

GAVIN and the MONSTER



**a story by
Hugh Steadman Williams**

*To my sons
Oliver and Gregory
and their friend Francis
without whom this story might
never have been written*



GAVIN and the MONSTER



by Hugh Steadman Williams
illustrated by Margaret Gray



GROSVENOR

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1. A Sleepless Night

Gavin could not sleep. It was not just the book on Monsters, still open on his bedside table, that was keeping him awake. Nor was it the occasional roar he thought he heard, sometimes down in his own street, sometimes far away across the city of Bristol where he lived. He had been hearing what he thought were Monster roars for some time, although actually he had never yet seen a Monster. He wanted to be able to recognise one. He was sure he *was* going to see one, one day.

No, there were other excitements on his mind. Tomorrow was the last Monday of term. Christmas was only two weeks away. A week tomorrow... next Monday, would be the first day of the real holidays (he didn't count Saturday or Sunday—you always had Saturday and Sunday off anyway so what was the point?) Next Monday instead of going to school he was going on the gleaming white bus bound for London. He was going to

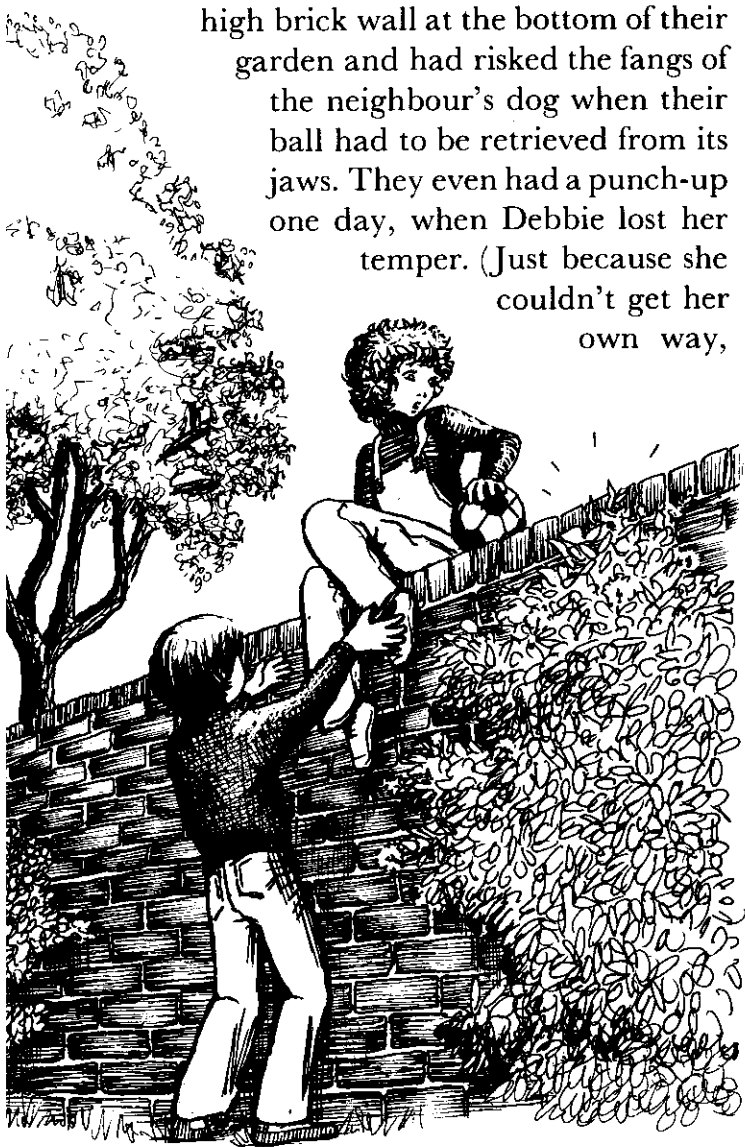
stay at his cousin Debbie's for a whole week.

He was looking forward to it all: the journey by bus all on his own, seeing the sights of London, and of course playing with Debbie. Not that Gavin usually played with girls. Debbie was his cousin, his mother said, and that was different. Gavin was not convinced. Last Easter, when Debbie arrived at the bus station, he had hung back a bit and let his mother go to the steps when the doors opened, to ask the driver whether a girl called Debbie Digit was on board.

He was hoping none of his friends from school would be down there that morning. How would Mickey Arnett know that Debbie was his cousin? Or Joe Bascombe? (Although Joe had a sister.) Or Andy Foster? They would just think he had gone sissy and was playing with girls. Luckily none of his friends was there that morning. When Gavin saw the sturdy character in anorak and jeans, with short, curly hair and freckles covering the cheeky face and determined jaw, he knew she was OK.

Debbie had passed every test. She could jump off the swing at full height. She could take off from the fifth, or even the sixth, step of the stairs and land crashing in the hall. (They only tried this when his mother was out.) She was good at dribbling a football and didn't mind being

brought down in a rucker tackle. (Gavin minded more when she tackled him and he went zipping into the rose bushes.) She could climb the high brick wall at the bottom of their garden and had risked the fangs of the neighbour's dog when their ball had to be retrieved from its jaws. They even had a punch-up one day, when Debbie lost her temper. (Just because she couldn't get her own way,



Gavin thought.) He felt bad afterwards, for having bashed a girl; but she didn't cry, and when he looked at his own face in the mirror afterwards he decided that she had given as good as she got.

All in all, Gavin decided, she was practically as good as a boy. By the time Debbie had to leave and go back to London at the end of the holidays he wouldn't have minded if Mickey and Joe and the rest had been down at the Bus Station. They weren't, which rather disappointed him. He would have quite liked to have shown them his cousin Debbie. She was the only girl he had ever wanted to play with. Not that he would admit that to his friends. They wouldn't understand. If they asked him where he was going for his holidays, well, he was going to stay with his cousin, or better still, with his uncle and aunt, the Digits.

He had never met the Digits, although he often heard his mother going on about her brilliant brother, Professor Digit. Of course Debbie was dead lucky having a father at home. That was one way of looking at it.

All the same, Gavin felt rather nervous about meeting the Digits. How was he going to cope with clever people like a Professor and his aunt whom his mother described as a "blue stocking"? Gavin was curious to see whether his Aunt

Bridget did in fact wear blue stockings. Someone had once said, when he was showing him round their small garden, that his mother had green fingers. That was some years ago, but even then he knew it wasn't true.

The hall clock stopped chiming twelve, but before the Town Hall clock sounded again, he fell asleep and dreamt of a white bus rushing through the cold air with all its windows open. Waiting for it at the other end was a lady with green stockings and blue fingers.

