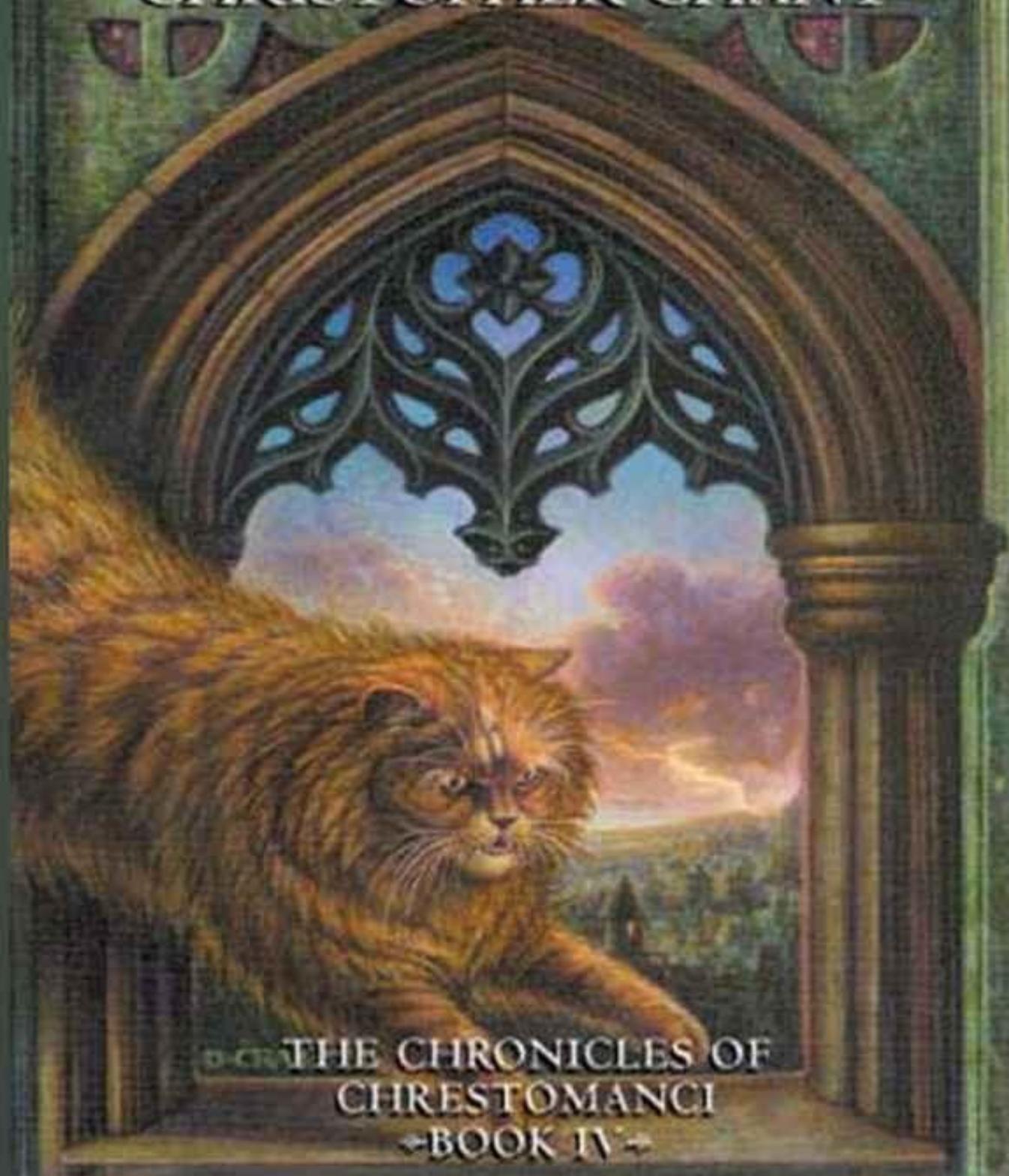


DIANA WYNNE JONES

THE LIVES of
CHRISTOPHER CHANT



THE CHRONICLES OF
CHRESTOMANCI
→BOOK IV←

Diana Wynne Jones

The Chronicles of Chrestomanci

The Lives of Christopher Chant

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Leo
who got hit on the head
with a cricket bat*

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THERE ARE THOUSANDS of worlds, all different from ours. Chrestomanci's world is the one nearest door to us, and the difference here is that magic is as common as music is with us. It is full of people working magic—warlocks, witches, thaumaturges, sorcerers, fakirs, conjurors, hexers, magicians, mages, shamans, diviners and many more—from the lowest Certified witch right up to the most powerful of enchanters. Enchanters are strange as well as powerful. Their magic is different and stronger and many of them have more than one life.

