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THE
WHISPERING
KNIGHTS

PENELOPE LIVELY



THE WHISPERING KNIGHTS

When William, Susie, and Martha cook a witch's brew in the old barn, they don't really expect anything to happen. Witches are just superstition, William says. Nobody believes in them today.

But there are stories in the village that the barn was once a witch's home. And then the children see old Miss Hepplewhite standing in the doorway. She tells them that there *is* a witch. Her name is Morgan le Fay, and she comes from a much older time, when knights rode into battle on horseback, and everybody believed in witches. 'There has been no sign of her for many, many years,' Miss Hepplewhite says. 'But she's always here somewhere. She's the bad side of things, you see.'

A cool wind has begun to blow, and in the shadowy places in the barn there are strange little noises. The three children, even calm, sensible Susie, suddenly feel very cold, icy cold . . .





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Fantasy & Horror

The Whispering Knights

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PENELOPE LIVELY

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Retold by
Clare West

Illustrated by
Toby Carr



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The witch's brew

The frogs' legs weren't as bad as the children had expected. They slid quickly out of the tin and into the pan, which Susie was holding over the fire. Although they were greyish-brown and very unpleasant, Martha was relieved to see that they didn't look like real legs. She had been feeling sorry for the poor frogs.

But William was looking crossly into the pan. 'We paid a lot for them!' he said. 'I hope they're worth it.'

The children had made a small fire just inside the door of the barn. They often came to play here, as it was only just outside the village of Steeple Hampden, where they



'I hope they're worth it.'

lived. Nobody else seemed to use the big, empty building. The barn's old walls were made of rough stone, which appeared to change colour when the sunlight touched it, and the barn roof had green and gold plants climbing all over it. On the other side of the building was a big house, standing alone in the middle of the fields. Inside the barn, the only light came through the large double doors and one or two holes in the roof. So it was difficult to see into all the corners, which always looked dark and mysterious.

It was William who had first suggested making a witch's brew, some weeks before. He had got the idea from his father, who was a teacher at the village school.

'It's what witches used to do!' he had told Susie and Martha excitedly. 'You know, put all kinds of things into a pan, and heat it over a fire. We can collect all the things, and make a fire in the barn. It'll be fun! Just a small fire, of course. We won't be able to play there any more if we cause any damage. Look, I've written it all down. My dad told me what we need. It's in an old book he's got. Look - here's the list!'

*With eye of fish, and toe of frog,
Wool of sheep, and hair of dog,
Oil of rose, and skin of snake,
And wing of bird, the brew make.*

'How can we find all these things?' Susie had asked. Her eyes were bright with interest.

'It's easy!' said William delightedly. 'We can buy a bottle of rose oil, a tin of those little fish with their heads on for

the eye of fish and . . .'

'Toe of frog! How do we manage that?' asked Susie.

'No problem,' replied William. 'You can get frogs' legs in tins. People eat them.'

The girls stared at him in horror.

'Honestly, it's true. We can order a tin from a shop in London. And we can find a dead bird in the woods. *And* a snake skin, if we look carefully. And . . .'

But Martha was feeling very worried. 'Do you think this is a good idea?' she asked. 'I mean, it sounds like a spell to me. Is it really safe?'

'It's not a *spell*,' William answered, 'it's like science. We're going to see what happens. It'll be very interesting!'

'But –' Martha went on unhappily, 'when you listen to all the stories in the village about the witch who used to live in the barn, couldn't it be – er – dangerous?'

'You don't really believe all that rubbish, do you?' said William. 'Witches and all that? That was just superstition – what people in the past used to believe. You see, they wanted someone to blame when they were ill or their cows died or something. So they said there were witches who put spells on things. But there aren't any! That's what my dad says, and he knows.'

Martha was still very doubtful, but she had to agree to the plan, because the three of them always did things together. In the next couple of weeks they busily collected what they needed for the witch's brew, as well as some firewood.