* * *

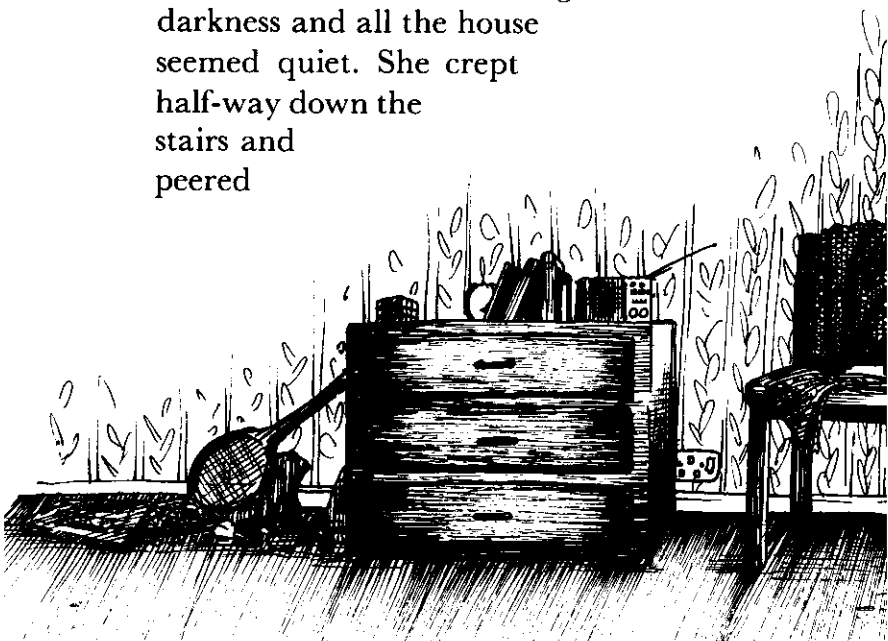
Debbie Digit was sleepy but was forcing herself to stay awake. She had set the alarm mode on her digital watch to go off at midnight and it had started its little melody with the last chimes of the church clock down the road. For a while Debbie lay in bed, too warm and comfortable to move, listening to the night sounds. A train rattled by in the distance. She could hear the roar of traffic from the main road, just a few streets away. A taxi with its slow ticking engine pulled up and stopped. A door slammed. The taxi moved off and away. Then all went quiet.

Debbie was drowsy. In fact she was afraid of falling back into the deep sleep from which she

had been awakened by the alarm. She pressed the light mode on her watch. It read 00.15. A quarter past twelve. She must have started dozing. She would have to get out of bed at once, or she would fall asleep again and her plan would be ruined.

But how could she be sure that her dad had gone to bed? Between ten-thirty and eleven, before she had dropped off to sleep, she had heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs. She hadn't looked in to see if Debbie was asleep or to say goodnight. But then she hadn't done that for years.

Debbie knew that her father often worked late into the night in his study. She got out of bed and without putting the light on, she tiptoed to the door. The landing was in darkness and all the house seemed quiet. She crept half-way down the stairs and peered



through the banisters to see if there was a light under the study door; but all was dark. Dad had gone to bed too. He hadn't looked in either. Nothing unusual in that. He was so wrapped up in his work that sometimes he didn't see her or speak to her for days on end.



In fact Debbie believed that half the time her father forgot he had a daughter at home.

"Well, after tonight they won't have a daughter at home," thought Debbie firmly as she returned to her room and closed her door behind her. She started to get dressed, in her warmest clothes, because it was December. She was fed up with being ignored; a father who did not speak to her for days, a mother who was always too busy to listen. It was always the same. Her parents took no notice of her until she wanted to do something really interesting or exciting. Then they always said, "No". She could not remember the last time they had gone anywhere together.

Now she was resolved to find her excitement alone. Tonight was the night. Tonight she would run away.

Debbie opened the window and looked down, trying to measure the distance. If she hung by her finger-tips from the window-ledge she reckoned she could get one foot on to the bend in the drain-pipe. From there it was still quite a drop to the street below. But at the bottom of Gavin's garden in Bristol last Easter she had dropped from the wall further than that. "Piece of cake," she said to herself. And no dog to snap at her heels like there had been at Bristol, either. The street after midnight was as quiet and uneventful as her own

house. "But at least it isn't boring," thought Debbie, feeling a tingle of excitement at what she was about to do. She turned back into her room to pack a few things in a shoulder-bag.

* * *

Had Debbie looked a little closer at the street below she might not have thought it so quiet and uneventful. For as she turned away from the window the man-hole cover in the middle of the road began to turn, making a grating noise as it did so. Then it was lifted up from below by a great green hand and pushed with a clatter to one side.



2. Even Monsters have Problems

London is like a beehive built over a honeycomb. Underneath the busy streets and buzzing shops and pavements lies a network of tunnels. Most people are familiar with the Underground. Millions travel on it every day, but not everyone is aware of the warren of other tunnels that criss-cross above and below the tube lines.

The Post Office has its own underground network, sending carts piled high with mail far quicker than it could by road above. Then there are drains, to take off the rain-water from roofs and streets, and sewers to carry away the waste water from houses.

But this honeycomb is used not only by tube trains, mail carts and flowing water. It also provides the secret routes along which Monsters move.

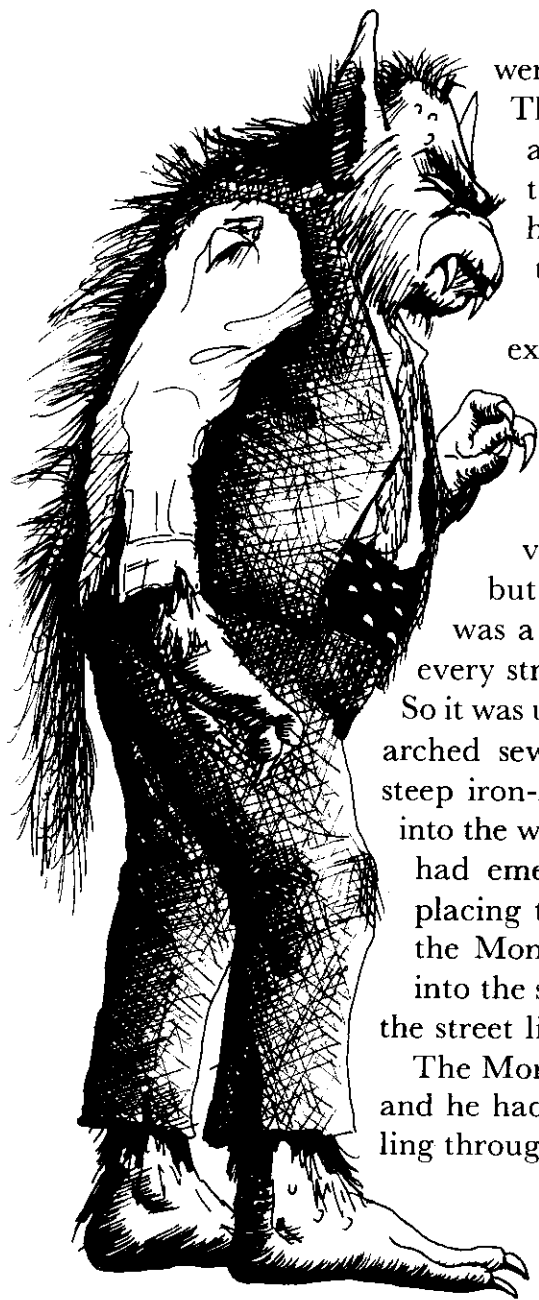
Had Debbie stayed by her window, instead of going to pack up her few belongings, she might

indeed have witnessed a remarkable sight. The great green hand, which had so deftly removed the heavy iron man-hole cover, belonged, in fact, to a Monster whose ugly head now appeared just above the level of the roadway, its bull-like neck pushing up from the sewer below.

