

ROGER SPOFFIN
AND THE
ARK OF THE VENGERS KNIGHTS

By

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Middle Grade Historical Fantasy

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In an age before, when there was so much more to explore ...

CHAPTER ONE

WENTWILLINGSLEY SCHOOL, LONDON, JUNE 12, 1914

Roger Spoffin opened one eye very gently, and then the other, and tried to make sense of where he was.

'My head hurts.' He touched it as a sharp pain shot through his skull.

'There's a reason for that,' said a voice.

Roger knew the voice. He squinted as a bespectacled face with black hair, aggressively parted, drew within an inch of his own.

'Justine Beedingslump's knee ring a bell?' the face said. 'You hit it with your head.'

'Oh? Really?' Roger said. 'Why would I do such a thing?'

'Why indeed, Roger! We're all wondering that as a matter of fact.'

At last, Roger's eyes started functioning enough to see Martin Marlborough slowly shaking his head in a mix of motherly pity and utter bewilderment.

Roger propped himself up on one elbow.

'Why are you wearing a rugby jersey, Marty?'

Marty turned away.

'He doesn't remember a thing!' he said to a larger figure behind him who pushed Marty aside and leaned forward and peered down.

'You were playing rugby, Roger. Your first game, and yer tried to stop Justine Beedingslump,' the larger boy explained, treading carefully through the words. 'And so you were knocked unconscious.'

'Hello, Doff,' Roger said, recognizing him. 'Sounds potentially embarrassing. Did anyone see this? Anyone important, I mean?'

'Ah, well, only really the Headmaster and all the house masters, and the other teachers too. And the rest of the school I suppose couldn't have helped noticing, a little bit.'

Doff was very good at rugby. He stood a full head taller than Roger and had grown up tackling Shetland ponies, so he claimed, and was always first pick for any sport that involved steam-rollering the opposition. He had deep red, curly hair and was wearing his clan's one-of-a-kind tartan and paisley kilt, which he liked to refer to as, 'The best of both worlds'.

Roger looked into his deep, blue eyes and smiled.

'Well, I'm glad no one missed it.'

'All stand, for our Headmaster, Sir Reginald Totting-Smedley!' honked Felton Duck-Haemorrhage, Head Prefect, his long nose high in the air.

Doff grabbed Roger by the elbow and helped him to his feet. The change-room was still swaying when Sir Reginald Totting-Smedley waddling in, his balding head and full white beard both catching the late morning sunlight.

'On behalf of the school, may I congratulate you for a most Dashing Display this afternoon,' he bellowed. 'Faced by a ruthless opponent, you showed Courage and Conviction. Confronted by Confusion and Fear you leapt forwards with Fortitude and Pluckiness. The pains you now bear will ease, this day will pass and a new dawn will rise, should the Lord permit it, and Rugby Will Endure.'

He paused for effect and looked serenely over the tops of the heads facing him (towards that new dawn, Roger suspected) while Duck-Haemorrhage stood behind, loyally nodding.

'I have congratulated the ladies on their victory and for the honourable way in which they conducted themselves. All in all, a most gratifying game. God save the King!'

'God save the King!' every voice in the change-room bellowed back.

Smedley nodded solemnly then turned and made for the door, Duck-Haemorrhage close on his tail, but stopped as he placed his hand on the doorknob.

'Spoffin!' he called back across the injured throng. 'Mr Spigglesworth would like to see you immediately in his office. You can have your wounds seen to later.'

Without waiting for a reply, he vanished through the door.

Roger's head began thumping again, almost as if he'd plowed it into Justine Beedingslump's knee for a second time. Spigglesworth! Of all the teachers in the school Dalton Spigglesworth, Master of History and Deputy Headmaster, was by far the last he'd want to be summoned by.

Roger blew out his lips and tried to smile.

'I suppose I'll see you tonight then, at the dinner,' he said, glancing quickly from Doff to Marty. He grinned awkwardly at Duck-Haemorrhage, who propped the door open with one arm and peered down his nose as he slunk past.

Knock, knock, knock.

The heavy, dark timber door with 'History Department' written in solid gold letters loomed above Roger.

He knocked again.

Silence.

