no place among the iced dainties.

‘She’s never had the knack of it,’ said Nanny weakly. ‘Has anyone tried one?’

‘Hahaha,’ said Gammer solemnly.

‘Tough, are they?’

‘You could beat a troll to death.’

‘But she was so ... sort of ... proud of them,’ said Letice.

‘And then there’s . . . the jam.’

It was a large pot. It seemed to be filled with solidified purple lava.

‘Nice ... colour,’ said Nanny. ‘Anyone tasted it?’

‘We couldn’t get the spoon out,’ said Gammer.

‘Oh, I’m sure - ‘

'We only got it in with a hammer.'

'What's she planning, Mrs Ogg? She's got a weak and vengeful nature,' said Letice. 'You're her friend,' she added, her tone suggesting that this was as much an accusation as a statement.

'I don't know what she's thinking, Mrs Earwig.'

'I thought she was staying away.'

'She said she was going to take an interest and encourage the young 'uns.'

'She is planning something,' said Letice, darkly. 'Those cakes are a plot to undermine my authority.'

'No, that's how she always cooks,' said Nanny. 'She just hasn't got the knack.' Your authority, eh?

'She's nearly finished the flags,' Gammer reported. 'Now she's going to try to make herself useful again.'

'Well ... I suppose we could ask her to do the Lucky Dip.'

Nanny looked blank. 'You mean where kids fish around in a big tub full of bran to see what they can pull out?'

'Yes.'

'You're going to let Granny Weatherwax do that?'

'Yes.'

'Only she's got a funny sense of humour, if you know what I mean.'

'Good morning to you all!'

It was Granny Weatherwax's voice. Nanny Ogg had known it for most of her life. But it had that strange edge to it again. It sounded nice.

'We was wondering if you could supervise the bran tub, Miss Weatherwax.'

Nanny flinched. But Granny merely said: 'Happy to, Mrs Earwig. I can't wait to see the expressions on their little faces as they pull out the goodies.'

Nor can I, Nanny thought.

When the others had scurried off she sidled up to her friend.

'Why're you doing this?' she said.

'I really don't know what you mean, Gytha.'

'I seen you face down terrible creatures, Esme. I once seen you catch a unicorn, for goodness' sake. What're you plannin'?'

'I still don't know what you mean, Gytha.'

'Are you angry 'cos they won't let you enter, and now you're plannin' horrible revenge?'

For a moment they both looked at the field. It was beginning to fill up. People were bowling for pigs and fighting on the greasy pole.

The Lancre Volunteer Band was trying to play a medley of popular tunes, and it was only a pity that each musician was playing a different one.

Small children were fighting. It was going to be a scorcher of a day, probably the last one of the year.

Their eyes were drawn to the roped-off square in the centre of the field.

‘Are you going to enter the Trials, Gytha?’ said Granny.

‘You never answered my question!’

‘What question was that?’

Nanny decided not to hammer on a locked door. ‘Yes, I am going to have a go, as it happens,’ she said.

‘I certainly hope you win, then. I’d cheer you on, only that wouldn’t be fair to the others. I shall merge into the background and be as quiet as a little mouse.’

Nanny tried guile. Her face spread into a wide pink grin, and she nudged her friend.

‘Right, right,’ she said. ‘Only. . . you can tell me, right? I wouldn’t like

to miss it when it happens. So if you could just give me a little signal when you’re going to do it, eh?’

‘What’s it you’re referring to, Gytha?’

‘Esme Weatherwax, sometimes I could really give you a bloody good slap!’

‘Oh dear.’

Nanny Ogg didn’t often swear, or at least use words beyond the boundaries of what the Lancrastrians thought of as ‘colourful language’.

She looked as if she habitually used bad words, and had just thought up a good one, but mostly witches are quite careful about what they say. You

can never be sure what the words are going to do when they’re

out of earshot. But now she swore under her breath and caused small

brief fires to start in the dry grass.

This put her in just about the right frame of mind for the Cursing.

