

Charlotte and the Troll

By

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He could see Orion in the water of the Leeds and Liverpool canal. Occasionally the water rippled and distorted the constellation, even obliterated the stars altogether, but for the most part, he could make it out quite clearly. It was January, cold as a penguin's bottom on the open towpath, but not too bad here underneath the bridge. Overhead, on Wellington Street, the carts moved slowly, hooves tapped on the frozen cobbles and tack tinkled in the freezing air.

From behind him, an icy breeze scooted along the path, playing with the frozen weeds on the banking. Above him, on the underbelly of the bridge, pigeons snored, and at the far end of the bridge, something moved in the nettles.

The troll watched for a while; just watched and held his breath. The rat emerged, looked right, then turned left and ran by him as though he were invisible. He shook his head and pulled out his tongue like a bad-tempered child. His stomach growled. It was going to be a long night, he thought.

It had always been the troll's ambition to strike it rich, absolutely stinking filthy rich. Rich enough to eat all day every day and not have to worry where the money came from. And in the hopes of striking it rich, he hid this evening beneath his favourite bridge.

* * *

Two whole chandeliers lit the room brightly; thirty-two candles glowing, slowly turning the high white ceiling a sooty dark colour. Their light was bright enough to illuminate, through the rippled glass, a small garden tended by Mrs Bolton, encircled by a miniature topiary privet hedge that ran from the entrance door, all the way around to this classroom.

And the room was hot too. In the breast of the brick chimney, a hearty coal fire crackled enthusiastically. Most of the smoke swam away up that chimney but a fair

contingent made it out into the classroom; and in no particular hurry, it seemed, circled the room once or twice and then left by an open sash at the back of the room.

In the flames, suspended by metal rods anchored to the fireplace walls, was a large black pot with a pouring spout like those found on jugs of evaporated milk. And on the hearth, an array of wooden-handled utensils and a row of brick-shaped moulds, like jelly moulds but... brick-shaped. On a shelf nearby were jars donated from Mrs Bolton's scullery, and they were labelled *sulfur*, *mercury*, and *salt*.

A shiny grey liquid bubbled in the pot, which was definitely not a cauldron – if one were to mention the word 'cauldron' to Master, one was likely to feel the cane around one's posterior. If he didn't have his cane to hand, which was rare, then he would likely as not throw a lump of chalk at you. And he was a damned fine shot. Cauldrons, he would say, are what witches use. Confounded creatures. Their cauldrons are made of cast iron, useless horrible pig iron. My pot, he would glare at the students, is made from the finest bronze, the same metal in fact, as the best church bells in the whole land.

And Master knew his metals; it was his craft, his art.

Opposite the open sash, at the head of the room, was a blackboard scribbled upon so much, and rubbed out so much, that a narrow hillock of chalk dust lay in the parquet floor beneath it, and clouds of chalk dust mingled with the smoke and the soot until the room had a foggy, grey appearance. Above the blackboard, carved into the stonework, the words Modern Alchemy G Instructive Centre.

The class of twelve pupils – sorry, *students*, sat attentively as Master pulled from the burning coals a strip of, "Mild steel," he grinned. "A new amalgam of elements making this particular alloy more flexible even than wrought iron. See it glow? When it glows as red as Mrs Bolton's cherries, it..." he tapered off, seeming to consider his choice of words, then cleared his throat and continued, "the flame is at 600 degrees Celsius." He peered around the room, and gradually, consternation dominated his round face. "Write it down."

They did, all twelve students put chalk to slate and wrote it down diligently.

Master took out his pocket watch and glared at it. Evidently, he was not pleased by what it said, as he stuffed it back into the tiny pocket in his waistcoat with no thought of grace or care. He stared at the thirteenth desk and at its chair. Both completely empty of student. "And when the flame is at 600 degrees Celsius, it is... well it's very warm actually; hot in fact. It is indeed hot enough to keep my pot of lead in a state of liquidness." Master replaced the mild steel strip and twisted the ends of his moustache, a sure sign that things planned had gone awry.

Charlotte looked up from her slate, and wondered if Master was all right.

Felix asked, "Master, is everything all right?"

Charlotte glared at Felix.

Master twisted his moustache with even more gusto, and then eyed the young lad.

"No, Master Felix, it is not. I await Master Gilbert."