Odd. Still, it wasn't the first time Roger'd been summoned to a teacher's office to be kept waiting on the stoop. He turned around and gazed up at the chapel opposite and immediately felt a cold shiver. Those things on the roof – gargoyles – stone carved beasts with teeth and claws six inches long sat looking down at him. They appeared to be watching him intensely.

He turned back towards Spigglesworth's office. Beside the door was a magnificent stained glass window. The late morning sunlight seemed caught in the hundreds of separate pieces of glass and it glowed with a vividness Roger had never seen before. He couldn't help but reach out and press his hand against the glass, feeling the warmth of the scene. A deep blue sky framed a Knight standing in full battle armour, his hands resting on his sword. He was at least as tall as Roger and looked strong, almost as if he could break out of the glass. He stood victorious over a strange creature, a serpent with wings, that lay twisted and slain at his feet. Under his arm, he held a helmet covered in tiny golden bees. Odd, Roger thought, as he gently ran his fingers across them, half expecting to be stung. Why bees?

Roger knocked, longer and harder than before.

'Mr Spigglesworth? It's me, Roger Spoffin, sir?' he yelled at the doorknob.

No one answered.

With each minute, the sun beat hotter and Roger grew more and more jittery. His head was still dully thumping and he hadn't even had a drink since being dropped back into consciousness. Above him, the glare of the gargoyles seemed piercing, almost as if they were ready to spring down at him. Roger could feel his pulse picking up and the sweat on his forehead. Whatever Spigglesworth had to see him about could wait. He had to get back down to the oval, where there were more people about, when he stopped himself. I wonder...?

With a quick look over his shoulder, he bounded up the two steps and tried the door handle. It turned! A rush of expectation and ever-so-slight wickedness brought a wide smile to his face. The door slowly swung shut behind him and all sounds from outside vanished.

Here it was. Spigglesworth's famous, fabulous office. He stood as silent as a ghost, wide-eyed and mesmerized by the wonders surrounding him. Sunlight poured through the stained glass Knight filling the room with colours so vivid Roger thought that if he walked

through them, his clothes would permanently change colour. In the middle of the room was a huge wooden and ebony desk covered in uneven stacks of books four, five, six high and up one end sat a towering glass vase filled and overflowing like a fountain with exotic and abundant white flowers trailing down and spreading across the desk. The flowers seemed to have their own light; it was as if they were gently glowing and shimmering and as he moved through the room, twice Roger thought he saw them move, (or something within them move, he couldn't be sure). The far wall was hidden by a bookcase stretching from floor to ceiling, only there wasn't a single book on its shelves. Instead, every shelf was crammed with bizarre, enormous insects sitting motionless, mounted under glass domes clutching onto little silver stands. He walked across to them, his hand outstretched. They were like jewels, their hard insect bodies covered in harsh pinchers and sharp spikes. Some were as big as a pigeon but yellow and black like a wasp and as angry-looking as though they'd been made of broken glass. Could they really have flown, Roger asked himself, as he inched closer. He had to touch one. His heart was racing and racing as he reached to lift up one of the glass domes. Were they all dead? Perhaps they were only sleeping ...

A noise came from behind him. Roger spun around to see a wide beam of sunlight fill the doorway. He nearly screamed, but it wasn't Spigglesworth. Only the wind. Then, as he turned back towards the bookcase a glint of light reflected from above the fireplace. Something metal was resting there. A sword and at first, Roger thought it looked like any number of swords on display in the British Museum, but for some reason he couldn't take his eyes off it. It was black, and yet caught the sunlight like polished steel. The scabbard was intricately carved; hundreds of words in a language he couldn't decipher were scrolling over each other all along its length. Roger reached across and closed his hands around the handle and when he checked his grip, he saw bees again, as small as his fingernail, worked into the metalwork. He tightened his fingers, almost expecting the bees to sting him. A sword! And

from another age, another world far, beyond the seas. Who was this Dalton Spigglesworth, Master of History? Who kept such fantastic artifacts close at hand?