Now here they were, on a Tuesday morning in August, all staring at a pan full of strange things on a very small fire. Susie, who was doing the cooking, had already said the words of the old song that William had copied from his father's book.

Wind blow, and night bird sing,

Fire burn, and trouble bring.

After a while she said crossly, 'This fire's no good! The brew's never going to get hot!'

William and Martha looked into the pan. The frogs' legs no longer looked like anything at all, but the bird's wing was still recognizable.

Martha looked away quickly. 'What's going to happen?' she whispered in a frightened little voice.

'Nothing,' said Susie. *She* wasn't afraid. But then nothing ever frightened her. She was only a few months older than Martha, but she seemed years older and was much more confident. 'I'd like to be more like Susie,' thought Martha, looking at her friend's round, sensible face. William wasn't afraid either. 'But it was his idea,' thought Martha, 'and anyway he's cleverer than Susie or me.' The square of yellow sunlight falling on to the stone floor from the open door suddenly disappeared, and Martha felt cold.

'What do we do with this, anyway?' said Susie, staring at the unpleasant greyish soup in the pan. 'What did witches do with it when they'd made it?' She looked accusingly at William.

'I - er, I don't know,' said William. He had wanted to

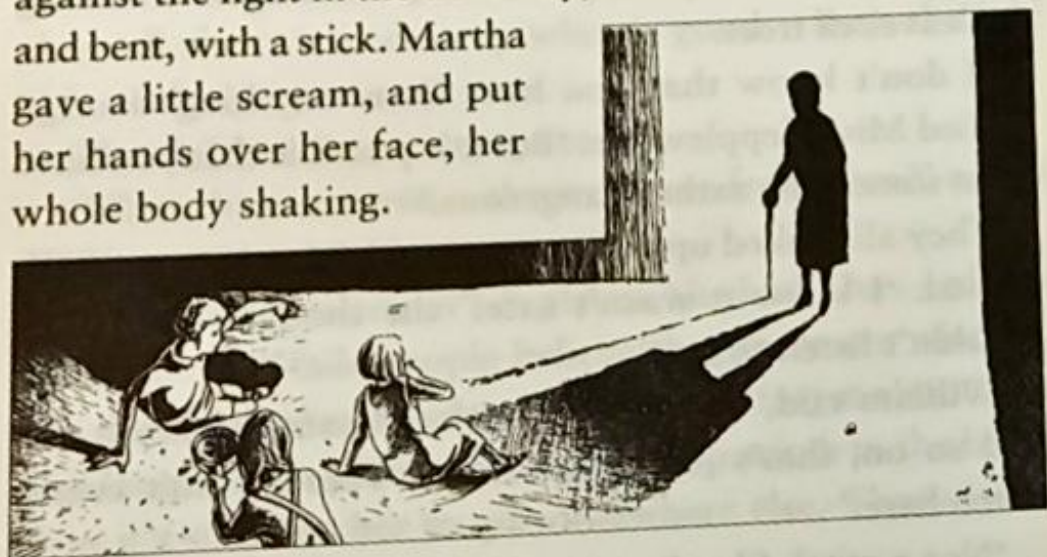
make a witch's brew in the place where people said a witch had once lived. But now they had actually made it, he couldn't remember at all what he had planned to do with it. He looked disappointedly at the brew. 'Throw it away, I suppose,' he said.

'Or eat it, perhaps,' said Susie, with a quick look at Martha, who felt suddenly sick. Now that the sun had gone, it was cold and dark in the barn, and the brew was beginning to smell bad as it got warmer. A little wind blew across the stone floor and made strange sad noises in the roof. The children went on staring at the pan.

At first they did not notice that a fourth person had joined them. She stood watching them for several minutes before any of them saw her.

At last she spoke. 'A witch's brew, is it?'

They all jumped. Martha saw only her black shape against the light in the doorway, but saw that she was old and bent, with a stick. Martha gave a little scream, and put her hands over her face, her whole body shaking.



'A witch's brew, is it?'