Now, if someone did not control all these busy magic-users, ordinary people would have a horrible time and probably end up as slaves. So the government appoints the very strongest enchanter there is to make sure no one misuses magic. This enchanter has nine lives and is known as “the Chrestomanci.” You pronounce it KREST-OH-MAN-SEE. He has to have a strong personality as well as strong magic.

DIANA WYNNE JONES

Everything in this book happens at least
twenty-five years before the story told in
Charmed Life.

IT WAS YEARS before Christopher told anyone about his dreams. This was because he mostly lived in the nurseries at the top of the big London house, and the nursery maids who looked after him changed every few months.

He scarcely saw his parents. When Christopher was small, he was terrified that he would meet Papa out walking in the Park one day and not recognize him. He used to kneel down and look through the banisters on the rare days when Papa came home from the City before bedtime, hoping to fix Papa's face in his mind. All he got was a foreshortened view of a figure in a frock coat with a great deal of well-combed black whisker, handing a tall black hat to the footman, and then a view of a very neat white parting in black hair, as Papa marched rapidly under the stairway and out of sight. Beyond knowing that Papa was taller than most footmen, Christopher knew little else.

Some evenings, Mama was on the stairs to meet Papa, blocking Christopher's view with wide silk skirts and a multitude of frills and draperies. "Remind your master," she would say icily to the footman, "that there is a Reception in this house tonight and that he is required for once in his life to act as host."

Papa, hidden behind Mama's wide clothing, would reply in a deep gloomy voice, "Tell Madam I shall have a great deal of work brought home from the office tonight. Tell her she should have warned me in advance."

"Inform your master," Mama would reply to the footman, "that if I'd warned him, he would have found an excuse not to be here. Point out to him that it is my money that finances his business and that I shall remove it if he does not do this small thing for me."

Then Papa would sigh. "Tell Madam I am going up to dress," he would say. "Under protest. Ask her to stand aside from the stairs."

Mama never did stand aside, to Christopher's disappointment. She always gathered up her skirts and sailed upstairs ahead of Papa, to make sure Papa did as she wanted. Mama had huge lustrous eyes, a perfect figure and piles of glossy black curls. The nursery maids told Christopher Mama was Beauty. At this stage in his life, Christopher thought everyone's parents were like this; but he did wish Mama would give him a view of Papa just once.

He thought everyone had the kind of dreams he had, too. He did not think they were worth mentioning. The dreams always began the same way. Christopher got out of bed and walked around the corner of the night nursery wall—the part with the fireplace, which jutted out—onto a rocky path high on the side of a valley. The valley was green and steep, with a stream rushing from waterfall to waterfall down the middle, but Christopher never felt there was much point in following the stream down the valley. Instead he went up the path, around a large rock, into the part he always thought of as The Place Between. Christopher thought it was probably a leftover piece of the world, from before somebody came along and made the world properly. Formless slopes of rock towered and slanted in all directions. Some of it was hard and steep, some of it piled and rubbly, and none of it had much

shape. Nor did it have much color—most of it was the ugly brown you get from mixing every color in a paintbox. There was always a formless wet mist hanging around this place, adding to the vagueness of everything. You could never see the sky. In fact, Christopher sometimes thought there might not be a sky: he had an idea that the formless rock went on and on in a great arch overhead—but when he thought about it, that did not seem possible.

Christopher always knew in his dream that you could get to Almost Anywhere from The Place Between. He called it Almost Anywhere because there was one place that did not want you to go to it. It was quite near, but he always found himself avoiding it. He set off sliding, scrambling, edging across bulging wet rock, and climbing up or down, until he found another valley and another path. There were hundreds of them. He called them the Anywheres.

The Anywheres were mostly quite different from London. They were hotter or colder, with strange trees and stranger houses. Sometimes the people in them looked ordinary, sometimes their skin was bluish or reddish and their eyes were peculiar, but they were always very kind to Christopher. He had a new adventure every time he went on a dream. In the active adventures people helped him escape through cellars of odd buildings, or he helped them in wars, or in rounding up dangerous animals. In the calm adventures, he got new things to eat and people gave him toys. He lost most of the toys as he was scrambling back home over the rocks, but he did manage to bring back the shiny shell necklace the silly ladies gave him, because he could hang it around his neck.

He went to the Anywhere with the silly ladies several times. It had blue sea and white sand, perfect for digging and building in. There were ordinary people in it, but Christopher only saw them from the distance. The silly ladies came and sat on rocks out of the sea and giggled at him while he made sand castles.