It was a massive, square sort of head. Large pointed ears rose above a patch of scrawny hair. The eyes were deep-set and evil, looking out from beneath dense brows, but it was the mouth and jaws which really gave the Monster its dangerous appearance. For protruding above and below the narrow lips were sharp and crooked fangs. With that massive jaw, those jagged teeth seemed designed for the tearing of flesh. Nor did they appear less menacing when the Monster's thin lips parted in a false and joyless smile.

The Monster surveyed the street from ground-level, his head turning slowly and carefully now this way, now that, like the periscope of a submarine. Satisfied at last that all was quiet and that no one was about, the Monster rose from the man-hole, bulging arms lifting his mighty frame up and on to the street.

The Monster had long ago explored the honeycomb beneath London's streets and had begun to use it for his own ulterior purposes. Disused tunnels and branch-lines of the Underground



were his favourite routes. They were larger, drier and less smelly than the sewers. Yet sewers had one great advantage: their numerous points of access and exit. With the Underground you sometimes had to go for miles to find a disused station or ventilation shaft; but but with sewers there was a man-hole in almost every street.

So it was up from a large brick-arched sewer, by means of a steep iron-runged ladder fixed into the wall, that the Monster had emerged. Carefully replacing the man-hole cover, the Monster slipped silently into the shadows, away from the street lights.

The Monster had a problem and he had to admit it, travelling through the sewers did not

help. The problem was, to put it delicately, his monstrous appearance. He lived with a nagging fear of being recognised.

To most ordinary eyes the Monster seemed like any other human being. "The man in the street", he liked to call himself. He often could move with reasonable safety among crowds and still escape notice or comment.

If at first this seems strange, it is worth remembering that most people, especially most grown-ups, suffer from Monster-blindness. Most people; but not all. There are a few, if only a very few, who see Monsters for what they really are—like the evil-looking creature who had just emerged from the man-hole in the middle of this quiet street.

People who are really interested in others have insight, and people who are not tend to suffer from Monster-blindness.

To Monsters, of course, Monster-blindness is a great boon. The fact that so many people have the disease enables them to do their dastardly work undetected and unmolested. What all Monsters fear is meeting anyone who has insight. For if they do not act decisively then they are in danger of being exposed and all their work undone. Monsters are taught that people with insight have to be dealt with swiftly and without mercy.

Therefore the Monster always moved in expectation of danger. Fear was his constant companion; watchfulness was his means of survival. When out in the street, he was always tense. He could never relax. That was why he preferred to work at night whenever possible, keeping to the shadows, away from the street lights. That was why he travelled underground, alone. His mind was full of such weighty thoughts when Debbie, unnoticed by the Monster, climbed out of her upstairs window, and landed with a bump, only a few feet away.

So deep in thought was the Monster and so startled was he by Debbie's sudden arrival, that, before he knew what he was saying, he blurted out, without thinking, the question he most wanted to ask, but had never dared put to any human before:

“Do *you* think I'm real?”

The question struck Debbie as being almost as odd as the person who asked it. But then, she told herself, London must be full of way-out people, especially after midnight. She assumed he had been to a zany concert or was perhaps on his way to some wild party. So she said, “Of course you're real.”

The Monster smelt a sniff of danger. He stiffened in alarm.

“You're real... real... real freaky,” added Debbie,

and the Monster was so relieved he could have thrown his arms round her and hugged her for sheer joy. But he was glad he didn't, because he might have frightened her. Recovering his composure, the Monster repeated, "Freaky?"

"Your get-up. All that green, and those face paints. It's brilliant," said Debbie.

This made the Monster worried again. She saw too much. To this girl he was something out of the ordinary. That was dangerous. He could not take any chances. She would have to be silenced. He asked, as politely as he could, "And who are you, then?"

"Oh, my name's Debbie."

"And what are you doing, Debbie?"

"Oh, nothing... I mean... that is..." she tried desperately to think how way-out people talked, and to sound off-hand and casual at the same time.

"I'm splitting," she said.

The Monster walked round her in a circle, looking at her carefully. But he couldn't see a split anywhere. "You seem all right to me," he said. "You must be on the mend."

"No, stupid," retorted Debbie. "I'm leaving. I've had enough of home and I'm running away."

The moment Debbie had said that she wished she hadn't. She bit her lip. She should not have

called the stranger stupid. And she should not have told him she was running away. She did not want anyone to know, not even a stranger. "You won't tell, will you?" she added quickly.

"Tell who?" asked the Monster, very surprised. He did not know anyone in the neighbourhood and he hoped no one knew him.

"My parents, of course. Or the police."

"The police?" repeated the Monster, trying not to sound alarmed. "The police? No, of course not. I won't tell anybody."

"So you're not going to stop me?"

"Stop you?" asked the Monster. "Why should I want to do that? I'd like to help you."

Debbie was quite overwhelmed by this unexpected answer. "Oh, you kind, lovely man," she cried.

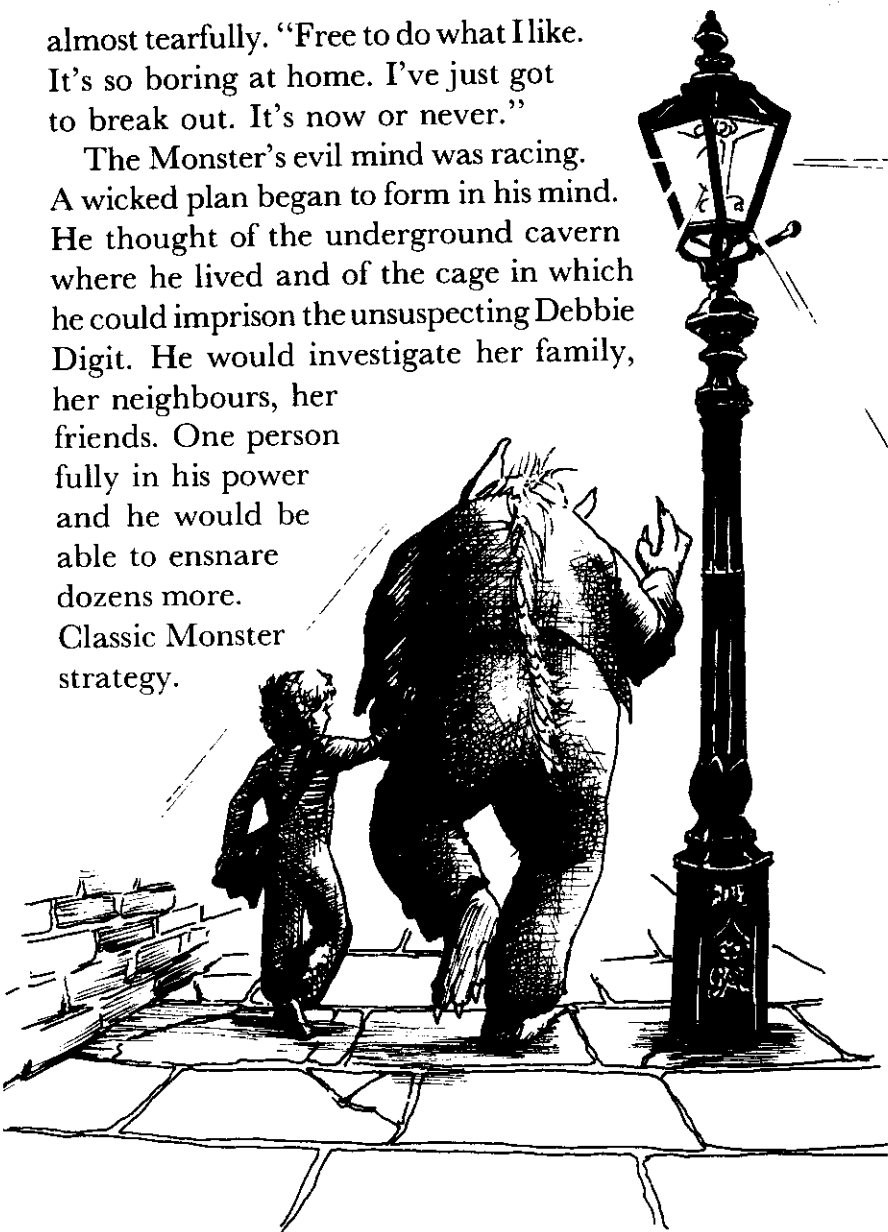
The Monster thought this was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him. "Watch it," he thought to himself. "Watch it, or you'll be getting soft. And that won't do." He had to give himself another warning when Debbie added, jerking her thumb towards her house, "No one else seems to understand me."