Roger didn't wait. With one hand on the scabbard and the other on the handle he pulled the blade free. It wasn't smooth and it wasn't steel. It was roughly hewn, as if cut from white rock, and as he brought it up to his nose Roger could see dull colours lurking beneath the surface. Too-carelessly he pressed his thumb against the edge of the blade and felt a sharp sting. He whipped his hand off as a thin line of blood appeared. It was real alright, and as sharp as a razor.

He wanted to see it more clearly. He wanted the colours hiding within it to burst out in the sunlight. So, he did something that would change the course of his life. Something fairly simple really. He carried the sword outside.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ENIGMATIC DALTON SPIGGLESWORTH

Roger knew it at once. This was no ordinary sword. The moment the sunlight hit the dull, white blade, a kaleidoscope of colours broke free. It was light, almost effortless to whip back and forth through the air. He smiled at the tall Knight watching over him in the stained glass window, then swept the sword above his head and spun it in a circle like he was cutting a rainbow halo in the air. With a hearty 'ahhhh,' he flicked it back and forth in front of him.

The sword scraped the stone pavers and Roger stopped, stunned. He knelt down and reached his fingers out and ran them along a furrow a foot long and an inch deep that had appeared at the deftest of touches. Incredible! It could cut stone!

'Roger!'

He jumped to his feet, nearly dropping the sword, and spun around expecting the piercing grey eyes of Dalton Spigglesworth. Instead, Doff and Marty stood glaring at him, Doff's head cocked to one side like a quizzical cat, Marty with his hands firmly on his hips.

'What are yer doing?' Doff said.

Roger had to take several deep breaths before the shock left him.

'Come closer, lads. Have a look at this,' he said, with an excited nod.

He held the sword high above his head then, as before, swept it down and cut another furrow in the stone.

'It cuts stone! Have you ever seen anything like that?'

'That's impressive, Rog!' Doff said, glaring in genuine wonder.

'Where'd you get that from?' Marty said, doing his best to not look impressed.

'In there,' Roger said, thumbing over his shoulder at Spigglesworth's office. 'It was lying above –'

'It's Mr Spigglesworth's!?!' Marty cried and frantically searched behind him. 'Have you gone completely insane! Put it back before –'

'Yes, yes, don't pop yourself, Martin. He's nowhere around,' Roger said. 'What do you reckon, Doff? Think if I gave it a decent swing it would cleave the chapel stairs in two?'

'It might be the last straw for you with the Chaplain if you did, Rog' Doff said, with half a smile. 'If you remember, you've already broken wind three times during Morning Prayers and yer rolled that cantaloupe down the middle aisle during Smedley's induction service.'

'It was a honeydew, Doff,' Roger said. 'Different variety of melon.'

'Clearly you are still suffering immensely from your concussion,' Marty said, gobsmacked. 'That's the only reason you would be out here, where everyone can see you, holding a sword that belongs to Dalton Spigglesworth!'

Roger was still looking in the direction of the chapel, when he felt it again. A strange sensation that made his skin shiver. Someone was watching him. He nervously scanned the chapel's doorways and windows (pointless really, as they were all made of stained glass and were impossible to see through) and then ran his eyes upwards to the roof. Only the gargoyles with their long fangs and tight claws gripping the edges of the gutters stared back. Roger rubbed his eyes as Marty cried out.

'It's him!'

Up from the direction of the main oval, his hands in the pockets of his long, crimson jacket, his shoulder-length black hair sweeping back and forth, his head down - fortunately - watching his yellow crocodile leather boots, marched Dalton Spigglesworth. There was no time to risk running back inside the office to return the sword. Roger shoved the weapon back into its black scabbard and spun around to face his doom, holding the blade vertically behind his back.

'Hello, Sir!' he called out, before Spigglesworth had lifted his head.

'Spoffin! Brought your entourage with you, I see,' and Spigglesworth glanced suspiciously from Doff to Marty.

'Roger is suffering from his head injury, Mr Spigglesworth,' Marty said, nervously fumbling the words out. 'I thought we should check on him.'

'I see. I see,' Spigglesworth said slowly, when he clearly didn't. He frowned. 'I won't keep you long, Spoffin. You'll be back to the matron in ten minutes.' He strode past to his office.

'Wait for me, lads,' Roger said, and cautiously followed Spigglesworth, keeping the sword behind his back pointing up at the sky.