“Oh clistoffer!” they would coo, in lispings voices. “Tell us what make you a clistoffer.” And then they would all burst into screams of high laughter.

They were the only ladies he had seen without clothes on. Their skins were greenish and so was their hair. He was fascinated by the way the ends of them were big silvery tails that could curl and flap almost like a fish could, and send powerful sprays of water over him from their big finned feet. He never could persuade them that he was not a strange animal called a clistoffer.

Every time he went to that Anywhere, the latest nursery maid complained about all the sand on his bed. He had learned very early on that they complained even louder when they found his pajamas muddy, wet and torn from climbing through The Place Between. He took a set of clothes out onto the rocky path and left them there to change into. He had to put new clothes there every year or so, when he grew out of the latest torn and muddy suit, but the nursery maids changed so often that none of them noticed. Nor did they notice the strange toys he brought back over the years. There was a clockwork dragon, a horse that was really a flute, and the necklace from the silly ladies which, when you looked closely, was a string of tiny pearl skulls.

Christopher thought about the silly ladies. He looked at his latest nursemaid's feet, and he thought that her shoes were about big enough to hide the flippers at the end of her tail. But you could never see any more of any lady because of her skirts. He kept wondering how Mama and the nursemaid walked about on a big limber tail and flippers, instead of legs and feet.

His chance to find out came one afternoon when the nursery maid put him into an unpleasant sailor-suit and led him downstairs to the drawing room. Mama and some other ladies were there with someone called Lady Badgett, who was a kind of cousin of Papa's. She had asked to see Christopher. Christopher stared at her long nose and her wrinkles. “Is she a witch, Mama?” he asked loudly.

Everyone except Lady Badgett—who went more wrinkled than ever—said, “Hush dear!” After that, Christopher was glad to find they seemed to have forgotten him. He quietly lay down, on his back on the carpet, and rolled from lady to lady. When they caught him, he was under the sofa gazing up

Lady Badgett's petticoats. He was dragged out of the room in disgrace, very disappointed to discover that all the ladies had big thick legs, except Lady Badgett: her legs were thin and yellow like chicken's.

Mama sent for him in her dressing room later that day. "Oh Christopher, how *could* you!" she said. "I'd just got Lady Badgett to the point of calling on me, and she'll never come again. You've undone the work of years!"

It was very hard work, Christopher realized, being a Beauty. Mama was very busy in front of her mirror with all sorts of little cut glass bottles and jars. Behind her, a maid was even busier, far busier than the nursery maids ever were, working on Mama's glossy curls. Christopher was so ashamed to have wasted all this work that he picked up a glass jar to hide his confusion.

Mama told him sharply to put it down. "Money isn't everything, you see, Christopher," she explained. "A good place in Society is worth far more. Lady Badgett could have helped us both. What do you think I married your papa?"

Since Christopher had simply no idea what could have brought Mama and Papa together, he put out his hand to pick up the jar again. But he remembered in time that he was not supposed to touch it and picked up a big pad of false hair instead. He turned it around in his hands while Mama talked.

"You are going to grow up with Papa's good family and my money," she said. "I want you to promise me now that you will take your place in Society alongside the very best people. Mama intends you to be a great man—Christopher, are you listening?"

Christopher had given up trying to understand Mama. He held the false hair out instead. "What is this for?"

"Bulking out my hair," Mama said. "Please attend, Christopher. It's very important you begin *now* preparing yourself for the future. Put that hair *down*."

Christopher put the pad of hair back. "I thought it might be a dead rat," he said. And somehow Mama must have made a mistake because, to Christopher's great interest, the thing really *was* a dead rat. Mama and her maid both screamed. Christopher was hustled away while a footman came running with a shovel.

After that, Mama called Christopher to her dressing room and talked to him quite often. He stood trying to remember not to fiddle with the jars, staring at his reflection in her mirror, wondering why his curls were black and Mama's rich brown, and why his eyes were so much more like coal than Mama's. Something seemed to stop there ever being another dead rat, but sometimes a spider could be encouraged to let itself down in front of the mirror, whenever Mama's talk became too alarming. He understood that Mama cared very urgently about his future. He knew he was going to have to enter Society with the best people. But the only Society he had heard of was the Aid the Heathen Society that he had to give a penny to every Sunday in church, and he thought Mama meant that.

Christopher made careful inquiries from the nursery maid with the big feet. She told him that Heathens were savages who ate people. Missionaries were the best people, and they were the only people the Heathens ate. Christopher saw that he was going to be a missionary when he grew up. He found Mama's talk increasingly alarming. He wished she had chosen another career for him.

He also asked the nursery maid about the kind of ladies who had tails like fish. "Oh you mean mermaids!" the girl said, laughing. "Those aren't real."