* * *

The troll was seven feet tall, and smelled of body odour and Germolene. The Germolene was for the grazes on his head. For some reason he had chosen one of the lowest bridges in Leeds as his home. He'd considered moving away from it more than once, but the pickings, you see, the pickings were rich.

Always plenty of young meat.

Okay, usually. Well, sometimes.

The troll's nose began to twitch, ever so slightly at first, and then it began to move from side to side, and then up and down. Both nostrils fought each other to capture the majority of the smell that wafted into the tunnel. The troll smiled. Soon afterwards his ears pricked up as they caught the clippety clop of the clogs from a youngster heading this way. The sound grew slightly louder, the grit beneath the clogs crunched. The troll grinned; this youngster was heavy.

The troll's mouth opened slightly and saliva dripped from his lower lip, and landed on his waistcoat. His stomach growled and his eyes widened to see a podgy youth walking tentatively from the light cast by the gas lamps on Wellington Street, into the darkness that was the troll's home. The troll stood, banged his head on the low cast iron beam and groaned. Not again, he thought, that's twice today. For a moment, he pondered whether to get a hat or whether to lag the beams with the clothes of the youngsters. It did seem an awful waste throwing them away each time.

He could feel a headache coming on.

The troll ambled into the centre of the path and was gladdened to see the youth stop. Dead. "Who is there?" the troll asked in a deep echoing voice.

Twine held up his sacking kegs, and sewn onto them was a pocket. From that pocket the youth took out a long match, the kind you'd find in a scullery. He struck it, and a yellow sparking light belched onto his trembling face. From beneath waves of slick black hair, the

plump young fellow looked at the Troll. He swallowed and then bravely said, “My name is Gilbert.”

The Troll took a pace forward, his claws glinting in the light. He smiled at the youth and more saliva patted onto the path. “Gilbert, eh?”

“Aye,” Gilbert said.

“And what business have you in my tunnel, Gilbert?”

“I wish to pass, and my business is my own.”

The troll’s eyebrows rose at that. “Is that so? Awfully brave for a young one.”

The match wavered and Gilbert hurriedly shielded the flame. He tried to speak but nothing more than damp air came out. The troll laughed, “Not really very brave are we, Gilbert?” The troll took a step forward. Gilbert took a step backward. The troll took another step forward. Gilbert took another step backward. The Troll sighed, “This got old very quickly.” He took out his knife, polished the blade on his shirt and marvelled at the light dancing along its curved edge; he also marvelled at how Gilbert’s knees knocked. “Tell you what,” he said, “I’ll let you pass to go about your business if you pay me, or challenge me. Or,” he smiled, “you die.” And then he whispered, “Growl,” with a little giggle on the end.

Gilbert’s mouth fell open.

“Fair enough?”

Gilbert gulped.

“So, pay me a shilling.”

Gilbert said nothing. By this time, a shiny trail of snot had run out of Gilbert’s left nostril, around the curve of his ever-open mouth and was dangling from this quivering chin. He reached into his pocket and took out a shilling.

The Troll looked at Gilbert’s snot trail, watched it sway in the breeze, and loved the way it shook as the youngster shivered. He licked his lips and wondered if he ought to renege on the deal and kill him anyway. He was jolly hungry. But no, that would be dishonourable, and the Troll was nothing if... He bit down on his lip, made himself ignore the dangling snot, and swallowed the bucketful of saliva that swam over his writhing tongue, forcing himself to ignore the incessant growling inside his stomach.

Gilbert tossed the coin and the Troll deftly caught it without taking his eyes off the kid. It was sad, he thought, that there was no one willing to challenge him. He nodded to Gilbert, “Go on,” he said, “pass freely and go about your business.”

Gilbert took a step forward, and the troll edged to the wall so the boy could pass. The clippety clop of clogs resumed at a much more cautious pace until after Gilbert was past. He

could have been mistaken, but he was sure he heard a little parp as the boy drew level with him, and could have sworn his kegs inflated a tad, a bit like a smithies bellows. The clippety clop grew quicker until the Troll said, “Gilbert?”

The clogs stopped on the path, a swirl of dust twisted around the kid’s legs. “Yes?” he asked in a thin little voice.

“Don’t have any paracetamol on you by any chance?”

* * *

His breath formed a perpetual cloud before his eyes, and the gas lanterns illuminated it like his own private fog. The smoke from the mills was low, almost choking, and the noise was incessant: hooves on cobbles, steam engines grinding away, criers yelling something about children disappearing – repeatedly.