It was said that once upon a time this had been done on a living, breathing subject, at least at the start of the event, but that wasn’t right for a family day out and for several hundred years the Curses had been directed at Unlucky Charlie who was, however you looked at it, nothing more than a scarecrow. And since curses are generally directed at the mind of the cursed, this presented a major problem, because even ‘May your straw go mouldy and your carrot fall off’ didn’t make much impression on a pumpkin. But points were given for general style and inventiveness.

There wasn’t much pressure for those in any case. Everyone knew what event counted, and it wasn’t Unlucky Charlie.

One year Granny Weatherwax had made the pumpkin explode. No one had ever worked out how she'd done it.

Someone would walk away at the end of today and everyone would know they were the winner, whatever the points said. You could win the Witch With The Pointiest Hat prize and the broomstick dressage, but that was just for the audience. What counted was the Trick you'd been working on all summer.

Nanny had drawn last place, at number nineteen. A lot of witches had turned up this year. News of Granny Weatherwax's withdrawal had got around, and nothing moves faster than news in the occult community since it doesn't just have to travel at ground level. Many pointy hats moved and nodded among the crowds.

Witches are among themselves generally as sociable as cats but, as also with cats, there are locations and times and neutral grounds where they meet at something like peace. And what was going on was a sort of slow, complicated dance ..

The witches walked around saying hello to one another, and rushing to meet newcomers, and innocent bystanders might have believed that here was a meeting of old friends. Which, at one level, it probably was. But Nanny watched through a witch's eyes, and saw the subtle positioning, the careful weighing-up, the little changes of stance, the eye-contact finely tuned by intensity and length.

And when a witch was in the arena, especially if she was comparatively unknown, all the others found some excuse to keep an eye on her, preferably without appearing to do so.

It was like watching cats. Cats spend a lot of time carefully eyeing one another. When they have to fight, that's merely to rubber-stamp something that's already been decided in their heads.

Nanny knew all this. And she also knew most of the witches to be kind (on the whole), gentle (to the meek), generous (to the deserving; the undeserving got more than they bargained for), and by and large quite dedicated to a life that really offered more kicks than kisses. Not one of them lived in a house made of confectionery, although some of the conscientious younger ones had experimented with various crispbreads.

Even children who deserved it were not slammed into their ovens.

Generally they did what they'd always done - smooth the passage of their neighbours into and out of the world, and help them over some of the nastier hurdles in between.

You needed to be a special kind of person to do that. You needed a special kind of ear, because you saw people in circumstances where they were inclined to tell you things, like where the money is buried or who the father was or how come they'd got a black eye again. And you needed a special kind of mouth, the sort that stayed shut.

Keeping secrets made you powerful. Being powerful earned you respect.

Respect was hard currency.

And within this sisterhood - except that it wasn't a sisterhood, it was a loose assortment of chronic non-joiners; a group of witches wasn't a coven, it was a small war - there was always this awareness of position.

It had nothing to do with anything the other world thought of as status.

Nothing was ever said. But if an elderly witch died the local witches would attend her funeral for a few last words, and then go solemnly home alone, with the little insistent thought at the back of their minds:

‘I’ve moved up one.’

And newcomers were watched very, very carefully.

‘Morning, Mrs Ogg,’ said a voice behind her. ‘I trust I find you well?’

‘How’d’yer do, Mistress Shimmy,’ said Nanny, turning. Her mental filing system threw up a card: Clarity Shimmy, lives over towards Cutshade with her old mum, takes snuff, good with animals. ‘How’s your mother keepin’?’

‘We buried her last month, Mrs Ogg.’

Nanny Ogg quite liked Clarity, because she didn’t see her very often.

‘Oh dear .. .’ she said.

‘But I shall tell her you asked after her, anyway,’ said Clarity. She glanced briefly towards the ring. ‘Who’s the fat girl on now? Got a backside on her like a bowling ball on a short seesaw.’

‘That’s Agnes Nitt.’