Christopher knew mermaids were not real, because he only met them in dreams. Now he was convinced that he would meet Heathens too, if he went to the wrong Almost Anywhere. For a time, he was so frightened of meeting Heathens that when he came to a new valley from The Place Between, he lay down and looked carefully at the Anywhere it led to, to see what the people were like there before he went on. But after a while, when nobody tried to eat him, he decided that the Heathens probably lived in the Anywhere which stopped you going to it, and gave up worrying until he was older.

When he was a little older, people in the Anywheres sometimes gave him money. Christopher learned to refuse coins. As soon as he touched them, everything just stopped. He landed in bed with a jolt and woke up sweating. Once this happened when a pretty lady who reminded him of Mama tried laughingly to hang an earring in his ear. Christopher would have asked the nursery maid with big feet about it, but she had left long ago. Most of the ones who came after simply said, "Don't bother me now—I'm busy!" when he asked them things. Until he learned to read, Christopher thought this was what all nursery maids did: they stayed a month, too busy to talk, and then set their mouths in a nasal line and flounced out. He was amazed to read of Old Retainers, who stayed with families for a whole lifetime and could be persuaded to tell long (and sometimes very boring) stories about the family of the past. In his house, none of the servants stayed more than six months.

The reason seemed to be that Mama and Papa had given up speaking to one another even through the footman. They handed the servants notes to give to one another instead. Since it never occurred to either Mama or Papa to seal the notes, sooner or later someone would bring the note up to the nursery floor and read it aloud to the nursery maid. Christopher learned that Mama was always short and to the point.

"Mr. Chant is requested to smoke cigars only in his own room." Or, "Will Mr. Chant please take note that the new laundry maid has complained of holes burned in his shirts." Or, "Mr. Chant caused me much embarrassment by leaving in the middle of my Breakfast Party."

Papa usually let the notes build up and then answered the lot in a kind of rambling rage. "My dear Miranda, I shall smoke where I please and it is the job of that lazy laundry maid to deal with the results. But then your extravagance in employing foolish layabouts and rude louts is only for your own selfish comfort and never for mine. If you wish me to remain at your parties, try to employ a cook who knows bacon from old shoes and refrain from giving that idiotic tinkling laugh all the time."

Papa's replies usually caused the servants to leave overnight.

Christopher rather enjoyed the insight these notes gave him. Papa seemed more like a person somehow, even if he was so critical. It was quite a blow to Christopher when he was cut off from them by the arrival of his first Governess.

Mama sent for him. She was in tears. "Your Papa has overreached himself this time," she said. "It's a mother's place to see to the education of her child. I want you to go to a good school, Christopher. It's most important. But I don't want to *force* you into learning. I want your ambition to flower as well. But your Papa comes crashing in with his *grim* notions and goes behind my back by appointing this Governess who, knowing your Papa, is bound to be *terrible!* Oh my poor child!"

Christopher realized that the Governess was his first step towards becoming a missionary. He felt solemn and alarmed. But when the Governess came, she was simply a drab lady with pink eyes, who was far too discreet to talk to servants. She only stayed a month, to Mama's jubilation.

"Now we can really start your education," Mama said. "I shall choose the next Governess myself."

Mama said that quite often over the next two years, for Governesses came and went just like the nursery maids before them. They were all drab, discreet ladies, and Christopher got their names muddled up. He decided that the chief difference between a Governess and a nursery maid was that a Governess usually burst into tears before she left—and that was the only time a Governess ever said anything interesting about Mama and Papa.

"I'm sorry to do this to you," the third—or maybe the fourth—Governess wept, "because you're a nice little boy, even if you *are* a bit remote, but the *atmosphere* in this house! Every night *he's* home—which thank God is rarely!—I have to sit at the dining table with them in utter silence. And she passes me a note to give to *him*, or *he* passes me one for *her*. Then they open the notes and look daggers at one another and then at me. I can't stand any more!"

The ninth—or maybe the tenth—Governess was even more indiscreet. “I know they hate one another,” she sobbed, “but *she’s* no call to hate me too! She’s one of those who can’t abide other women. And she’s a sorceress, I think—I can’t be sure, because she only does little things—and *he* at least as strong as *she* is. He may even be an enchanter. Between them they make such a atmosphere—it’s no wonder they can’t keep any servants! Oh Christopher, forgive me for talking like this about your parents!”

