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The Wickedest Witch

written by

Martin Howard

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WITCHES AT WAR

*The
Wickedest
Witch*

MARTIN HOWARD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY COLIN STIMPSON

WITCHES AT WAR I: The Wickedest Witch

Text by Martin Howard
Illustrations by Colin Stimpson

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CHILDREN'S

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Prologue

A small light glowed in a dormitory that was otherwise as black as a witch's knickers. From halfway down the row of beds came an exasperated whisper: "Drat!" A jumble of baggage had managed to burst – for the third time – out of a spotted red handkerchief tied to a stick. If you are going to run away to seek your destiny properly then you *must* have all your belongings tied up in a spotted red handkerchief on a stick and Sam always tried to do things properly. She just couldn't understand how to get three pairs of black jeans, a black dress, a selection of black t-shirts, two black pullovers, several changes of underwear (all black) and what was nearly a library's worth of books about magic into a handkerchief.

Sam loved reading books and had a particular weakness for tales about witches and wizards. She had waited patiently to be transported away to a land of magic (as generally happened in her books)...and waited...and then waited some more. Now she had decided that if the magic wouldn't come to *her* she would go to *it*. Luckily, she knew just where to start looking.

Waving a torch over the hopeless mess on her bed, Sam relented and pulled a battered pink rucksack out of

a drawer. It was not quite the look she had been aiming for, but she was starting to think that people who ran away with only the clothes they could carry in a handkerchief probably got very smelly very quickly anyway.

She squashed everything in and pulled it onto her back. For the sake of tradition she then pushed some rolled-up socks into the handkerchief and hoisted the stick over her shoulder. Bending down, she picked up her most prized possession – a cone of flimsy black cardboard – and jammed it down on her head, before tip-toeing between two rows of beds where girls of all ages snuffled and snored. Climbing out of the dormitory window Sam took one last look around. Finally, she was leaving the orphanage behind. On her hat, stars cut out of silver paper twinkled in the moonlight. Sam grinned. She was running away to learn magic.

Across town was Pignout Wood. Everyone knew that a witch lived in the middle of Pignout Wood. And all witches need an apprentice.



1 *Bye Bye Biddy*

No one ever walks their dog in Pignout Wood for fear of never seeing Fido again. Things lurk in the shadows and occasionally jump out on unattended golden retrievers in a whirl of fangs and claws. It's the kind of tangled, gnarly wood where twigs grab at your hair and brambles try to eat your legs. Odd-smelling toadstools grow everywhere. The trees are covered in rope-like creepers and have weird, monstrous faces. They sound as if they are whispering nasty things about you, even when no breeze stirs their branches. It is a dark, haunted sort of place where there are ancient statues covered in ivy. For years there have been rumours and gossip about a witch living right in the middle and – for once – rumours and gossip are true.

It was the end of summer. The leaves were falling from the trees and the crescent moon was golden. In the middle of Pignout Wood was a crooked cottage, difficult to see in the moonlight because trees grew right up to the cracked and lumpy walls. Inside the cottage an old lady sat in a rocking chair by the fire and unfolded the newspaper. After a few moments she began to cackle horribly.

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Esmelia Sniff, a witch, sat back in her chair smiling the kind of smile she smiled when something horrible had happened to someone else. Then she read the front page of *The Cackler* (the witches' newspaper – 'all the news wot is fit to line the cat's litter tray with') for a second time.

Emblazoned across the front page was a photograph of a witch so old that spiders had built cobwebs over her. At first glance she looked like a normal hag: the warts, pointy hat, black clothes and drool were all present and correct, but then you noticed that she had a safety pin through her nose and zips all over the place. This was a punk rock witch and her name was Old Bidy Vicious. She was also the Most Superior High and Wicked Witch, the owner of the Black Wand of Ohh Please Don't Turn Me Into Aaaaarghhh...Ribbett and the most powerful sorceress in all the world. Well, that is to say she *had* been.

Underneath the photo, *The Cackler's* headline read:

POISONED TO DEATH!