"Ah, now *she's* becoming soft," thought the Monster. "That's better. Now I shall have the advantage once again."

"I just want to be free," Debbie went on,

almost tearfully. "Free to do what I like. It's so boring at home. I've just got to break out. It's now or never."

The Monster's evil mind was racing. A wicked plan began to form in his mind. He thought of the underground cavern where he lived and of the cage in which he could imprison the unsuspecting Debbie Digit. He would investigate her family, her neighbours, her friends. One person fully in his power and he would be able to ensnare dozens more. Classic Monster strategy.



"Come along with me, my dear," he said. "I know a place where you will be free to have as much fun as you like."

"Is it a disco?" asked Debbie eagerly.

"Why yes, as a matter of fact it is," replied the Monster, thinking quickly. "It's the greatest disco in town. It's called the... er, The Cave."

The Cave sounded to Debbie like it might be fun.

"Would you like to go there?" asked the Monster, careful not to press her too hard or too quickly.

"What, now?" asked Debbie.

"Why not? It's open all night," said the Monster.

"Oh, so you know it well, do you?"

The Monster laughed.

"No one knows it better," he gave a modest cough. "Like I, er, I... own it."

"Wow!" thought Debbie.

The Monster held out his hand. "Come along, my dear. You're going to have fun. And you're going to be free, with me."

Debbie had been taught not to go with strangers. Her mother's repeated warnings flashed into her mind. But she was determined to turn her back on all her parents' rules and regulations. Wasn't that the whole point of running away? She was on her

own now. No one was going to tell her what to do. She was free to make her own decisions, she told herself. Besides, an all-night disco sounded fun. And to be invited there as the guest of the proprietor! Well, what could be better? Wait till she told the girls at school. Wouldn't they be jealous? School! Debbie suddenly remembered, with a jolt. It was Monday morning. School would begin in about eight hours' time. "Oh, never mind," she told herself, "I've run away from all that now."

So, taking a deep breath, she grasped the Monster's outstretched hand.



3. The Monster Strikes

One week and several hours later Gavin stood in the same street. It was Monday evening, a week before Christmas, so it was already dark by the time he had found his way from Victoria Coach Station to Einstein Avenue. So dark were the rain-filled skies and so ill-lit was the street, that he had difficulty in reading the numbers on the houses, which were set back a little from the road. Still less could he have noticed that the man-hole cover in the middle of the road had recently been turned, removed, and carefully replaced. One doesn't normally notice man-hole covers at all.

Gavin was cold. His anorak was wet across the shoulders and the rain had begun to seep into his shoes. He had been travelling all day and his sandwiches had been devoured hours ago. He had no idea that London was so vast. In fact he reckoned that finding his way from Victoria Coach Station to Einstein Avenue had taken him

longer than the bus journey from Bristol.

There had been no one to meet him at the Coach Station. No Debbie, no lady in blue stockings and certainly no Professor, at least no one who answered to the description his mother had given him of her brother. He had gone to the Information kiosk and the kind lady there had called out the names of Professor and Mrs Digit over the loudspeakers. He could hear it echoing all round the vast Coach Station. But no one had come forward to meet the passenger from Bristol.

Gavin had tried to telephone from a coin-box, but there was no reply. So, after a lot of enquiries, he boarded a red double-decker bus going in the right direction and the helpful conductor had set him down at a request stop on the main road. "Darn there, me old sunshine," the conductor said, pointing to a street on the left.

That walk from the main road to Einstein Avenue was the worst part of the whole journey. Gavin had a heavy sports bag, as well as his rucksack. That slow walk through cold drizzle down long streets which all looked the same, while the light faded and it grew darker and darker, seemed as if it would never end. Several times he took a wrong turning and had to stop and ask the way. Now at last he was on Einstein Avenue. But the street seemed deserted and he

just couldn't find number seventy-seven.

Gavin shifted his bag to the other hand. His arms and shoulders were aching. A strong wiry boy of determined will, he was usually cheerful under most circumstances. But now he began to feel just a little sorry for himself. It had not been the happy sort of day he had expected. Why had no one come to meet him?

It was at that moment that he heard the roar. It was the same roar he thought he heard sometimes in Bristol. It echoed down the empty street, sending a chill down his spine. It was loud, throaty, almost human, a terrifying sound. What was worse, it seemed to be coming towards him down the dark street, where bare branches of trees made strange patterns under the dim street lamps. Now and again the roar was interrupted by a loud and wicked laugh which was, if anything, more frightening still. It was then that he heard another sound; the clip, clip, of light footsteps on the pavement and the squeaking of unoiled wheels.

Gavin turned to see a lady coming up behind him. He was very relieved to find another human being on that lonely avenue. What was he doing feeling so scared when this brave lady was walking briskly along with her day's shopping? She was pulling a heavy basket on wheels and was

well wrapped up against the cold and the rain. She seemed quite unaware of the terrifying sound Gavin could hear and she didn't appear at all frightened.

She must live around here, he thought. He would ask her to point out number seventy-seven.

Gavin put down his heavy sports bag and waited for her to catch up with him. When he looked round again he saw a sight which froze him to the spot. A great green creature came hurtling up behind her. With a loud roar it snatched her handbag and knocked her to the ground, scattering the contents of her shopping basket all over the street. Then without stopping, it bounded off up the street the way it had come, laughing cruelly at the top of its voice. Then it was gone.

It all happened so quickly and so suddenly that Gavin at first wondered whether he had imagined it. But the lady in the raincoat was sprawled out on the pavement, now moaning softly, now calling for help. Her shopping was scattered all about her. A tin of peas still rolled idly in the gutter.

Leaving his bag, Gavin rushed over to her and tried to help her to her feet. But when she looked up at him her moans and sobs turned to loud screams.



"Are you hurt?" asked Gavin cautiously. He remembered that you should not try to move an injured person, so he gently lowered her to the pavement again. But the woman just moaned all the louder.

"Anything broken, do you think?"

Another scream.

"Shall I get an ambulance?" Gavin persisted.

"Get away from me!"



Gavin tried to explain that he was only trying to help her. But she would not listen.

"You're one of them, aren't you!"

"One of whom?" asked Gavin, perplexed.