All the Governesses asked Christopher to forgive them and he forgave them very readily, for this was the only time now that he had news of Mama and Papa. It gave him a wistful sort of feeling that perhaps other people had parents who were not like this. He was also sure that there was some sort of crisis brewing. The hushed thunder of it reached as far as the schoolroom, even though the Governesses would not let him gossip with the servants anymore. He remembered the night the crisis broke, because that was the night when he went to an Anywhere where a man under a yellow umbrella gave him a sort of candlestick of little bells. It was so beautiful that Christopher was determined to bring it home. He held it in his teeth as he scrambled across the rocks of The Place Between. To his joy, it was in his bed when he woke up. But there was quite a different feeling to the house. The twelfth Governess packed and left straight after breakfast.

CHRISTOPHER WAS CALLED to Mama's dressing room that afternoon. There was a new Governess sitting on the only hard chair, wearing the usual sort of ugly grayish clothes and a hat that was uglier than usual. Her drab cotton gloves were folded on her dull bag and her head hung down as if she were timid or put-upon, or both. Christopher found her of no interest. All the interest in the room was centered on the man standing behind Mama's chair with his hand on Mama's shoulder.

"Christopher, this is my brother," Mama said happily. "Your uncle Ralph."

Mama pronounced it Rafe. It was more than a year before Christopher discovered it was the name he read as Ralph. Uncle Ralph took his fancy completely. To begin with, he was smoking a cigar. The scents of the dressing room were changed and mixed with the rich, incenselike smoke, and Mama was not protesting by even so much as sniffing. That alone was enough to show that Uncle Ralph was in a class by himself. Then he was wearing tweeds, strong and tangy and almost fox-colored, which were a little baggy here and there, but blended beautifully with the darker foxiness of Uncle Ralph's hair and the redder foxiness of his mustache. Christopher had seldom seen a man in tweeds or without whiskers. This did even more to assure him that Uncle Ralph was someone special. As a final touch Uncle Ralph smiled at him like sunlight on an autumn forest. It was such an engaging smile that Christopher's face broke into a return smile almost of its own accord.

"Hallo old chap," said Uncle Ralph, rolling out blue smoke above Mama's glossy hair. "I know this is not the best way for an uncle to recommend himself to a nephew, but I've been sorting the family affairs out, and I'm afraid I've had to do one or two quite shocking things, like bringing you a new Governess and arranging for you to start school in the autumn. Governess over there. Miss Bell. I hope you like one another. Enough to forgive me anyway."

He smiled at Christopher in a sunny, humorous way which had Christopher rapidly approaching adoration. All the same, Christopher glanced dubiously at Miss Bell. She looked back, and there was an instant when a sort of hidden prettiness in her almost came out into the open. Then she blinked past her eyelashes and murmured, "Pleased to meet you," in a voice as uninteresting as her clothes.

"She'll be your last Governess, I hope," said Mama. Because of that, Christopher never afterwards thought of Miss Bell as the Last Governess. "She's going to prepare you for school. I wasn't meant to send you away yet, but your uncle says—Anyway, a good education is important for your career, and, to be blunt with you, Christopher, your papa has made a most *vexatious* hash of the money—which is mine, not his, as you know—and lost practically all of it. Luckily I had your uncle to turn to and—"

"And once turned to, I don't let people down," Uncle Ralph said, with a quick flick of a glance at the Governess. Maybe he meant she should not be hearing this. "Fortunately, there's plenty left to send you to school, and then your mama is going to recoup a bit by living abroad. She'll like that—er, Miranda? And Miss Bell is going to be found another post with glowing references. Everyone's going to be fine."

His smile went to all of them one by one, full of warmth and confidence. Mama laughed and dabbed scent behind her ears. The Last Governess almost smiled, so that the hidden prettiness had emerged again. Christopher tried to grin a strong manly grin at Uncle Ralph, because that seemed to be the only way to express the huge, almost hopeless adoration that was growing in him. Uncle Ralph laughed, a golden brown laugh, and completed the conquest of Christopher by fishing in a two-shilling pocket and tipping his nephew a bright new sixpence.

Christopher would have died rather than spend that sixpence. Whenever he changed clothes, he transferred the sixpence to the new pockets. It was another way of expressing his adoration of Uncle Ralph. It was clear that Uncle Ralph had stepped in to save Mama from ruin, and this made him the first good man that Christopher had met. And on top of that, he was the only person outside the Anywheres who had bothered to speak to Christopher in that friendly man-to-man way.

Christopher tried to treasure the Last Governess too, for Uncle Ralph's sake, but that was not so easy. She was so very boring. She had a drab, calm way of speaking, and she never raised her voice or showed impatience, even when he was stupid about Mental Arithmetic or Levitation, both of which were the other Governesses had somehow missed out on.

"If a herring and a half cost three-ha'pence, Christopher," she explained drearily, "that's a penny and a half for a fish and a half. How much for a whole fish?"