‘That’s a good cursin’ voice she’s got there. You know you’ve been cursed with a voice like that.’

‘Oh yes, she’s been blessed with a good voice for cursin’,’ said Nanny politely. ‘Esme Weatherwax an’ me gave her a few tips,’ she added.

Clarity’s head turned.

At the far edge of the field, a small pink shape sat alone behind the Lucky Dip. It did not seem to be drawing a big crowd.

Clarity leaned closer.

‘What’s she doing?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Nanny. ‘I think she’s decided to be nice about it.’

‘Esme? Nice about it?’

‘..... . yes,’ said Nanny. It didn’t sound any better now she was telling someone.

Clarity stared at her. Nanny saw her make a little sign with her left hand, and then hurry off.

The pointy hats were bunching up now. There were little groups of three or four. You could see the points come together, cluster in animated conversation, and then open out again like a flower, and turn towards the distant blob of pinkness. Then a hat would leave that group and head off purposefully to another one, where the process would start all over again. It was a bit like watching very slow nuclear fission.

There was a lot of excitement, and soon there would be an explosion.

Every so often someone would turn and look at Nanny, so she hurried away among the sideshows until she fetched up beside the stall of the dwarf Zakzak Stronginthearm, maker and purveyor of occult knicknackery to the more impressionable. He nodded at her cheerfully over the top of a display saying 'Lucky Horseshoes \$2 Each'.

'Hello, Mrs Ogg,' he said.

Nanny realized she was flustered.

'What's lucky about 'em?' she said, picking up a horseshoe.

'Well, I get two dollars each for them,' said Stronginthearm.

'And that makes them lucky?'

'Lucky for me,' said Stronginthearm. 'I expect you'll be wanting one too, Mrs Ogg? I'd have fetched along another box if I'd known they'd be so popular. Some of the ladies've bought two.'

There was an inflection to the word 'ladies'.

'Witches have been buying lucky horseshoes?' said Nanny.

'Like there's no tomorrow,' said Zakzak. He frowned for a moment. They had been witches, after all. 'Er. ... there will be... won't there?' he added.

'I'm very nearly certain of it,' said Nanny, which didn't seem to comfort him.

'Suddenly been doing a roaring trade in protective herbs, too,' said Zakzak. And, being a dwarf, which meant that he'd see the Flood as a marvellous opportunity to sell towels, he added, 'Can I interest you, Mrs Ogg?'

Nanny shook her head. If trouble was going to come from the direction everyone had been looking, then a sprig of rue wasn't going to be much help. A large oak tree'd be better, but only maybe.

The atmosphere was changing. The sky was a wide pale blue, but there was thunder on the horizons of the mind. The witches were uneasy and with so many in one place the nervousness was bouncing from one to another and, amplified, rebroadcasting itself to everyone. It meant that even ordinary people who thought that a rune was a dried plum were beginning to feel a deep, existential worry, the kind that causes you to snap at your kids and want a drink.

Nanny peered through a gap between a couple of stalls. The pink figure was still sitting patiently, and a little crestfallen, behind the barrel. There was, as it were, a huge queue of no one at all.

Then Nanny scuttled from the cover of one tent to another until she could see the produce stand. It had already been doing a busy trade but there, forlorn in the middle of the cloth, was the pile of terrible cakes. And the jar of jam. Some wag had chalked up a sign beside it: 'Get Thee spoon out of thee Jar, 3 tries for A Penney!!!'

She thought she'd been careful to stay concealed, but she heard the straw rustle behind her. The committee had tracked her down.

'That's your handwriting, isn't it, Mrs Earwig?' she said.

'That's cruel.

That ain't ... nice.'

'We've decided you're to go and talk to Miss Weatherwax,' said Letice.

'She's got to stop it.'

'Stop what?'

'She's doing something to people's heads! She's come here to put the 'fluence on us, right? Everyone knows she does head magic. We can all feel it! She's spoiling it for everyone!'