The Troll moved along swiftly, eyes flicking left and right. The street was busy with traders, the shouts of deals being struck, and the smack of faces being struck; ah the delights of commerce, he thought. For the most part, people didn’t pay him too much attention, which was nice. They were busy, and the gas light wasn’t exactly strong enough to sear your eyes, and the gentlemen who wore those ridiculous top hats to make themselves appear taller or grander almost obscured him, for which he was grateful. He didn’t particularly want a scene, not tonight; he was tired and hungry, and his nose was quite cold. And as if that wasn’t enough, he was sure he had an ingrowing toenail.

The bell tinkled as the Troll entered the shop. The heat in here was refreshingly pleasant and the personal fog evaporated within a stride or two. And the smell... aaaahh, the smell was delicious, and the sight of so many fondants was almost cruel. Eyes turned to look at the new customer, and the Troll shuffled further into the shop, leaving the door ajar for those who fancied a quick exit.

Behind the counter, the baker’s nose wrinkled and he looked up, saw the Troll and peered through slatted eyes. In return, the Troll nudged his eyebrows, he would have nudged his cap, but he didn’t have one. It was on his list, but right now other things clamoured for the top spot in the priority stakes. The baker’s assistant snuck towards the back door, and his exit made the Troll smile. People were shy, that’s all, bless them. Of the six customers in the bakery, two had accepted the open door invitation and left without making a purchase, another two edged along the counter front hoping no one would notice. One of them whistled

nonchalantly, gazing upward as though admiring the rather splendid ceiling, sliding his left foot and then his right.

The crier walked past the open door shouting, “Be on the lookout for trolls.”

“I’ll have two of your finest flaky pastry Cornish pasties, please,” smiled the Troll.

The baker eyed him with suspicion, then reached for a bag and slid the pasties inside.

“Oooh, and a slice of that delicious-looking broccoli quiche.”

In the distance, the crier shouted, “Real men don’t eat quiche!”

“Make that a custard tart instead.”

The baker reached for a custard tart as the Troll looked at the fondants, eyes sweeping them all, stomach tearing at his waistcoat trying to get out, just as the whistling customer made the door and slipped and tripped away from the shop in a frenzy of arms and legs.

“That it?” the baker asked.

“Think so.”

“Two shillings and sixpence.”

“Ah,” the Troll said, as yet another customer made it out of the door to safety. “I appear to have but one shilling, sir.”

“One shilling buys the custard tart.”

“Shame that. I could spend another ten minutes bartering with you,” he smiled. “And how many customers would be left in your establishment by then?”

For a moment, as he deliberated the threat, the baker’s mouth squeezed to a tight white line. “One shilling. Take the food and get out.”

Quick as the blink of an eye, the Troll flicked the coin, scooped up the bags, and he was at the door just as the next customer said, “I’ll have what he had. For the same price.”

* * *

The next evening, all twelve pupils students watched the large pot in the fireplace. The mild steel strip, they could see, was glowing as hot as Mrs Bolton’s cherries, and every now and then the molten lead inside would pop like a parp in a bathtub. Mrs Bolton’s jugs were still there on the shelf: sulfur, mercury and salt, as if waiting for something. Master himself, had been fiddling with something for the last fifteen minutes, but at last his preparations were complete and he held aloft a clear glass bulb that seemed to glow all by itself.

All the students' gawped, their mouths wide in wonderment, and an excited chatter spread around the room.

"Calm down, students, calm down."

"What is it?" they all asked.

"Aha, for years people wondered what that the small white squares were that came attached to the walls. They thought they were simply a rather plain vertical ornament," he said. "But no, we scientists have determined that the three holes have function as well as a certain aesthetic appeal." He stepped aside, sweeping an arm towards the wonderment. "If one plugs in one of these extremely rare bulbs, it illuminates thus," he smiled widely.

A small ripple of applause greeted him.

"It's quite bright as you'll see presently." Using a wooden cranked lever, Master lowered both chandeliers. "This is the only such bulb we have in all of Leeds, and we at the Society shall be featuring it at next years' Christmas Lecture in London."

Another coo from the students.

"Here, Charlotte, hold this very carefully." Master passed the bulb to Charlotte, and then extinguished the candles.