"I don't know," he said, trying not to yawn.

"Very well," the Last Governess said calmly. "We'll think again tomorrow. Now look in this little mirror and see if you can't make it rise in the air just an inch."

But Christopher could not move the mirror any more than he could understand what a herring cost. The Last Governess put the mirror aside and quietly went on to puzzle him about French. After a few days of this, Christopher tried to make her angry, hoping she would turn more interesting when she shouted. But she just said calmly, "Christopher, you're getting silly. You may play with your toys now. But remember you only take one out at a time, and you put that back before you get out another. That is our rule."

Christopher had become rapidly and dismally accustomed to this rule. It reduced the fun a lot. He had also become used to the Last Governess sitting beside him while he played. The other Governesses had seized the chance to rest, but this one sat in a hard chair efficiently mending his clothes, which reduced the fun even more. Nevertheless, he got the candlestick of chiming bells out of the cupboard, because that was fascinating in its way. It was so arranged that it played different tunes depending on which bell you touched first. When he had finished with it, the Last Governess paused her darning to say, "That goes in the middle of the top shelf. Put it back before you take the clockwork dragon." She waited to listen to the chiming that showed Christopher had done what she said. Then, as she drove the needle into the sock again, she asked in her dullest way, "Who gave you the bells, Christopher?"

No one had ever asked Christopher about anything he had brought back from the Anywheres before. He was rather at a loss. "A man under a yellow umbrella," he answered. "He said they bring good luck on my house."

"What man where?" the Last Governess wanted to know—except that she did not sound as if she cared if she knew or not.

"An Almost Anywhere," Christopher said. "The hot one with the smells and the snake charmer. The man didn't say his name."

"That's not an answer, Christopher," the Last Governess said calmly, but she did not say anything more until the next time, two days later, when Christopher got out the chiming bells again. "Remember where they go when you've finished with them," she said. "Have you thought yet where the man with the yellow umbrella was?"

“Outside a painted place where some gods live,” Christopher said, setting the small silver bellcups ringing. “He was nice. He said it didn’t matter about money.”

“Very generous,” remarked the Last Govern-ess. “Where was this painted house for god Christopher?”

“I told you. It was an Almost Anywhere,” Christopher said.

“And I told you that that is not an answer,” the Last Governess said. She folded up her darnin “Christopher, I insist that you tell me where those bells came from.”

“Why do you want to know?” Christopher asked, wishing she would leave him in peace.

“Because,” the Last Governess said with truly ominous calm, “you are not being frank and open like a nice boy should be. I suspect you stole those bells.”

At this monstrous injustice, Christopher’s face reddened and tears stood in his eyes. “I *haven’t*” he cried out. “He *gave* them to me! People always give me things in the Anywheres, only I drop more of them. Look.” And regardless of her one-toy-at-a-time rule, he rushed to the cupboard, fetched the horse flute, the mermaids’ necklace and the clockwork dragon, and banged them down in her darnin basket. “Look! These are from other Anywheres.”

The Last Governess gazed at them with terrible impassiveness. “Am I to believe you have stolen these, too?” she said. She put the basket and the toys on the floor and stood up. “Come with me. This must be reported to your mama at once.”

She seized Christopher’s arm and in spite of his yells of “I *didn’t*, I *didn’t*!” she marched him inexorably downstairs.

Christopher leaned backwards and dragged his feet and implored her not to. He knew he would never be able to explain to Mama. All the notice the Last Governess took was to say, “Stop that disgraceful noise. You’re a big boy now.”

This was something all the Governesses agreed on. But Christopher no longer cared about being big. Tears poured disgracefully down his cheeks and he screamed the name of the one person he knew who saved people. “Uncle Ralph! I’ll explain to Uncle Ralph!”

The Last Governess glanced down at him at that. Just for a moment, the hidden prettiness flickered in her face. But to Christopher’s despair, she dragged him to Mama’s dressing room and knocked on the door.

Mama turned from her mirror in surprise. She looked at Christopher, red faced and gulping air, wet with tears. She looked at the Last Governess. “Whatever is going on? Is he ill?”

“No, Madam,” the Last Governess said in her dullest way. “Something has happened which I think your brother should be informed of at once.”

“Ralph?” said Mama. “You mean I’m to write to Ralph? Or is it more urgent than that?”

“Urgent, Madam, I think,” the Last Governess said drearily. “Christopher says that he is willing to confess to his uncle. I suggest, if I may make so bold, that you summon him now.”