'She's only sitting there,' said Nanny.

'Ah, yes, but how is she sitting there, may we ask?'

Nanny peered around the stall again.

'Well ... like normal. You know ... bent in the middle and the knees...'

Letice waved a finger sternly.

'Now you listen to me, Gytha Ogg -'

'If you want her to go away, you go and tell her!' snapped Nanny. 'I'm fed up with -'

There was the piercing scream of a child.

The witches stared at one another, and then ran across the field to the Lucky Dip.

A small boy was writhing on the ground, sobbing.

It was Pewsey, Nanny's youngest grandchild.

Her stomach turned to ice. She snatched him up, and glared into Granny's face.

'What have you done to him, you -' she began.

'Don'twannadolly! Don'twannadolly! Wannasoijer! Wannawannawanna-SOLJER!'

Now Nanny looked down at the rag doll in Pewsey's sticky hand, and the expression of affronted tearful rage on such of his face as could be seen around his screaming mouth -

'OiwannawannaSOLJER!'

and then at the other witches, and at Granny Weatherwax's face, and felt the horrible cold shame welling up from her boots.

'I said he could put it back and have another go,' said Granny meekly.

'But he just wouldn't listen.'

'- wannawannaSOL -'

'Pewsey Ogg, if you don't shut up right this minute Nanny will-'

Nanny Ogg began, and dredged up the nastiest punishment she could think of,

'Nanny won't give you a sweetie ever again!'

Pewsey closed his mouth, stunned into silence by this unimaginable threat. Then, to Nanny's horror, Letice Earwig drew herself up and said,

'Miss Weatherwax, we would prefer it if you left.'

'Am I being a bother?' said Granny. 'I hope I'm not being a bother. I don't want to be a bother. He just took a lucky dip and -'

'You're ... upsetting people.'

Any minute now, Nanny thought. Any minute now she's going to raise her head and narrow her eyes and if Letice doesn't take two steps backwards she'll be a lot tougher than me.

'I can't stay and watch?' Granny said quietly.

'I know your game,' said Letice. 'You're planning to spoil it, aren't you? You can't stand the thought of being beaten, so you're intending something nasty.'

Three steps back, Nanny thought. Else there won't be anything left but bones. Any minute now...

'Oh, I wouldn't like anyone to think I was spoiling anything,' said Granny. She sighed, and stood up. 'I'll be off home ...'

'No you won't!' snapped Nanny Ogg, pushing her back down on to the chair. 'What do you think of this, Beryl Dismass? And you, Letty Parkin?'

'They're all -' Letice began.

'I weren't talking to you!'

The witches behind Mrs Earwig avoided Nanny's gaze.

'Well, it's not that ... I mean, we don't think ...' began Beryl awkwardly. 'That is ... I've always had a lot of respect for ... but ... well, it is for everyone.'

Her voice trailed off. Letice looked triumphant.

'Really? I think we had better be going after all, then,' said Nanny sourly.

'I don't like the comp'ny in these parts.' She looked around.

'Agnes? You give me a hand to get Granny home ...'

'I really don't need...' Granny began, but the other two each took an arm and gently propelled her through the crowd, which parted to let them through and turned to watch them go.

'Probably the best for all concerned, in the circumstances,' said Letice.

Several of the witches tried not to look at her face.

There were scraps of material all over the floor in Granny's kitchen, and gouts of congealed jam had dripped off the edge of the table and formed an immovable mound on the floor. The jam saucepan had been left in the stone sink to soak, although it was clear that the iron would rust away before the jam ever softened.

There was a row of empty pickle jars as well.

Granny sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

‘Want a cup of tea, Esme?’ said Nanny Ogg.

‘No, dear, thank you. You get on back to the Trials. Don’t you worry about me.’

‘You sure?’

‘I’ll just sit here quiet. Don’t you worry.’

‘I’m not going back!’ Agnes hissed, as they left. ‘I don’t like the way Letice smiles . . .’