Charlotte grabbed the bulb marvelling at the light in the palm of her hand that was strong enough to turn her fingers pink, feeling the eyes of her classmates on her as the candles went out. And then she felt the heat of the bulb, screamed and dropped it on the floor.

Smash. Tinkle.

"Oops," she said. "Sorry."

By the light of the fire, Charlotte could see Master close his eyes and breathe in very very deeply, nervously twisting his moustache. She was about to ask Master if everything was all right.

Gilbert, asked, "Master, is everything all right?"

Charlotte glared at Gilbert.

Master twisted his moustache with even more gusto, then eyed the young lad. "No, Master Gilbert, it is not. I await Master Felix."

* * *

The troll watched the rats coming out of the triangle of nettles near the path, and was about to bring out the blade when he heard it, quite plainly. The clippety clop of someone approaching his tunnel. His eyes widened, and then his mouth did. Last night's Cornish

pasties were lovely and the custard tart had been a rare treat, but his damned stomach was crying out again. And he had resigned to the fact that rats were on the menu again, until the lovely clippety clop of footsteps.

His mouth watered as he stood, back against the stone wall, breath leaking out in tiny miniature clouds this time.

The footsteps slowed, then stopped. The troll peered out onto the tow path, and in the gas light from Wellington Street above, he could see another youth; this one was on the skinny side, wore smooth leather moccasins and breeches. He also wore a flat cap and an old man's jacket.

The troll took a hefty pace and banged his head on the cast iron girder. He closed his eyes, and his lips trembled. As he reached inside a pocket for the tin of Germolene, the youth looked on with curiosity. He began to feel a headache coming on, and knowing his luck it would be a migraine before midnight and that would be another night's sleep ruined. Utterly.

"You look familiar," said the troll. "Your name's not Bert, is it?"

"What?" said the youth.

"Oh, never mind." The troll screwed the lid back on the tin of Germolene and put it back in his pocket. He cleared his throat and said, "Who is there?"

From the darkness, the youth took out a long match, the kind you'd find in a scullery. The match struck and yellow sparking light belched onto his thin face. He looked at troll, and then bravely said, "My name is Felix."

Troll took a pace forward, his claws glinted in the light. He smiled at the youth and more saliva patted onto the path. "Felix, eh?"

"Aye," said Felix.

"And what business have you in my tunnel, Felix?"

"I wish to pass, and my business is my own."

Troll's eyebrows rose at that. "Is that so? Jolly brave for a young one."

"Yes I am, and I challenge—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute!"

The troll took a step forward. Felix took a step backward. The troll took another step forward. Felix took another step backward. The troll grinned, "Never gets old, that; never." He took out his knife, polished the blade on his shirt and marvelled at the light dancing along its curved edge. "Tell you what," he said, "I'll let you pass to go about your business if you pay me, or challenge me. Or," he smiled, "you die." And then he whispered, "Growl," with a little giggle on the end.

“I challenge you to a race,” smiled Felix.

“A race?”

Felix nodded.

“What kind of race?”

“A running race.”

“A running race?”

Felix nodded.

“You and me?”

“You and me,” said Felix.

“I’m not what you might call one of life’s natural athletes.”

Felix shrugged, “It’s my challenge.”

“But I have an ingrowing toenail.”

Felix simply stared.

The troll screwed his eyes up; he hated smart kids. “Very well,” he said, “where to?”

“My school.”

The troll rubbed his chin in thought. “You have me at a slight disadvantage there since I don’t know *where your school is!*”

Felix pointed along the towpath. “Two hundred and fifty yards that way.”

The troll cracked his knuckles. “Sure you wouldn’t rather just pay me?”

“After three,” said Felix.

The troll scratched his chin in thought, then assumed the position, right leg forward, left leg at an angle, ready to push off, head down for aerodynamic efficiency.

“Three. Two. One...go!” Felix was off like a scolded whippet, arms pumping, feet kicking dust.

The troll stood upright, and wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. As the kid exited the darkness of the tunnel and entered the yellowy glow from the gas lamps on Wellington Street overhead, the troll reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out his tin of Germolene. He wet his index finger, held it up in the air, did a few rough calculations then lobbed it at the kid.

He began walking. Then he heard a dink and thud.

The reach of the gas lamps was fading here and up in the distance he could see the building he supposed Felix referred to as his school. Felix, it seemed, was out cold and the tin of Germolene, complete with a fresh dent in the side, was in the weeds nearby. The troll picked it up, wiped it on his waistcoat and replaced it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

And even though it was only just above freezing, he dipped his fingers into the canal and dabbed the wetness across his mucky forehead, began panting, and then roused dear old Felix.