Mama yawned. This Governess bored her terribly. “I’ll do my best,” she said, “but I don’t answer for my brother’s temper. He lives a very busy life, you know.” Carelessly, she pulled one of her dark glossy hairs out of the silver-backed brush she had been using. Then, much more carefully, she began teasing hairs out of her silver and crystal hair-tidy. Most of the hairs were Mama’s own dark ones, but Christopher, watching Mama’s beautiful pearly nails delicately pinching and pulling at the hairs while he sobbed and swallowed and sobbed again, saw that one of the hairs was a much redder color. This was the one Mama pulled out. She laid it across her own hair from the brush. Then, picking up what seemed to be a hatpin with a glittery knob, she laid that across both hairs and tapped it with one sharp, impatient nail. “Ralph,” she said. “Ralph Weatherby Argent. Miranda wants you.”

One of the mirrors of the dressing table turned out to be a window, with Uncle Ralph looking through it, rather irritably, while he knotted his tie. “What is it?” he said. “I’m busy today.”

“When *aren't* you?” asked Mama. “Listen, that Governess is here looking like a wet week usual. She’s brought Christopher. Something about a confession. *Could* you come and sort it out? It’s beyond me.”

“*Is* she?” said Uncle Ralph. He leaned sideways to look through the mirror—or window, or whatever—and when he saw Christopher, he winked and broke into his sunniest smile. “Dear, dear! This does look upsetting. I’ll be along at once.”

Christopher saw him leave the window and walk away to one side. Mama had only time to turn to the Last Governess and say, “There, I’ve done my best!” before the door of her dressing room opened and Uncle Ralph strode in.

Christopher quite forgot his sobs in the interest of all this. He tried to think what was on the other side of the wall of Mama’s dressing room. The stairs, as far as he knew. He supposed Uncle Ralph *could* have a secret room in the wall about one foot wide, but he was much more inclined to think he had been seeing real magic. As he decided this, Uncle Ralph secretly passed him a large white handkerchief and walked cheerfully into the middle of the room to allow Christopher time to wipe his face.

“Now what’s all this about?” he said.

“I have no idea,” said Mama. “She’ll explain, no doubt.”

Uncle Ralph cocked a ginger eyebrow at the Last Governess. “I found Christopher playing with an artifact,” the Governess said tediously, “of a kind I have never seen before, made of a metal that is totally unknown to me. He then revealed he had three more artifacts, each one different from the other, but he was unable to explain how he had come by them.”

Uncle Ralph looked at Christopher, who hid the handkerchief behind his back and looked nervously back. “Enough to get anyone into hot water, old chap,” Uncle Ralph said. “Suppose you talk me to look at these things and explain where they do come from?”

Christopher heaved a great happy sigh. He had known he could count on Uncle Ralph to save him. “Yes please,” he said.

They went back upstairs with the Last Govern-ess processing ahead and Christopher hanging gratefully on to Uncle Ralph’s large warm hand. When they got there, the Governess sat quietly down to her sewing again as if she felt she had done her bit. Uncle Ralph picked up the bells and jingled them. “By Jove!” he said. “These sound like nothing else in the universe!” He took them to the window and carefully examined each bell. “Bull’s-eye!” he said. “You clever woman! They *are* like nothing else in the universe. Some kind of strange alloy, I think, different for each bell. Handmade by the look of them.” He pointed genially to the tuffet by the fire. “Sit there, old chap, and oblige me by explaining what you did to get these bells here.”

Christopher sat down, full of willing eagerness. “I had to hold them in my mouth while I climbed through The Place Between,” he explained.

“No, no,” said Uncle Ralph. “That sounds like near the end. Start with what you did in the beginning before you got the bells.”

“I went down the valley to the snake-charming town,” Christopher said.

“No, before that, old chap,” said Uncle Ralph. “When you set off from here. What time of day was it, for instance? After breakfast? Before lunch?”

“No, in the night,” Christopher explained. “It was one of the dreams.”

In this way, by going carefully back every time Christopher missed out a step, Uncle Ralph got Christopher to tell him in detail about the dreams, and The Place Between, and the Almost Anywhere, and he came to down the valleys. Since Uncle Ralph, far from being angry, seemed steadily more delighted, Christopher told him everything he could think of.

“What did I tell you!” he said, possibly to the Governess. “I can always trust my hunches.”

Something *had* to come out of a heredity like this! By Jove, Christopher old chap, you must be the only person in the world who can bring back solid objects from a spirit trip! I doubt if even old Witt can do that!”

Christopher glowed to find Uncle Ralph so pleased with him, but he could not help feeling resentful about the Last Governess. “*She* said I stole them.”