"Don't try to be clever with me. You're one of those boys who mugged me just then, aren't you?"

Gavin could not believe his ears.

"Boys?" he started to say, "those weren't boys. That was a...." But the lady just kept on shrieking at him. "I'll get the police on to you. Attacking defenceless women in the street."

"But you've got it all wrong," objected Gavin.

The lady was talking at him so loudly and so rapidly now that Gavin decided that she could not have been badly hurt after all. When she began to struggle to her feet, he again tried to help her.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Help! Police! Help!"

"I am trying to help," said Gavin. "Do you feel any better?" he added with real concern, when she finally stood on her own two feet.

"Better indeed!" she replied crossly. "I'm aching all over."

"I saw it, you know," said Gavin as he began to gather up her scattered shopping and put the packets, tins and fresh vegetables back in her wheeled carrier.

"I saw the Monster attack you."

"What *are* you talking about? What Monster?"

Gavin explained exactly what happened.

"A likely story. You're making it up," exploded the lady. "It was a gang of boys, and I bet you're one of them."

"It was a Monster, I tell you," Gavin persisted, really bewildered that she had not seen the huge creature.

"Try telling that to the police, when they catch you."

"I only hope they catch the Monster," countered Gavin.

"Monster indeed!" the lady said impatiently. "There are no such things as Monsters. The real trouble in the world is boys!"

Gavin could see there was no point in arguing. He put the last items of shopping back into her basket. Then he went to collect his sports bag. "See?" he said to the lady, holding up his bag. "I was on my way from the bus stop, looking for number...."

Whether it was that his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, or whether the blowing branches of a tree had allowed the light from the nearest street lamp to fall on just the right spot for an instant, Gavin wasn't sure. But there, on the open gate in front of him was the

number he had been looking for. Seventy-seven.

"There it is!" he shouted with relief and joy. He marched through the gate and up to the front door on which he gave a loud knock. Suddenly he was aware that the lady with the wheeled shopping basket was standing just behind him, her door key in her hand.

"That proves it," said the lady.

Gavin stepped back with a startled look.

"You *are* one of those dreadful boys who knock on people's doors and then run away."

"But this is my uncle's house," objected an even more bewildered Gavin.

"Indeed!" said the lady. "Now I know you're lying."

Gavin took from his pocket the piece of blue paper his mother had given him and showed it to her. She looked at it carefully. "I don't believe it!" was all she could say.

"You know Professor Digit?" asked Gavin.

"Of course I know him," replied the lady tartly.

Gavin then explained how Debbie had come to stay with him last Easter. "It was brilliant fun," he said. "Now I'm coming to stay with her."

"But haven't you heard? Debbie ran away from home a week ago and nobody knows where she is."

When Gavin recovered a little from the shock of this alarming news about his cousin, he asked, "How do you know?"

"Because I'm Mrs Digit. That's how!"

This was one more shock in a day of shocks and surprises.

She continued, rather wearily now, "I suppose your mother wrote to her brother—Professor Digit."

"Yes, well—she rang, some weeks ago. And Uncle said it was all right. I hope it *is* all right?" he added nervously.

"Oh yes, perfectly all right," she said testily. "Except that he forgot to tell *me*." She paused. "Or Debbie." Her voice had a choking sound. "I suppose if... if she had known you were coming... she might never have run away."

Mrs Digit unlocked the front door and led the way inside the house.



4. Monsters and Computers

Gavin was surprised by the drabness of the Digit home. He had assumed that because his uncle was a professor and, according to his mother, one of the most brilliant men in his field, the Digits would be well off. But their house was, if anything, less well furnished than his own little home in Bristol. The floorboards were uncovered, except for some threadbare rugs. The few pieces of furniture in the living-room were decidedly shabby. There had been little attempt to beautify the room with curtains, pictures, ornaments or cushions; yet books... books were everywhere.

His Aunty Bridget noticed the expression of surprise on his face. "Research," she said, as if that one word provided the entire reason for their frugal life-style. "Yes, research—but wait till you see his study!"

Gavin's opportunity came when Aunty Bridget announced that supper was ready and asked him to

go and summon his uncle to the table. Gavin could smell noodles; and noodles, as he had often informed his mother, were ace.

He knocked at the study door, as he had been taught to do at school, and waited. After a few moments he knocked again. Still no reply. So in he went.

He found himself in the most spacious room of the house.

Professor Digit was at the far end, a slight man with tousled hair and straggly beard, and about as shabby altogether as the rooms Gavin had just come through. His woollen cardigan was worn at the elbows, his trousers torn at the knees. A big toe peeped through the end of one slipper.

He did not notice Gavin's arrival. His whole attention was concentrated on the huge computer which lined the entire wall on the left-hand side of the study. Here nothing was shabby. Everything was shiny and new. It reminded Gavin of Mission Control, Houston, Texas.

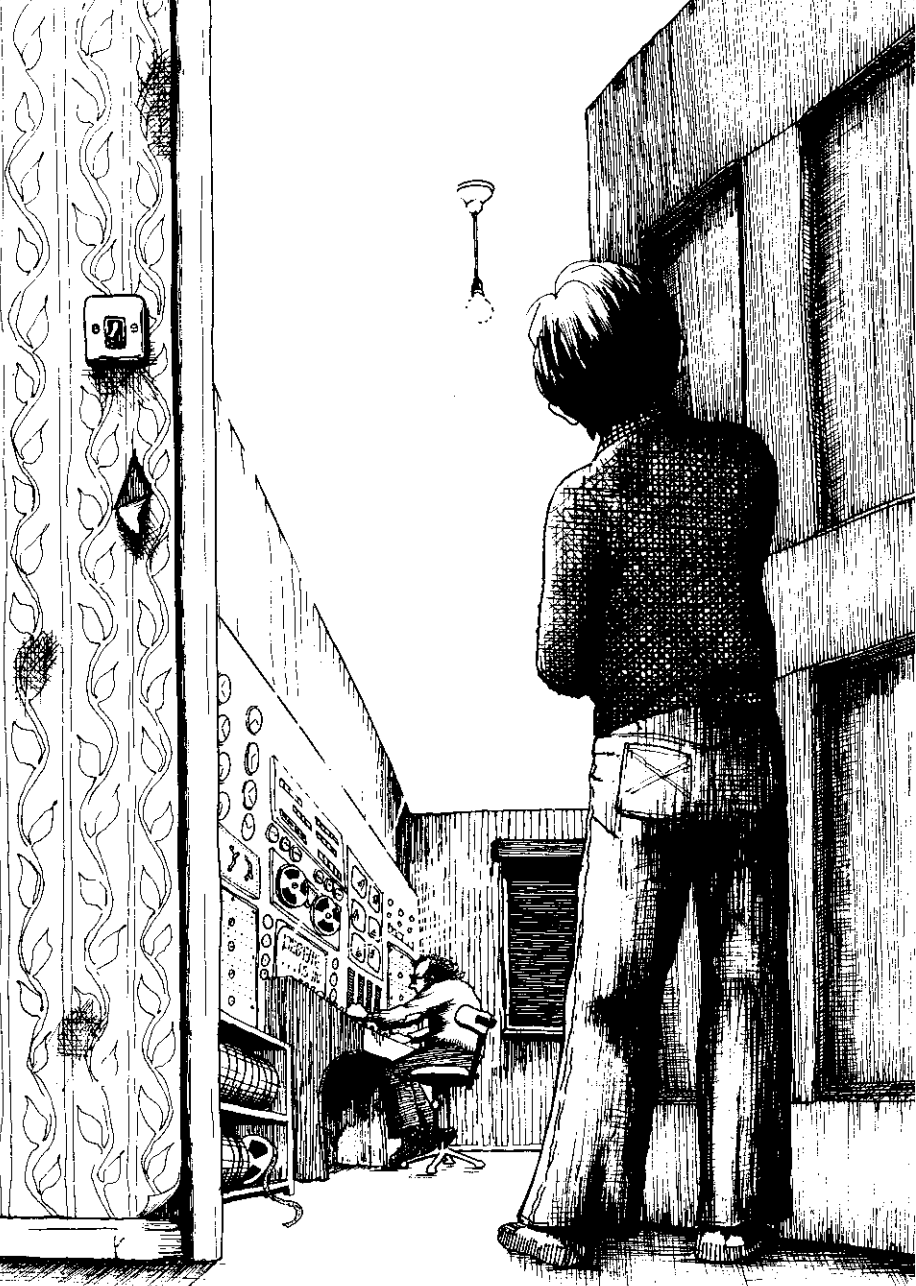
The Professor, hunched over a desk, tapped away on a keyboard and above him on a dark green screen appeared light green letters.