After a couple of well-aimed slaps, Felix's eyes flickered and then sprang open. "You cheat," he said.

The troll panted harder, wiped a sleeve across the 'sweat' on his forehead, creating a clean stripe. "Beg your paradox?"

"You cheat."

"I beat you fair and square, Felix. So stop it with the bad loser attitude; you know no one likes a bad—"

"Did you touch the school?" Felix shakily clambered to his feet.

"Of course I did," and the troll took out his knife and held it at Felix's throat. "And you lose." He smiled and a squirt of saliva caught the kid right in the eye. "Sorry," he said, wiping it away. His stomach growled.

"I can't believe you're going to slash my throat."

"Well, it's for a reason, Felix."

"What reason?"

"Well, when I cut your throat, most of the blood spurts out, see? The more blood I leave inside the worse you're going to taste. And let me tell you," he looked up and then down the tow path, and whispered, "I have a very delicate constitution—"

"I'll pay."

Troll's face went limp. "Sorry? What?"

"I'll pay you."

"Now wait a moment. Let me do a quick recap on the rules for you. You can, I said, *either* pay me, *or* challenge me."

Suddenly a light came on in Felix's eyes. He grinned. "And then what did you say?"

"I'm not with you, dear boy."

"You said, 'You can pay me, or challenge me, or die.'"

"Yeeees, that's right." The troll's eyes looked left and right. His nostrils fought each other again.

"So, I challenged you—"

"And lost!"

"And lost—"

"So you agree!"

“Shush a minute!”

“Sorry,” said the troll.

“You gave me a choice of three: pay, challenge, or die. I challenged, therefore I cannot die.”

“Ah, but—” The troll put his finger in the air and was about to wag it, when he realised the kid was right. His mouth closed with a clang. His stomach growled and his nostrils dropped drooped again. “I’m going to have to revise my terms and conditions.”

Felix used the very edge of his finger to push away the troll’s knife. He smiled up at him.

The troll glared down at him. “I accept your offer of payment.”

“Too late.” With his nose in the air, Felix walked calmly away.

“But—”

“Ah!” Felix put his finger in the air.

“But...”

Felix disappeared into the night, and a minute later, the troll could see his silhouette in the gas lamps surrounding the school.

“I hate children,” the troll kicked at the towpath and dejectedly headed back to his bridge to try and find a rat.

* * *

“So, does anyone have a match?”

“Sorry, Master,” said Gilbert, “I gave them to Felix.”

The school door slammed and there was a clippety clop sound on the floor outside the classroom door.

“Shhh,” whispered the Master.

The large oak door to the classroom groaned on old hinges, and everyone held their breath. From the doorway, there was a small parp and everyone exhaled. And then hurriedly held their breath again.

Felix stood alongside the Master in front of the massive fire, his leather moccasins crunching glass underfoot. “He cheats,” he told the Master.

Gilbert laughed, “Loser.” And then he saw the look in Felix’s eyes and stopped laughing.

The Master held out his hand. “Matches, please.”

“Please, Master, let me try,” Charlotte left her desk and stood before him, her hands folded before her, her head down, peering at him through the tops of her eyes.

Felix laughed at her.

“Shut up, Felix,” said the Master. He considered her request for a short time, and though he really didn’t blame her for dropping the only light bulb in Leeds, the one that would have brought him fame in next years’ Christmas Lecture, he rather hoped the troll would eat her. “Light the candles, Felix. Then give Charlotte the matches.”

* * *

The troll was sitting on the cold towpath beneath his bridge. The rats scurried over his outstretched legs. He watched them and his bottom lip began to quiver. “Even the rats aren’t scared anymore.” His stomach punched his ribcage from the inside, and he was about to become quite mad with it when his nostrils flared and then pulled his head around and stood proud. They pointed (and fought) to the entrance to his tunnel.

His eyes widened slightly, and in anticipation, even his stomach held its breath. And then he heard a faint clippety clop on the towpath. Out of the smoky fog and into the yellow halo of the gas lamp from overhead, stepped a young girl. She was barefoot, skinny legged, skinny armed, with a scrawny neck. Not much more than an aperitif. His stomach punched him again. “Alright, alright,” he whispered.