Spigglesworth flicked on an electric light softening the flooding effect of the stained glass on the room.

'Tea, Spoffin?'

'Ah, yes, sir,' Roger said, trying to remain calm.

Spigglesworth turned away and Roger whipped the sword up to return it above the fireplace. It slipped, clattering with a bone-freezing noise onto the white, stone hearth. Spigglesworth shot around.

'Oh, this is nice, sir!' Roger stammered, horrified. 'Where did you get it? Timbuktu?'

Spigglesworth was as still and as hard as a statue.

'Be careful with that, Spoffin. It is very precious.' His words sounded almost like they were intended to cut.

Roger gingerly replaced the sword and its black scabbard. By the time Spigglesworth had handed him a steaming cup of Earl Grey (Roger's least favourite blend), his hands were wet with perspiration.

'Your friends seem concerned about your head,' Spigglesworth said, eyebrow raised, leaning against the mantelpiece.

'Oh, it's nothing. Nothing at all,' Roger said, quickly. 'I've no idea why they took me off the field, to be frank.'

'You were unconscious, lad.'

'Ah, yes,' and Roger looked down into his tea and took a long sip.

'Now, Spoffin, tomorrow at 9 o'clock, the end-of-year examination results will be posted around the Main Quadrangle. It will not be all good news for you.'

Roger nodded as his knees started rattling along with his teacup.

'You have struggled with history all year. We both know that.'

'I *do* remember, sir,' Roger said, as if it counted for anything.

Spigglesworth frowned.

'You have failed your final history exam and as such, have failed history for the year.'

'Failed!' Roger cried. 'But, sir, I ... I studied at least three hours for that exam!'

Spigglesworth's mouth was a thin line.

'I can't fail, sir. It won't happen again! I'll work harder, sir.'

'You said that last time.'

'But, my father! What will he say? If there's one subject dear to his heart –'

'What you tell your father is not my concern, Master Spoffin.'

'I'll tell you what. Let's forget about this momentary, ah, hiccup and next year I'll work really very hard – you won't have seen anything like it – so *incredibly* hard that you'll gloat over me to all the other Masters in the school and they'll jealously gush to you, "Oh, that Roger Spoffin, he certainly knows his history, I wish I had a student who –"

'You must have suffered a greater head injury than I thought to believe I would accede to such nonsense!' Spigglesworth roared. 'You have failed history, but there is more. Let me ask you something. Who is Mr Frond?'

Roger stared at the floor and thought with all his might. The last era they'd studied in history (he was almost 50% certain of this) had been Napoleon's conquest of Europe and the Dutch East Indies; and Australia too, possibly. But Frond? Was he one of Napoleon's generals? His horse, perhaps? Before he could answer, Spigglesworth grew tired.

'Mr Archibald Frond is your biology Master, Roger. You do take biology, don't you?'

Yes, yes, yes, Roger thought. He could see Frond now. Pointing out the pertinent features of various stamens; caressing the petals of a rose, a tulip and a rhododendron in turn; waving a fistful of seagrass back and forth in a mesmerising display and mumbling incomprehensibly through it all.

'No sooner had I struck a red line through your name for "History 1914" than Mr Frond called on me. It appears his subject, biology, was also not something you considered worthy of your time and effort. He told me, and there was a lot of anger and heat in his voice, that you had failed the biology examination.'

'Oh? Indeed?'

'But almost inconceivably, that is not all,' Spigglesworth went on with hardly a breath. 'Moments before I called the Headmaster with this deeply disappointing news, your chemistry master knocked on my door.'

Roger's teacup nearly slipped from his sweaty hands.

'Mr Gibbs-Bunsen, sir? Really?'

'On any other day, the news Mr Gibbs-Bunsen had for me would have been quite a shock, but after the morning's developments he might as well have been just the next cab off the rank.' Spigglesworth stretched himself to his full height and lent over Roger. 'Three

subjects failed! Never in the history of Wentwillingsley has a student failed *three* subjects. It is an utter disgrace!

Roger's stomach cramped into a horridly tight knot. He wished he was still lying blissfully unconscious in the change-room.