In general Esmelia liked people being dead (except herself, of course) as they were less annoying that way and didn't wriggle about so much on the plate. However, finding out another witch had popped her clogs was even better and guaranteed to make Esmelia's day. It confirmed

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her belief that all other witches were a bunch of lightweight, flibbertigibbets with no staying power. Even old Bidy had only made it to 148. It was shameful, a witch of her standing dying so young – and being murdered was no excuse. The world of witchcraft needed some shaking up and Esmelia knew just the person to do it. Eagerly, she flicked through the newspaper. There were pages and pages of kerfuffle about Old Bidy's death and what a great witch she had been, but Esmelia didn't bother reading any further. In her opinion any witch that allowed herself to get poisoned had it coming and certainly didn't deserve an eight page commemorative pull-out section. No, she was looking for something else. She found it near the bottom of page two and her eyes sparkled with an evil glint as she read:

Of course, now Old Bidy has been done in by some unknown assassin we'll have to get a new Most Superior High and Wicked Witch. Trials will start in one month's time in the grounds of the Bleak Fortress. Any witch what wishes to enter must have three signatures from other witches along with a few words saying why [Name of Applicant] would make a great Most Superior High and Wicked Witch...

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Folding the paper with a snap, Esmelia looked over to her cat and said “Tiddles, pack up your fleas, we’re moving on.”

Tiddles looked up and yawned.

“Yes, my dear,” Esmelia continued. “We will shortly be taking up residence in the Bleak Fortress of the Most Superior High and Wicked Witch. You’ll like Transylvania, there’s lots of...umm...weremice and suchlike. You’ll love it there.”

The one thing Esmelia wanted more than anything was to become Most Superior High and Wicked Witch. It wasn’t just the idea of living in style at the Bleak Fortress or having the awesome power of the Black Wand of Ohh Please Don’t Turn Me Into Aaaaarghhh...Ribbett at her fingertips. No, what Esmelia longed for was the chance to boss other witches around. If she was Most Superior High and Wicked Witch there would be no more of the modern witchcraft you got nowadays. All witches would be forced to wear black, familiars would be a traditional toad or black cat and midnight cackling over cauldrons would be put back on the curriculum.

Once she was in the contest Esmelia was sure she could win it – even if it did mean breaking the legs of her competitor – but there was one small problem: Where

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would she find three witches to recommend her?

Esmelia was not a popular witch. It was quite right and proper for a witch to hate another witch, but Esmelia didn’t just detest her fellow hags, she looked down her nose at them, making it quite clear that they didn’t reach the Esmelia Sniff standards of bad, old-fashioned witchery. Also, every now and again she would poke them in the eye. Very few people – not even witches – like being poked in the eye. In fact, everyone thought she was a crusty, miserable, smelly old baggage and tried to avoid her. And while Esmelia was quite proud of this, it did mean it would be tricky finding three witches who were prepared to sign up for having her as Most Superior High and Wicked Witch.

“Drat!” she exclaimed. ‘Great big lumps of dog doings with flies buzzing round.’”

Swearing solved nothing. A different tactic was called for. One that would have immediate results. If Esmelia could magic up her own witches, it would be easy to hit them over the head with the poker until they agreed to recommend her. It had been a while since she had done any actual magic, but the old witch thought she remembered how it went. Snatching up the poker from the fire and pointing her finger at Tiddles, Esmelia chanted:

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La la la and tiddly pum
Something about the power of one
I summon whatever rhymes with 'itch'
To turn this cat into a witch!

A bolt of magic was supposed to blast out of Esmelia's finger. Tiddles should have disappeared, to be replaced – in a puff of smoke and some glittery twinkles – with a witch. Instead, a couple of sad-looking glints dropped off Esmelia's finger as if it were a damp firework. Tiddles yawned and went back to sleep.

Having tried the spell on an unsuspecting spider, an ant crossing the stone floor and the pile of crusting plates next to the sink, Esmelia admitted defeat. Her specialties as a witch had, for a long time, been cursing, cackling and rubbing her hands together. It had been a long time since she practiced any real magic.

Pacing the floor, she tried to think of a solution her problem. She considered forging some signatures, but becoming the Most Superior High and Wicked Witch was a big deal and the judges were bound to check. Finally, Esmelia wondered if she could get three witches to recommend her by asking them nicely, perhaps even going so far as to say "please." The thought made her cackle so hard that her baggy old grey knickers

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fell down around her ankles.

The only course of action left was to have a temper tantrum, so the old witch picked up a toad and prepared to throw it at the wall. "Aaarghh, blinkin', flippin', peskidental botheration!" she yelled.

There was a knock at the door. No one had knocked on Esmelia's door for many years.

Esmelia dropped the toad, who thanked whatever it is toads thank when they have a close shave with being splatted against the wall and slunk off under the dresser.

The hag scowled. Whoever was disturbing her toad tossing was in for a very bad time indeed.