“Take no notice of her. Women are always jumping to the wrong conclusions,” Uncle Ralph said lighting a cigar. At this, the Last Governess shrugged her shoulders up and smiled a little. The hidden prettiness came out stronger than Christopher had ever seen it, almost as if she was human and sharing a joke. Uncle Ralph blew a roll of blue smoke over them both, beaming like the sun coming through clouds. “Now the next thing, old chap,” he said, “is to do a few experiments to test this gift of yours. Can you control these dreams of yours? Can you say *when* you’re about to go off to your Almond Anywheres—or can’t you?”

Christopher thought about it. “I go when I want to,” he said.

“Then have you any objection to doing me a test run, say tomorrow night?” Uncle Ralph asked.

“I could go tonight,” Christopher offered.

“No, tomorrow,” said Uncle Ralph. “It’ll take me a day to get things set up. And when you go this is what I want you to do.” He leaned forward and pointed his cigar at Christopher, to let him know he was serious. “You set out as usual when you’re ready and try to do two experiments for me. First I’m going to arrange to have a man waiting for you in your Place Between. I want you to see if you can find him. You may have to shout to find him—I don’t know: I’m not a spirit traveler myself—but anyway, you climb about and see if you can make contact with him. *If* you do, then you do the second experiment. The man will tell you what that is. And if they both work, then we can experiment some more. Do you think you can do that? You’d like to help, wouldn’t you, old chap?”

“Yes!” said Christopher.

Uncle Ralph stood up and patted his shoulder. “Good lad. Don’t let anyone deceive you, old chap. You have a very exciting and important gift here. It’s so important that I advise you not to talk about it to anyone but me and Miss Bell over there. Don’t tell anyone, not even your mama. Right?”

“Right,” said Christopher. It was wonderful that Uncle Ralph thought him important. He was so glad and delighted that he would have done far more for Uncle Ralph than just not tell anyone. That was easy. There was no one to tell.

“So it’s our secret,” said Uncle Ralph, going to the door. “Just the three of us—and the man I’m going to send, of course. Don’t forget you may have to look quite hard to find him, will you?”

“I won’t forget,” Christopher promised eagerly.

“Good lad,” said Uncle Ralph, and went out of the door in a waft of cigar smoke.

CHRISTOPHER THOUGHT he would never live through the time until tomorrow night. He burned to show Uncle Ralph what he could do. If it had not been for the Last Governess, he would have made himself ill with excitement, but she managed to be so boring that she somehow made everything else boring too. By the time Christopher went to bed that next night, he was almost wondering if it was worth dreaming.

But he did dream, because Uncle Ralph had asked him to, and got out of bed as usual and walked around the fireplace to the valley, where his clothes were lying on the rocky path as usual. By now the lot of clothes was torn, covered with mud and assorted filth from a hundred Almost Anywheres, and at least two sizes too small. Christopher put them on quickly, without bothering to do up buttons that would not meet. He never wore shoes because they got in the way as he climbed the rocks. He pattered around the crag in his bare feet into The Place Between.

It was formless and unfinished as ever, all slides and jumbles of rock rearing in every direction and high overhead. The mist billowed as formlessly as the rocks. It was one of the times when rain slanted in it, driven this way and that by the hither-thither winds that blew in The Place Between. Christopher hoped he would not have to spend too long here hunting for Uncle Ralph's man. It made him feel so small, besides being cold and wet. He dutifully braced himself on a slide of rubbly sand and shouted.

"Hallo!"

The Place Between made his voice sound no louder than a bird cheeping. The windy fog seemed to snatch the sound away and bury it in a flurry of rain. Christopher listened for a reply, but for minutes on end the only noise was the hissing hum of the wind. He was wondering whether to shout again, when he heard a little cheeping thread of sound, wailing its thin way back to him across the rocks. "Hallo-o-o!" It was his own shout. Christopher was sure of it. Right from the start of his dreams, he had known that The Place Between liked to have everything that did not belong sent back to the place it came from. That was why he always climbed back to bed faster than he did when he climbed out to a new valley. The Place pushed him back.

Christopher thought about this. It probably did no good to shout. If Uncle Ralph's man was out there in the mist, he would not be able to stand and wait for very long, without getting pushed back to the valley he came from. So the man would have to wait in the mouth of a valley and hope that Christopher found him. Christopher sighed. There were such thousands and thousands of valleys, high up, low down, turning off at every angle you could think of, and some valleys turned off other valleys—and that was only if you crawled around the side of the Place that was nearest. If you went the other way, towards the Anywhere that did not want people, there were probably many thousands more. On the other hand, Uncle Ralph would not want to make it too difficult. The man must be quite near.

Determined to make Uncle Ralph's experiment a success if he could, Christopher set off climbing, sliding, inching across wet rock with his face close to the cold hard smell of it. The first

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