Gavin was beside himself with curiosity. He was sure that the Professor must be on the verge of some momentous scientific discovery. A new planet, perhaps, or even a new galaxy. Imagine

his surprise therefore when he approached the motionless form of the Professor and peered over his shoulder at the screen, only to see the bright green letters read **FACTS ABOUT DEBBIE DIGIT.**

The Professor, deeply absorbed, pressed another key. The question vanished from the screen. There was a whirring sound from the computer to his left and as the Professor turned his head towards it, so did Gavin. He saw the giant spools of tape begin to turn. Red and black needles in a dozen meters came to life with a spring and a quiver. Pale green zig-zag lines began to dodge backwards and forwards in tiny screens dotted over the computer. The whole apparatus seemed to hum. Professor Digit turned back to the screen above his desk. Gavin, still unobserved, followed his gaze. **DEBBIE DIGIT MISSING FOR EIGHT DAYS.** "I know that," muttered his uncle impatiently. **LEFT HOME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.** "I know that too, confound you," said the Professor. **NO CONTACT WITH DEBBIE DIGIT SINCE THEN.** "Tell me something new," murmured Professor Digit desperately. "Well, come on, *where* is she? That's what I want to know." Gavin stood transfixed by the scene around him.

With the press of a key the Professor wiped the



useless information from the screen. Then he tapped out POSSIBLE DIRECTION DEBBIE TOOK. "Now," said the Professor to himself, "If I put in the position of all her usual haunts—friends' houses, favourite discos, parks, sports-grounds, swimming-pools—some kind of pattern might begin to emerge. It's worth trying." He worked silently for some time, feeding all the information he knew into the computer's brain.

"Now," he demanded, beginning to perspire profusely, "answer this question, and this question alone." He tapped out the words: WHERE REPEAT WHERE IS SHE? The computer came alive again and this time the whirring sound was accompanied by several loud pips and squeaks. Lights flashed on and off. Needles swung dangerously back and forth. The wavy lines in the tiny screens seemed to go crazy with vibration. Then there was a slurring noise, like a descending *glissando* on a 'cello, and the computer went strangely silent. The lights stopped flashing, the needles stopped flickering, the little green lines went dead straight and still.

There was a short pause. Then suddenly the computer emitted a sound which reminded Gavin of something he had heard quite recently. It sounded awfully like the wicked laughter of the Monster. But of course it could not be since it

came from the very core of the computer.

Gavin cleared his throat. "Uncle," he said, and tapped him on the shoulder. The Professor turned in surprise.

"Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Gavin. Your nephew, Gavin."

"Nephew? Ah! You must be Janie's boy. Yes she rang me. So you're here. Good. Er, good to see you. Now, if you'll kindly excuse me, I'm very busy and..."

"Aunty Bridget says to tell you supper is ready."

"Good," said his uncle, turning back to the computer.

"She says it's ready now," Gavin added.

"Then go and eat it—if you *can* eat it," retorted the Professor. "I'm too busy."

"Too busy to eat?" This struck Gavin as most odd.

"That's what I said," replied the Professor.

"And that's what I am."

"I'm starving, myself," said Gavin.

"Well, go and have your supper then, and tell your Aunty Bridget to stop bothering me with trivialities. I've got more important things to think about!"

"More important than supper?" questioned Gavin in amazement. For him mealtimes were

the most important event of the day. Trouble was, they didn't come round quickly enough.

"Greedy boy! It will be your undoing, mark my words. Now, *please* stop wasting my time. I *must* get back to work," pleaded the Professor impatiently.

"What *is* your work?" asked Gavin.

"More questions! More time wasted! Oh, well," sighed the perspiring Professor at last, "I don't seem to be getting anywhere this evening, so I may as well break off. My work? I'll tell you about it over supper. Come on." And reluctantly he led the way to supper, promising himself to return with all speed to continue the search for Debbie.

While they waited at the table for Mrs Digit to serve up the food, Professor Digit endeavoured to explain his passion for his work. Gavin could not take his mind off noodles, but Professor Digit launched into an explanation of his life, work and fascination with computers. Gavin found it hard to follow all his uncle was saying, but when he talked about data gathering he had visions of brown-skinned boys shinning up tall palm trees collecting the dates he loved so much. He had to remind himself to concentrate on what his uncle was telling him.

"Information," the Professor was saying,

“Information is the most important commodity in today’s world. Collecting facts and figures, millions of them, and then relating them to other facts and figures; this is what computers have enabled men like me to do. After all,” said the Professor, “What is the most valuable thing in the world today?”

“Gold?” suggested Gavin. The Professor shook his head. Gavin tried again, “Oil?”

“No, no, no!” cried the Professor with a mixture of impatience and enthusiasm. “Don’t you see? The most valuable thing in the world today is information, knowledge. And through my computer there, I’ve got more of that than almost anyone else in the whole world.”

“Then how come we’re so poor?” said Mrs Digit, flatly, coming in from the kitchen with a pot full of steaming noodles.

“Poor?” said the Professor, genuinely mystified. “We’re not poor.” Then, seeing the expression on his wife’s face added, “Are we?”

Mrs Digit was piling Gavin’s plate high with noodles. But when it came to her husband’s turn she filled his plate with yards and yards of computer tape. The Professor was so busy talking to Gavin about his work that he put a fork-full of the thin paper strips into his mouth before he realised what he was doing. He spat it out saying



angrily, "What's this? I can't eat computer tape!"

"Glad you realise that at least," replied Mrs Digit. "Nor can any of us."

"That," retorted Professor Digit testily, "is not the point."

"And what *is* the point?" asked Mrs Digit.

"Oh dear," thought Gavin, "They're going to have a row."

"That tape is valuable," said Professor Digit. "It contains priceless information. If I ate it, that knowledge would be lost."

"Oh, I'll admit you know a lot," replied Gavin's aunty, holding her ground. "You know almost everything there is to know about anything—or your computer does." The Professor looked happier. "Thank you, my dear," he said.