‘You once told me you didn’t like the way Esme frowns,’ said Nanny.

‘Yes, but you can trust a frown. Er ... you don’t think she’s losing it, do you?’

‘No one’ll be able to find it if she has,’ said Nanny. ‘No, you come on back with me. I’m sure she’s planning . . . something.’ I wish the hell I knew what it is, she thought. I’m not sure I can take any more waiting.

She could feel the mounting tension before they reached the field. Of course, there was always tension, that was part of the Trials, but this kind had a sour, unpleasant taste. The sideshows were still going on but ordinary folk were leaving, spooked by sensations they couldn’t put their finger on which nevertheless had them under their thumb.

As for the witches themselves, they had that look worn by actors about two minutes from the end of a horror movie, when they know the monster is about to make its final leap and now it’s only a matter of which door.

Letice was surrounded by witches. Nanny could hear raised voices. She nudged another witch, who was watching gloomily.

‘What’s happening, Winnie?’

‘Oh, Reena Trump made a pig’s ear of her piece and her friends say she ought to have another go because she was so nervous.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘And Virago Johnson ran off ‘cos her weather spell went wrong.’

‘Left under a bit of a cloud, did she?’

‘And I was all thumbs when I had a go. You could be in with a chance, Gytha.’

‘Oh, I’ve never been one for prizes, Winnie, you know me. It’s the fun of taking part that counts.’

The other witch gave her a skewed look.

‘You almost made that sound believable,’ she said.

Gammer Beavis hurried over. ‘On you go, Gytha’, she said. ‘Do your best, eh? The only contender so far is Mrs Weavitt and her whistling frog, and it wasn’t as if it could even carry a tune. Poor thing was a bundle of nerves.’

Nanny Ogg shrugged, and walked out into the roped-off area.

Somewhere in the distance someone was having hysterics, punctuated by an occasional worried whistle.

Unlike the magic of wizards, the magic of witches did not usually involve the application of much raw power. The difference is between hammers and levers. Witches generally tried to find the small point where a little changes made a lot of result. To make an avalanche you can either shake the mountain, or maybe you can just find exactly the right place to drop a snowflake.

This year Nanny had been idly working on the Man of Straw. It was an ideal trick for her. It got a laugh, it was a bit suggestive, it was a lot easier than it looked but showed she was joining in, and it was unlikely to win.

Damn! She'd been relying on that frog to beat her. She'd heard it whistling quite beautifully on the summer evenings.

She concentrated.

Pieces of straw rustled through the stubble. All she had to do was use the little bits of wind that drifted across the field, allowed to move here and there, spiral up and...

She tried to stop her hands from shaking. She'd done this a hundred times, she could tie the damn stuff in knots by now. She kept seeing the face of Esme Weatherwax, and the way she'd just sat there, looking puzzled and hurt, while for a few seconds Nanny had been ready to kill

For a moment she managed to get the legs right, and a suggestion of arms and head. There was a smattering of applause from the watchers.

Then an errant eddy caught the thing before she could concentrate on its first step, and it spun down, just a lot of useless straw.

She made some frantic gestures to get it to rise again. It flopped about, tangled itself, and lay still.

There was a bit more applause, nervous and sporadic.

'Sorry. . . don't seem to be able to get the hang of it today,' she muttered, walking off the field.

The judges went into a huddle.

'I reckon that frog did really well,' said Nanny, more loudly than was necessary.

The wind, so contrary a little while ago, blew sharper now.

What might be called the psychic darkness of the event was being enhanced by real twilight.

The shadow of the bonfire loomed on the far side of the field.

No one as yet had the heart to light it. Almost all the non-witches had gone home.

Anything good about the day had long drained away.

The circle of judges broke up and Mrs Earwig advanced on the nervous crowd, her smile only slightly waxen at the corners.

