

CHAPTER TWO



he presentation took place in the Great Hall, a huge stone room with rows of wooden benches, a raised platform at one end and shields and portraits all round the walls. The whole school had assembled, and Miss Cackle and Miss Hardbroom stood behind a table on the platform. On the table was a large wicker basket from which came mews and squeaks.

First of all everyone sang the school song, which went like this:

Onward, ever striving onward,
Proudly on our brooms we fly
Straight and true above the treetops,
Shadows on the moonlit sky.

Ne'er a day will pass before us

When we have not tried our best,
Kept our cauldrons bubbling nicely,
Cast our spells and charms with zest.

Full of joy we mix our potions,
Working by each other's side.
When our days at school are over
Let us think of them with pride.

It was the usual type of school song, full of pride, joy and striving. Mildred had never yet mixed a potion with joy, nor flown her broomstick with pride – she was usually too busy trying to keep upright!

Anyway, when they had finished droning the last verse, Miss Cackle rang the little silver bell on her table and the girls marched up in single file to receive their kittens. Mildred was the last of all, and when she reached the table Miss Cackle pulled out of the basket not a sleek black kitten like all the others but a little tabby with white paws and the sort of fur that looked as if it had been out all night in a gale.



‘We ran out of black ones,’ explained Miss Cackle with a pleasant grin.

Miss Hardbroom smiled too, but nastily.

After the ceremony everyone rushed to see Mildred’s kitten.

‘I think H.B. had a hand in this somewhere,’ said Maud darkly. (‘H.B.’ was their nickname for Miss Hardbroom.)

‘I must admit, it does look a bit dim, doesn’t it?’ said Mildred, scratching the tabby kitten’s head. ‘But I don’t really mind. I’ll just have to think of another name – I was going to call it Sooty. Let’s take them down to the playground and see what they make of broomstick riding.’

Almost all the first-year witches were in the yard trying to persuade their puzzled kittens to sit on their

broomsticks. Several were already clinging on by their claws, and one kitten, belonging to a rather smug young witch named Ethel, was sitting bolt upright cleaning its paws, as if it had been broomstick riding all its life!

Riding a broomstick was no easy matter, as I have mentioned before. First, you ordered the stick to hover, and it hovered lengthways above the ground. Then you sat on it, gave it a sharp tap, and away you flew. Once in the air you could make the stick do almost anything by saying, ‘Right! Left! Stop! Down a bit!’ and so on. The difficult part was balancing, for if you leaned a little too far to one side you could easily overbalance, in which case you would either fall off or find yourself hanging upside-down and then you would just have to hold on with your skirt over your head until a friend came to your rescue.

It had taken Mildred several weeks of falling off and crashing before she could ride the broomstick reasonably well, and it looked as though her kitten was going to have the same trouble. When she put it on the end of the stick, it just fell off without even trying to hold on. After many attempts, Mildred picked up her kitten and gave it a shake.

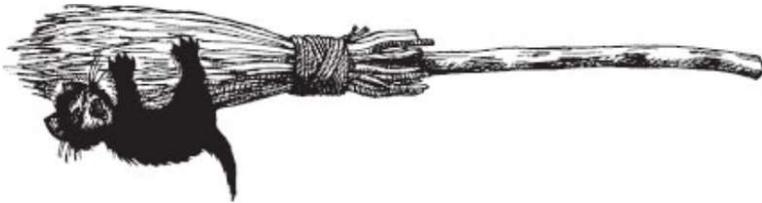
‘Listen!’ she said severely. ‘I think I shall have to call you Stupid. You don’t even *try* to hold on. Everyone else is all right – look at all your friends.’

The kitten gazed at her sadly and licked her nose with its rough tongue.

‘Oh, come on,’ said Mildred, softening her voice. ‘I’m not really angry with you. Let’s try again.’

And she put the kitten back on the broomstick, from which it fell with a thud.

Maud was having better luck. Her kitten was hanging on grimly upside down.



‘Oh, well,’ laughed Maud. ‘It’s a start.’

‘Mine’s useless,’ said Mildred, sitting on the broomstick for a rest.

‘Never mind,’ Maud said. ‘Think how hard it must be for them to hang on by their claws.’

An idea flashed into Mildred’s head, and she dived into the school, leaving her kitten chasing a leaf along the ground and the broomstick still patiently hovering. She came out carrying her satchel which she hooked over the end of the broom and then bundled the kitten into it. The kitten’s astounded face peeped out of the bag as Mildred flew delightedly round the yard.



‘Look, Maud!’ she called from ten feet up in the air. ‘That’s cheating!’ said Maud, looking at the satchel. Mildred flew back and landed on the ground laughing. ‘I don’t think H.B. will approve,’ said Maud doubtfully.

‘Quite right, Maud,’ an icy voice behind them said. ‘Mildred, my dear, possibly it would be even easier with handlebars and a saddle.’

Mildred blushed.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Hardbroom,’ she muttered. ‘It doesn’t balance very well – my kitten, so ... I thought ... perhaps ...’ Her voice trailed away under Miss Hardbroom’s stony glare and Mildred unhooked her satchel and turned the bewildered kitten on to the

ground.

‘Girls!’ Miss Hardbroom clapped her hands. ‘I would remind you that there is a potion test tomorrow morning. That is all.’

So saying, she disappeared – literally.

‘I wish she wouldn’t do that,’ whispered Maud, looking at the place where their form-mistress had been standing. ‘You’re never quite sure whether she’s gone or not.’

‘Right again, Maud,’ came Miss Hardbroom’s voice from nowhere.

Maud gulped and hurried back to her kitten.



Task – please answer the following questions.

1. How do you think Mildred felt when she saw her kitten coming out of the basket?
Give a reason for your answer.
2. Why does Mildred get cross with her kitten (at the end of page 2)?
3. What was Mildred’s plan (page 3)?
4. What does the word *astounded* mean and why was Mildred’s kitten *astounded*?
5. Why didn’t Mildred like it when Miss Hardbroom disappeared (page 4)?