'I am profoundly disappointed in you, Roger Spoffin. You can be thankful, believe it or not, of your injury today on the rugby field for it has led to a rare moment of pity from Sir Totting-Smedley. Otherwise, I have no doubt he would have agreed with my suggestion as Deputy Headmaster and expelled you from the school.'

Roger tried to swallow. His mouth was dry.

'What do you have to say for yourself?'

Roger thought for a moment.

'Anything else, sir?' Roger heard himself stammer.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Did I fail anything else, sir?'

'Not that I'm aware of,' Spigglesworth growled. 'At this stage.'

'Mathematics?' Roger said quickly, thinking hard.

Spigglesworth looked puzzled.

'Are you asking me if you also failed mathematics?'

'I didn't rate my chances too highly, I have to admit.'

'Who is your teacher?'

Roger squirmed in his seat.

'Mr Humblebert.'

'Well, he has not come to me with any news yet that you have –'

'Musical Therapy, sir? Surely –'

'The rest of your results will be posted around the quadrangle tomorrow morning at 9am,' Spigglesworth said, angrily. 'Here is what you are going to do. Tomorrow, at 9:15, you are obliged to come here to my office. For the next three weeks you will be studying, under my supervision, history, biology and chemistry whereupon you will sit three more examinations which you must pass, or you will repeat the entire year.'

Roger was blinking with every word trying to take it all in.

'Do you understand?'

'But, but, tomorrow's the start of the holidays!'

'Not for you, Spoffin.'

When Roger stepped outside, he didn't even bother to shield his eyes from the harsh sun bearing straight down onto his face. He was stunned. Three subjects failed! Saved from expulsion only by surely the most embarrassing tackle in the history of Wentwillingsley.

'All well, Rog?' Doff asked gently.

'He's overawed, I'm sure,' Marty said, with a smirk. 'Touched, perhaps for the first time, by the wonders of learning and scholarship.'

Doff cleared his throat.

'Ahem, Rog?'

Spigglesworth's strange sword mattered not a jot now. The mysterious, massive insects mounted across his bookcase might just as well have been stuffed sparrows. All he could think of was: what would his father say? What would his mother say (she'd learnt a few things about terror from her cheap novels)? His sister too? And every member of the entire school community? He would very soon be famous for all the worst reasons.

'It appears the many hours I devoted to diligently studying history, biology and chemistry have proved a wasted effort,' Roger said, trying to stop his voice from shaking. 'I failed them all and as such –'

'All of them?!?' Marty interrupted, his eyes popping forwards nearly knocking out the glass of his spectacles. 'You failed all *three* of them?'

'Yes, Martin. So, starting tomorrow, I will be studying for three weeks and then I'll resit the exams. If I don't pass, they'll send me back to kindergarten.'

'Tomorrow's the start of the holidays, Rog!' Doff cried.

'Yes, I know that.'

'Oh, what a price to pay for failing an exam!' Doff moaned.

'Three exams,' Marty added, unnecessarily.

Roger threw his head back and gazed dejectedly up at the sky and then, it happened again. Like the flash from a lightning bolt it was there, then gone. But it was real alright; the feeling that he was being watched.

CHAPTER THREE

PRAISE RUGBY DAY ANNUAL DINNER

The Wentwillingsley 'Praise Rugby Day Annual Dinner' was the final school event of the year. All the school students were expected to attend, along with their parents, and all the teachers were spread about the dining hall presumably, Roger figured, to make the evening as painful for everyone as possible.

Roger found his table, right down the back next to the kitchens. His head started aching as he noticed that the tablecloths, the serviettes, the menus, even the dark green curtains hanging around the hall were all adorned with the new Wentwillingsley school crest. Smedley had designed it himself. It featured a brown leather rugby ball framed by two mounted Knights and the motto: 'Deo. Ecclesiae. Rugbyi', which Smedley claimed meant, 'For God. For Church. For Rugby'. Or, 'For God. For Church. And Rugby is brilliant, didn't you know?' Or something like that. Doff smiled as Roger took his seat between him and Marty. Mercifully, the seating was divided with all the students together up one end of each table and their parents and teachers up the other. Roger's sister, Josephine, sat opposite with her best friend Anna.