"Except," added Mrs Digit sharply, "All the really important things."

"What things?" asked the Professor, hurt by this.

"Like what we are going to eat for breakfast tomorrow," said Mrs Digit. "And where your slippers are."

"Good point, my dear," said the Professor, trying now to pacify her. "Where are they?"

"On your feet," Gavin giggled.

"Ah thank you, my boy. I wondered where I had put them."

But Aunty Bridget was not so easily pacified. "And where your only daughter is—missing for over a week."

The Professor was really hurt by this last dig. Hurt and angry. He protested that it was quite unfair. After all he had been working on the

problem that very evening. "If you hadn't summoned me in for what you humorously call supper, I would be working on it still," he complained. "I now know everything there is to know about Debbie's disappearance."

"Everything?" asked Mrs Digit sceptically.

"Everything," repeated the Professor stoutly. Then added, in a smaller voice, "Except where she actually is."

Aunt Bridget shrugged. "*Your* work comes before everything, doesn't it!"

"You know as well as I do how important it is," her husband retorted.

"It's always been *your* studies and *your* research. You never consider *me* or the research I gave up to marry you!"

Gavin thought of his mother and how she would love to be able to give up her job and spend more time making a home for him. She just had to support them both, since his father was gone... because his father had.... Gavin preferred not to think about his father. His uncle and aunt were still arguing about whose work was more important. He could dimly remember arguments like that at home, before his father went away, arguments that went on all evening and all night too, when he had lain awake in the next room, unable to sleep.

Just then there was a loud knock at the front door. The Professor, glad to escape from his wife's accusations, went to answer it. He came back looking rather puzzled and saying there was no one there. Mrs Digit was not at all surprised. She knew it must be those dreadful boys again, up to their tricks. She told her husband he had better go outside to see what damage they had done.

Rather reluctantly the Professor went outside. He returned a few minutes later angrily brandishing a windscreen-wiper almost bent in half and a car radio aerial that had been twisted round into a spiral.

"What did I tell you?" said Mrs Digit indignantly. "Those worthless boys are at it again."

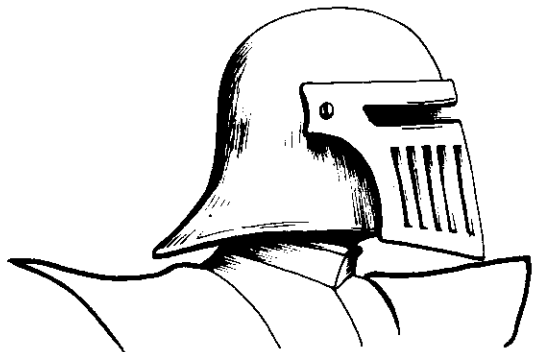
Gavin had other suspicions. He began to wonder if the Monster was not responsible for a lot of the things that seemed to be happening in Einstein Avenue: the attack on his aunt, the antics of the computer, the damage to the Digits' car—even the disappearance of their daughter, though he couldn't prove it. But when he told them what he had been thinking, they only laughed.

Their supper was brought to an abrupt end by a loud buzzing which came from the study. "Time for the news," said Professor Digit. "I receive TV broadcasts from all over the world by

satellite, picked up by a concave receiving dish on the roof." Gavin wished he could have another helping of noodles. Instead his uncle led them into the study where there was a huge television screen set into the right-hand wall, opposite the computer.

The news was about a bank robbery in the West End of London. Then there was an item about various guerilla groups in Belfast, Munich, Rome and Barcelona who had attacked the police. Gavin sat fascinated. Every now and again he thought he could recognise the Monster on the screen. Yes, wasn't that him with football hooligans who had wrecked a train? But his uncle and aunt didn't seem to see it. At least they didn't comment. They went on talking about tragic world events as if there were no Monsters. "Boys," snapped Auntie Bridget, "horrid, grown-up boys. That's what happens to you boys when you get older, mark my words."

Not a word about the Monster. Yet Gavin was certain he had seen his wicked face appearing on every news item. He could not understand how his aunt and uncle could be so blind.



5. Enter the White Knight

Gavin got into his pyjamas in the cold and bare bedroom. There were no carpets on the floor, not even a rug. The few items of furniture were a low wooden bed and an upright chair, also of wood, over which he now spread his clothes. The only remotely convenient fitting was a cord hanging over the end of the bed. By pulling it he could switch the light on and off. At least he would not have to cross this strange room in the dark to get into bed, thought Gavin.

The evening had not ended altogether happily. Gavin had been told firmly by his uncle and aunt that he had Monsters on the brain and that a good night's sleep would probably clear his head. When saying good-night he had slightly improved relations with his aunt by promising that in the morning he would start looking for Debbie. He would begin by visiting her usual haunts and talking to some of her friends. But his uncle had

only snorted through his nose and told him he would be wasting his time. His computer, he claimed, would be sure to come up with the answer to Debbie's whereabouts, in the morning. Gavin gathered from the look on Mrs Digit's face that she did not share her husband's optimism, nor his faith in his beloved computer.

Gavin slept only fitfully. Quite early on he had a vivid dream about Debbie in which he saw her being carried off by the Monster while he looked on helplessly. He awoke in a cold sweat and calling out, "Debbie! Come back, Debbie! Where are you, Debbie?"

He propped himself up in bed and pulled the light cord. He gazed around the depressingly bare room. His shoulders began to feel chilly. He got out of bed and crossed to the window and looked out. He could see rain still driving against the street lamps and the weird patterns made by the leafless twigs and branches of the trees in the avenue. Out in the street things looked as cold and as grim and as miserable as they did inside.

Gavin began to feel just a little homesick. He missed his cosy bed in his warm little room in Bristol. But Gavin was both brave and determined and he did not let these thoughts linger for long. He clenched his fist, gritted his teeth and muttered to himself, "I will find you, Debbie, wherever you

are. I promise, I will find you.” Then he got back to bed, put the light out, and went straight back to sleep.

It must have been an hour later that he woke again. Lying in bed he thought he could hear strange electronic music which grew louder as it came closer. Then gradually he became aware of a bluish white light slowly invading the room. He thought he must be dreaming again and rubbed his eyes and shook his head. Then suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed. For in the middle of the bright light he could see a Knight in shining white armour, standing not a foot from the end of his bed.

The Knight’s visor was down. On his hands were white gauntlets. At his side hung a huge sword in a white scabbard. Gavin, wanting to be sure he was not a ghost, asked in a thin and quavery voice, “Who are you?” To his relief and joy the figure in white spoke back to him.

“I’m a Knight,” the man said.

Gavin was so surprised and delighted that he did not know what to say next. He was not afraid now. There was a warmth in the Knight’s voice even though it was muffled by his visor, and something about his presence radiated both strength and kindness. He wanted to get to know the Knight better. He hoped desperately that he

would not disappear again too soon. So Gavin put out his hand and said, "My name is Gavin." The Knight began to take off his helmet and gauntlets. Good, thought Gavin, he's going to stay. "What's your name?" asked Gavin. He liked the sound of the Knight's voice and wanted to keep him talking.