‘Well, what a difficult decision it has been,’ she said brightly. ‘But what a marvellous turnout, too! It really has been a most tricky choice -, Between me and a frog that lost its whistle and got its foot stuck in its banjo, thought Nanny. She looked sidelong at the faces of her sister witches. She’d known some of them for sixty years. If she’d ever read books, she’d have been able to read the faces just like one.

‘We all know who won, Mrs Earwig,’ she said, interrupting the flow.

‘What do you mean, Mrs Ogg?’

‘There’s not a witch here who could get her mind right today,’ said Nanny. ‘And most of ‘em have bought lucky charms, too. Witches?’

Buying lucky charms?’ Several women stared at the ground.

‘I don’t know why everyone seems so afraid of Miss Weatherwax! I certainly am not! You think she’s put a spell on you, then?’

‘A pretty sharp one, by the feel of it,’ said Nanny. ‘Look, Mrs Earwig, no one’s won, not with the stuff we’ve managed today. We all know it.

So let’s just all go home, eh?’

‘Certainly not! I paid ten dollars for this cup and I mean to present it-‘

The dying leaves shivered on the trees.

The witches drew together.

Branches rattled.

‘It’s the wind,’ said Nanny Ogg. ‘That’s all . . . ‘

And then Granny was simply there. It was as if they’d just not noticed that she’d been there all the time. She had the knack of fading out of the foreground.

‘I jus’ thought I’d come to see who won,’ she said. ‘Join in the applause, and so on ...

Letice advanced on her, wild with rage.

‘Have you been getting into people’s heads?’ she shrieked.

‘An’ how could I do that, Mrs Earwig?’ said Granny meekly.

‘Past all them lucky charms?’

‘You’re lying!’

Nanny Ogg heard the indrawn breaths, and hers was loudest. Witches lived by their words.

‘I don’t lie, Mrs Earwig.’

‘Do you deny that you set out to ruin my day?’

Some of the witches at the edge of the crowd started to back away.

‘I’ll grant my jam ain’t to everyone’s taste but I never -‘ Granny began, in a modest little tone.

'You've been putting a 'fluence on everyone!'

'I just set out to help, you can ask anyone -'

'You did! Admit it!' Mrs Earwig's voice was as shrill as a gull.

'- and I certainly didn't do any -'

Granny's head turned as the slap came.

For the moment no one breathed, no one moved.

She lifted a hand slowly and rubbed her cheek.

'You know you could have done it easily!'

It seemed to Nanny that Letice's scream echoed off the mountains.

The cup dropped from her hands and crunched on the stubble.

Then the tableau unfroze. A couple of her sister witches stepped forward, put their hands on Letice's shoulders and she was pulled, gently and unprotesting, away...

Everyone else waited to see what Granny Weatherwax would do. She raised her head.

'I hope Mrs Earwig is all right,' she said. 'She seemed a bit . . . distraught.'

There was silence. Nanny picked up the abandoned cup and tapped it with a forefinger.

'Hmm,' she said. 'Just plated, I reckon. If she paid ten dollars for it, the poor woman was robbed.' She tossed it to Gammer Beavis, who fumbled it out of the air. 'Can you give it back to her tomorrow, Gammer?'

Gammer nodded, trying not to catch Granny's eye.

'Still, we don't have to let it spoil everything,' Granny said pleasantly.

'Let's have the proper ending to the day, eh? Traditional, like. Roast potatoes and marshmallows and old stories round the fire. And forgiveness. And let's let bygones be bygones.'

Nanny could feel the sudden relief spreading out like a fan.

The witches seemed to come alive, at the breaking of the spell that had never actually been there in the first place. There was a general straightening up and the beginnings of a bustle as they headed for the saddlebags on their broomsticks.

'Mr Hopcroft gave me a whole sack of spuds,' said Nanny, as conversation rose around them. 'I'll go and drag 'em over. Can you get the fire lit, Esme?'

A sudden change in the air made her look up. Granny's eyes gleamed in the dusk.

Nanny knew enough to fling herself to the ground.

Granny Weatherwax's hand curved through the air like a comet and the spark flew out, crackling.