'I am looking forward to getting my exam results tomorrow,' Anna said, with the traces of a smirk on her lips. 'I am hoping to be pleasantly surprised. You too, Roger?'

Roger's tongue caught in his throat. Did she know about him failing already? How could she?

'A surprise is certainly in order, I'm sure,' Roger mumbled, not looking at her.

She giggled and turned to Josephine.

'I have always thought, if you work hard, you will get the rewards.'

Josephine giggled. Roger coughed.

Anna da Mondova was, according to Josephine, fantastically beautiful. She had long black hair and dark brown eyes. Otherwise sensible boys in the school seemed to lose their concentration when Anna was around and had been seen to walk into closed doors and parked automobiles and 100 year-old oak trees. For Roger though, any supposed 'ravishing beauty' she possessed was cancelled out many times over by her smug, sarcastic manner. Anna always seemed to be the first to hear when someone dropped a comfortable catch in cricket or an uncomfortable gas during prayers and she delighted in drawing attention to the fact as quickly as possible. She was a foreign exchange student from a place called Andorra, which Roger had never heard of and, as he'd told her on several occasions, didn't believe in. Her almost feral disregard for boys made Roger wonder if she hadn't been raised in a dark forest by wolves.

Dink! Dink! Dink! Dink! Dink!

Roger leapt up and spun around at the loud ringing.

'Settle down, Rog,' Doff whispered, grabbing his arm and gently pulling him back down. 'A bit jumpy, aren't yer!'

Smedley stepped up to the lectern as the ringing sound of spoons tapping glasses faded. Soon, all was silence. Smedley's sparse white hair, thick white beard and twirling mustache seemed even brighter in the candle-lit room.

'Welcome! Welcome all to the Annual Wentwillingsley Praise Rugby Day Dinner! As I look around, I see many familiar and friendly faces here tonight. I see young faces with Triumph and Victory etched upon them. I see faces with Assurance and Confidence pulsing just below the surface.' Roger looked at Marty who rolled his eyes. 'I also see, I will not lie to you, the occasional face in the grip of Disappointment and Defeat.' (Roger was sure Spigglesworth gave an involuntary cough at this point.) 'We are not all made to be Victors

and Conquerors. The world can only bear so many Achilles; so many Alcibiades. Can one imagine a classroom full of Francis Drakes?' (A few teachers laughed uncomfortably and shook their heads.) 'No, no. But I do not expect as much. However, I *do* expect, and Wentwillingsley school *always* expects, that one puts in one's best effort and takes the opportunities one is given and makes the most of them. That is what we celebrate tonight and that, I am pleased to say, is the case with most of our students here. Please enjoy your evening. God save the King!'

The entire assembly rose to its feet and, 'God save the King!' rang out across the hall. As Smedley stepped down from the lectern and everyone began to re-take their seats, a faint, ancient dust fell onto Roger's head and hands. He looked up and it caught in his eyes.

'What it is?' Marty said, noticing him blinking and blinking.

Roger wiped the dust from his hair onto his plate.

'I don't know. Something's moving up there.' He looked up again but the rafters were lost in darkness.

The kitchen doors swung open and endless rows of waiters in black and whites swept into the room carrying enormous silver platters and the feast began.

Roger put on a good show during dinner, so he thought. He smiled and waved and pretended everything was right with the world, but inside he was like a tempest sea; dark and angry, turning over and over. On top of his unpleasant meeting with Spigglesworth, Smedley's brief speech had stirred a wild frustration within him. He knew those heroes - Achilles, Alcibiades, Drake too, and many others - because for all his disinterest in Spigglesworth's history classes, he had always been drawn to the lives of the great conquerors, the men who seemed more than men who marched into the night, or sailed across the seas, and who others flocked to follow to glory whether in life, or death. These heroes had a purpose he desperately wanted but there was so little adventure or glory to be

seized in London. If he studied and he excelled (as Marty did), what then? A nice job like his father had. Where was the glory in that? Even if war broke out on the continent, which everyone said soon would, he'd be too young to enlist.

'Some faces are in the grip of Disappointment and Defeat,' Anna said, with raised eyebrows as they all tucked into the roast beef. 'I wonder who the Headmaster could have meant by that?'