The clippety clop started again as her bare feet came closer, out of the lamp light and into his tunnel. The troll stood up quickly and smacked his head on the cast iron girder. His eyes watered and inside his boots, his toes curled. But he refused to scream, so he whimpered slightly instead. “Who is there?” his voice cracked.

From the darkness, the young girl took out a long match, the kind you’d find in a scullery. The match struck and yellow sparking light belched onto her thin face. She looked at the troll, and she smiled at him, “My name is Charlotte.”

Troll took a pace forward, his claws glinted in the light. He didn’t smile at her though, didn’t really feel much like smiling. But his stomach pushed saliva out of his mouth and it patted onto the path. “Charlotte, eh?”

“Aye,” said Charlotte.

“And what business have you in my tunnel, Charlotte?”

“I wondered if you’d like to come for a walk with me.”

Troll’s eyebrows rose at that. “Is that so? Extremely brave for a young one.”

“Oh that’s nice,” she said. “Do you really think so? Everyone else thinks I’m a bit slow.”

The troll took a step forward. Charlotte took a step forward too. The Troll took another step forward. Charlotte took a step forward too. The Troll sighed, “Am I taking very big strides tonight?”

He took out his knife, polished the blade on his shirt and marvelled at the light dancing along its curved edge; he also marvelled at how Charlotte’s dainty little fingers held onto the match. “Tell you what,” he said, “I’ll let you pass to go about your business if you pay me, or challenge me. Or,” he smiled, “you die.” And then he whispered, “Growl,” with a little giggle on the end. “Oh no, wait a mo, wait a mo.” He patted his pocket and pulled out a scroll, which unfurled as he held it high. “I got stung by a kid earlier,” he snapped, “it will not happen again.” He turned the scroll around, and in fancy script across the top it said, ‘Terms and Conditions’, and then below in tiny script, it began, ‘I hereby agree that I shall be eaten...’ The troll pointed to a dotted line at the bottom. “Sign there.”

Charlotte smiled up at him. “But I don’t have a pen.”

The troll’s mouth fell open. He tossed the scroll into the water, “So pay me a shilling.”

She smiled up at him, and took hold of his hand. “But I don’t have any money, silly.”

He looked down at her hand. It squeezed the first two fingers of his. He swallowed. “So I get to eat you.”

“My father says I’m all skin and bone,” she jerked his hand and began walking, “so I don’t think I’d fill you up.”

“Very well,” he said, taking tiny strides by her side, “I’ll take a sixpence.”

She giggled, “Haven’t got a sixpence either.”

“Penny?”

“Nope.”

“Farthing?”

“Sorry.”

“Paracetamol?”

* * *

Together, they walked through the patch of darkness between the gas lamps above his bridge on Whitehall Road, and those to which they now approached, surrounding the school.

“This your place?”

“Oh yes,” Charlotte said through a beaming smile. “It’s a wonderful school—”

“I am very educated, thank you very much. I do not need—”

“Oh no, you misunderstand, sir.”

“I do?”

“You do indeed. I’m taking you to our kitchen. I’m going to dig out some buns for you...”

Something behind his waistcoat whistled.

“...Mrs Bolton has scrummy buns.”

“She does?”

“But first, I’d like to ask a little favour of you.”

They approached the gas lit garden with its ornate plants and shrubs, with its splendidly ornate private privet hedge.

“That’s called topiary,” beamed Charlotte.

“I knew that. Who keeps this garden?”

“Mrs Bolton, of course.”

“Ah, of course. I must say Mrs Bolton has a splendid bush.”

They walked beneath a metal banner spanning two cast iron columns. Cut from the banner were the words Modern Alchemy G Instructive Centre.

“What does the ‘G’ stand for?” asked the troll.

“Ssshhh,” whispered Charlotte. “No one seems to know.” She stopped, peered around, “And they don’t like it mentioning for some reason.”

Moments later they walked along towards a large oak door. Their footfalls echoed; his clud clud from his big leather boots, and her clippety clop from her bare feet. And then she stopped, and looked up at him. “Don’t worry about anything.”

“Okay,” he said.

The door opened and their foggy breath dispersed as they entered, and the heat from the fire washed over them. The chattering inside the classroom ceased as though shock had dried up the children’s tongues. “Hello Gilbert,” said the troll. “Hello Felix.”