The bonfire exploded. A blue-white flame shot up through the stacked branches and danced into the sky, etching shadows on the forest. It blew off hats and overturned tables

and formed figures and castles and scenes from famous battles and joined hands and danced in a ring. It left a purple image on the eye that burned into the brain -

And settled down, and was just a bonfire.

'I never said nothin' about forget'tin',' said Granny.

When Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg walked home through the dawn, their boots kicked up the mist. It had, on the whole, been a good night.

After some while, Nanny said: 'That wasn't nice, what you done.'

'I done nothin'.'

'Yeah, well ... it wasn't nice, what you didn't do. It was like pullin' away someone's chair when they're expecting to sit down.'

'People who don't look where they're sitting should stay stood up,' said Granny.

There was a brief pattering on the leaves, one of those very brief showers you get when a few raindrops don't want to bond with the group.

'Well, all right,' Nanny conceded. 'But it was a little bit cruel.'

'Right,' said Granny.

'And some people might think it was a little bit nasty.'

'Right.'

Nanny shivered. The thoughts that'd gone through her head in those few seconds after Pewsey had screamed -

'I gave you no cause,' said Granny. 'I put nothin' in anyone's head that weren't there already.'

'Sorry, Esme.'

'Right.'

'But... Letice didn't mean to be cruel, Esme. I mean, she's spiteful and bossy and silly, but -'

'You've known me since we was girls, right?' Granny interrupted.

'Through thick and thin, good and bad?'

'Yes, of course, but -'

'And you never sank to sayin' "I'm telling you this as a friend", did you?'

Nanny shook her head. It was a telling point. No one even remotely friendly would say a thing like that.

'What's empowerin' about witchcraft anyway?' said Granny. 'It's a daft sort of a word.'

'Search me,' said Nanny. 'I did start out in witchcraft to get boys, to tell you the truth.'

'Think I don't know that?'

'What did you start out to get, Esme?'

Granny stopped, and looked up at the frosty sky and then down at the ground.

'Dunno,' she said, at last. 'Even, I suppose.'

And that, Nanny thought, was that.

Deer bounded away as they arrived at Granny's cottage.

There was a stack of firewood piled up neatly by the back door, and a couple of sacks on the doorstep. One contained a large cheese.

'Looks like Mr Hopcroft and Mr Poorchick have been here,' said Nanny.

'Hmph.' Granny looked at the carefully yet badly written piece of paper attached to the second sack:

"Dear Misftresf Weatherwax, I would be moft grateful if you would let me name thif new championfhip Variety Efine Weatherwax. Yours in hopefully good health, Percy Hopcroft.

"Well, well, well. I wonder what gave him that idea?"

'Can't imagine,' said Nanny.

'I would just bet you can't,' said Granny.

She sniffed suspiciously, tugged at the sack's string, and pulled out an Esme Weatherwax.

It was rounded, very slightly flattened, and pointy at one end. It was an onion.

Nanny Ogg swallowed. 'I told him not -'

'I'm sorry?'

'Oh ... nothing ...

Granny Weatherwax turned the onion round and round, while the world, via the medium of Nanny Ogg, awaited its fate. Then she seemed to reach a decision she was comfortable with.

'A very useful vegetable, the onion,' she said, at last. 'Firm. Sharp.'

'Good for the system,' said Nanny.

'Keeps well. Adds flavour.'

'Hot and spicy,' said Nanny, losing track of the metaphor in the flood of relief. 'Nice with cheese -'

'We don't need to go that far,' said Granny Weatherwax, putting it carefully back in the sack. She sounded almost amicable.

'You comm' in for a cup of tea, Gytha?'

'Er... I'd better be getting along -'

'Fair enough.'

Granny started to close the door, and then stopped and opened it again.

Nanny could see one blue eye watching her through the crack.

'I was right though, wasn't I,' said Granny. It wasn't a question.

Nanny nodded.

'Right,' she said.

'That's nice.'