'Some faces are in the grip of Unattractive Smugness,' Roger said, turning towards Marty.

Doff leaned forward and gallantly changed the subject.

'Where will you be spending your holidays, Anna?' he said. 'Back on the Continent?'

'Yes. I am leaving tomorrow,' Anna said. 'My uncle has a new aeroplane. He wants to take me up in it as soon as I get back. He always wants to show me his new aeroplanes.'

'Aeroplanes?' Marty asked, stopping munching and holding his fork in midair.

'He builds them,' Anna said. 'It is not too difficult. It is a bit like a bicycle, only it has wings.'

At this, Roger burst out laughing.

'Oh, yes, of course he does, Marty, didn't you know? And I build rocketships! Care to join me lads on a trip to the moon? Make sure you pack a little extra for lunch.'

Both Marty and Doff roared in delight at the joke. Anna didn't smile.

'Have you ever seen an aeroplane, Roger?' she said.

'Yes, yes, yes, of course. Three or four of them.'

'My Uncle has taken me up in one; many times in fact,' Anna turned to Josephine. 'You must come to Andorra some day and see Europe too. It is all so close!'

'Oh, I'd love to,' and her eyes fell to her plate. 'But it's so expensive. I don't know how you can afford it,' she whispered.

Anna suddenly shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

'Oh, I don't know, really.'

'Have you ever been to Scotland?' Doff asked her, keenly.

Somehow, despite all the noise of the feast, Roger heard a soft scraping sound coming from high above. Marty heard it too. They both looked up to see more dust drifting down towards them; lit very faintly by the delicate candlelight.

'Bats,' Marty said.

Roger's stomach tightened again.

'You think so? Inside?'

Marty straightened his glasses and shrugged.

'What else could it be?'

The plates were whisked away and Smedley returned to the lectern. He stood still, his white mustache twitching ever so slightly, until silence had descended upon the room.

"'Deo. Ecclesiae. Rugby,'" he said, heavily and precisely, as if announcing the death of the Monarch. 'Were there ever truer words spoken? Have we not witnessed, even only this morning, the wonders that rugby, under the hand of God, bestows upon *all* students, both male and female?'

Clearly the post-match carnage in the boys' change room had faded from Smedley's memory, Roger figured.

'Have we not beheld the glory of the fairer sex triumphing – admittedly with the added protection of cricket bats – over their male counterparts? In life, we play a Spirited Game,' Smedley continued. 'We pass the ball of decision and we live with the consequences. We play on the Fields of Life, do we not, sidestepping Trouble and Foe, always aiming to score between the Posts Of Our Ambition.'

He paused for effect, his mustache twitching three times, and took a deep breath.

‘And when the full-time whistle blows and our mortal flesh expires, whose ears would not wish to hear, from that Referee of Referees, those treasured words, “Finely played, child. Finely played”?’

Smedley paused. Perhaps he expected to hear weeping. Or a unified cry of ‘Hallelujah’ followed by a spontaneous rousing rendition of ‘Rule Britannia’. Instead, at that precise moment, a sharp crack sounded above. Roger watched, stunned, as Anna leapt out of her seat and dove right across the table, knocking him backwards off his chair as a mighty crash sounded in the middle of the table. The cutlery and candles bounced to the floor. Josie screamed. Roger’s mother screamed. Marty screamed. Roger pushed Anna off him.

‘What is the matter with you?’ he cried.

She didn’t answer, but jumped to her feet. The whole table was standing by the time Roger had struggled back up. Every last pair of eyes were staring at him. On its side, lying on top of his unfinished pudding, lay a carved stone creature, its teeth bared in a permanent snarl. A gargoyle. Its claws gripped the air. It was close to a yard long.

Smedley leant forward on his lectern and squinted towards the commotion. The entire assembly rose to its feet, tossing their white serviettes to the floor and peering over towards the table at the back of the hall.

Roger stared at Anna, his mouth open, and then, with a terrifying sense of the hand of death reaching out to grab him, he looked up to the dark rafters. The gargoyle had fallen a long way but there was no doubt in his mind. Whoever had dropped that stone beast had meant to kill him.