The boys looked at him with slack jaws, and a tiny parp fell out of Gilbert’s kegs. “This is Mr Troll,” announced Charlotte. “And he’s lovely.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr Troll.” The Master extended his hand and shook the troll’s with vigour. “Some of the boys have been trying to get you to come here for days.” He stared at Gilbert and Felix. “And they failed.”

The boys folded their arms, and resolutely stared forward, lips out, eyes dampened.

“And this,” the Master swept an arm aside, “is Mrs Bolton.”

The troll took Mrs Bolton’s gloved hand in his and bowed his head slightly.

“Oh my,” said Mrs Bolton, standing on tip-toe, “you have blood leaking from your head, sir.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“How fortuitous,” smiled the Master.

“It is?” asked the troll.

“We need some of your blood, Mr Troll,” Charlotte looked up at him.

“But why?”

“Ah,” the Master gently unhooked Charlotte’s hand from his and led him across the parquet floor, through the small mound of chalk dust to stand before the blazing fire and the black pot. “We are about to turn molten lead into gold.”

“I see,” said the troll, “that’s why your banner mentions ‘Alchemy,’” the Master nodded. “But I’m curious to know what the ‘G’ stands for.”

The Master, and Charlotte, and those students who were paying attention, all gasped as one. They turned to Mrs Bolton. Her face had clouded over, her eyes had become tight slits and her hands had curled into fists beneath the lace cuffs of her blouse.

“Well,” he asked again of her. “What does the ‘G’ stand for?”

“I am too ashamed to reply, sir.”

“Then I am unable to donate any of my blood.”

She stared at him for quite some time. Feet shuffled, noses were scratched, coal spat sparks. “Very well, if you insist.” She cleared her throat. “When I first obtained this building and decided I would use it for the education of young persons, of course alchemy was at the heart of its teachings, and I thought it an utterly magical topic.” She paused, looked around at her audience. “So I wanted magic as its title.”

“Go on,” said the troll.

“But I... I couldn’t think of a word beginning with ‘G’ that sat well among the others.”

Gilbert snorted and the Master gave him a cold hard stare.

“I see,” said the troll. “Why can’t you tear out the signs and have new ones made? Perhaps you could call it ‘The Golden Centre?’”

“Entirely out of the question, unfortunately. I can barely afford to keep the place afloat.”

The troll nodded. “So, how much blood do you need?”

“Oh my word,” said the Master, “I’m not entirely sure. You see, we’ve waited years for—”

“All I need to know is that you don’t need it all,” he smiled.

“No, no, just a few drops into my pot.”

Curiosity took hold of the troll now and pulled him closer. “What is in here?” He quickly leaned forward and smacked his head on the stone mantelpiece and before he could even begin to grimace, a tiny rivulet of pure troll blood oozed from the crown of his head and splashed into the molten lead.

“Quick, quick,” shouted the Master, “grab Mrs Bolton’s jugs!”

“I’ll do no such—”

“The salt,” he screamed, “the mercury and the sulfur.”

The troll grabbed the salt jug and poured it into the pot as Charlotte grabbed the mercury, and Mrs Bolton the sulfur. In it all went and the Master grabbed the mild steel strip and stirred it vigorously. Mrs Bolton dabbed at the troll’s wound.

Everyone stood back as he the Master stirred and stirred. Sparks flew from within the pot, a strange brown smoke spewed over the brim and for a moment the fire beneath the pot died down, and then it glowed a bright yellow.

“What’s your name?” Charlotte tore her eyes from the firelight, and looked up at the troll him.

He shrugged. “I don’t think I have a name. What would you like to call me?”

Charlotte thought for a moment, and then said, “Stan.”

Stan slapped a hand over his eyes, and shook his head in despair as Charlotte giggled.

The Master continued to stir; sweat dripping from his brow hissed into the fire. Charlotte clung onto Stan’s hand at one side, and Mrs Bolton at the other.

Eventually, the Master stopped stirring, stood up straight and held up the mild steel strip. It was coated in the brightest, shiniest gold anyone had ever seen.

“Looks like you’ll be able to afford new signs after all,” Stan said.

The whole classroom erupted with joyous shouts and screams of utter elation. Charlotte flung herself at Stan and hugged him tightly, until his stomach punched her in the

side of the face. Stan looked at her apologetically, and then turned to Mrs Bolton. "Time to show me your buns," he smiled.