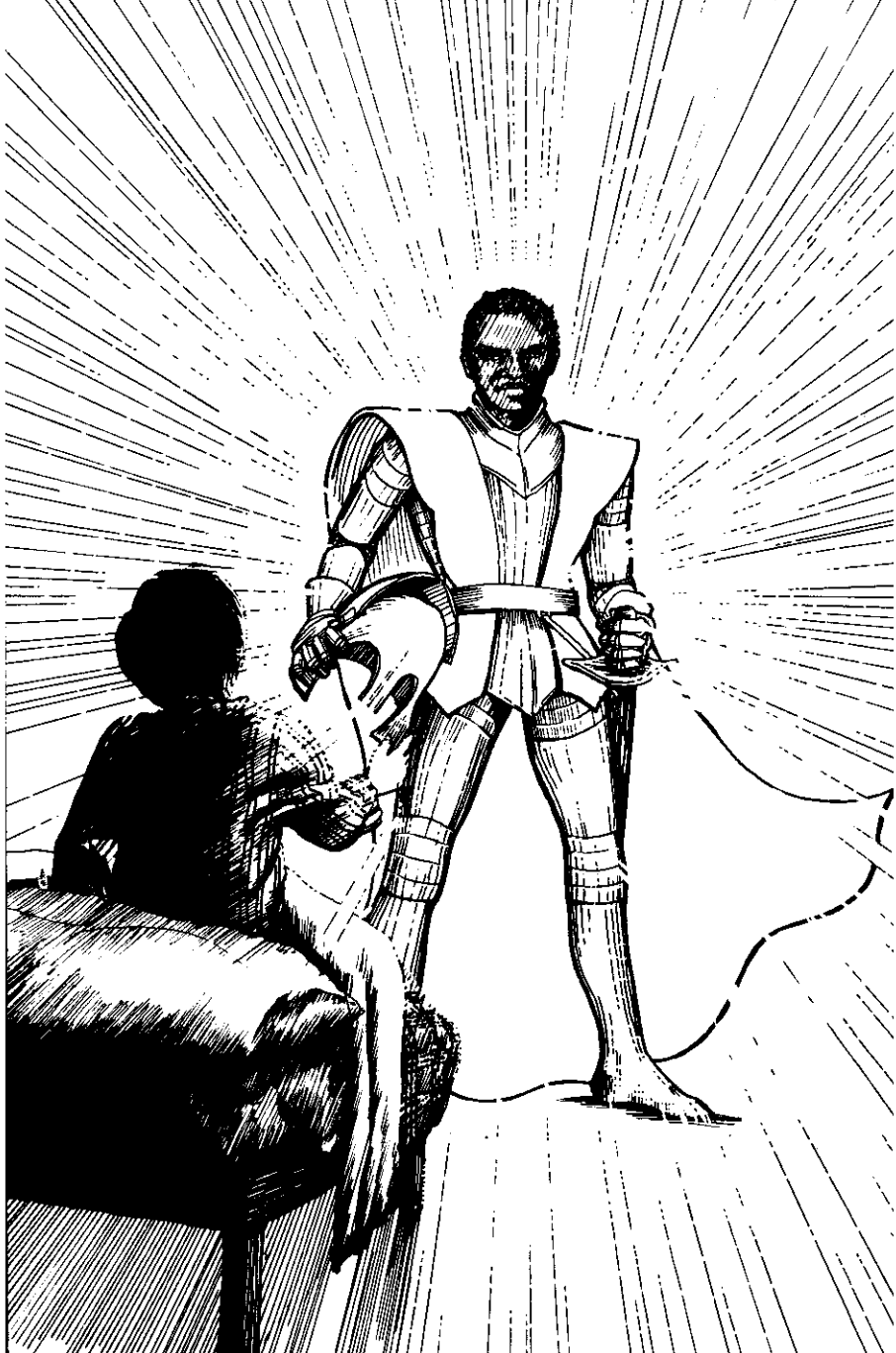
"Oh, we don't have names," the Knight said. "But I'm known as The White Knight." He shook Gavin's hand.

"But... but... you're black," said Gavin, now that he could see his hands and face.

The White Knight laughed and his even teeth shone, matching the whiteness of his spotless armour. "I know," he said. "The boss has a sense of humour." Gavin wanted to ask him who the boss was, but he had another, more urgent question, "Are you real? Or am I dreaming?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" replied the White Knight. And his broad grin flashed again. When he smiled it was like switching on a light, thought Gavin, and his laughter was like happy music.

"Because today I saw a Monster," explained Gavin. "I saw it with my own eyes. In the street and again this evening on TV. Only the Digits don't believe in Monsters. They say there are no such things."



The White Knight said, "Oh, I know all about that Monster. In fact I know that Monster all too well."

Gavin was relieved to hear that. At least someone believed him and didn't just think he had made it all up. He did not like being laughed at or told he was wrong about something he had seen with his own two eyes. "But are *you* real?" he asked again, wanting to be sure.

"I'm as real as the Monster is," said the White Knight.

"Are you going to slay the Monster?" asked Gavin hopefully. He was sure that the Knight must be strong as well as brave. So he was disappointed when the White Knight shook his head. Gavin pointed to the huge sword which hung at the Knight's side, "You could easily slay the Monster with that terrific sword of yours," he told him.

"Of course I could," said the White Knight. "But that's your job."

This thought startled Gavin. Then a thrill ran down his spine. To think that the White Knight would entrust him with a task like that. He knew it would be difficult and dangerous. Wait until he told the boys at school! But then he pulled himself together. He must be realistic. He was not trained to fight Monsters. He was not strong, only a boy.

He had no weapon. "How on earth could I ever slay the Monster?" asked Gavin.

The White Knight drew the sword and handed it to him. "With this sword," he said simply.

Gavin was really taken aback. The White Knight went on, "You are to have the sword on loan at first. If during that time you prove yourself brave and true and worthy of such a sword, then you may be given it."

"For keeps?" asked Gavin.

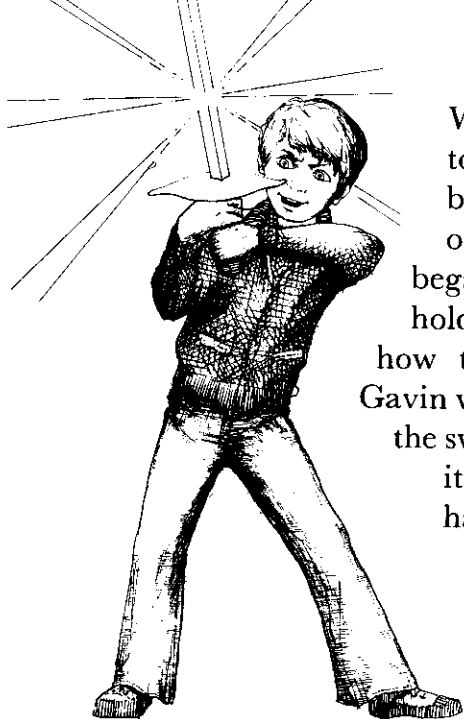
"For keeps," confirmed the White Knight.

Of course Gavin immediately promised that he would be brave and true. He had always wanted a real sword.

"It's not what you want that matters," the White Knight said firmly, reading his thoughts. "But *why* you want it. This sword is not a toy or something to show off with. It's too important for that. It will only truly become yours if you genuinely wish to rescue Debbie and slay the Monster."

This confirmed what Gavin had suspected all along: Debbie had been captured by the Monster and was being held by him.

"It won't be a picnic," the White Knight continued. "Slaying Monsters is not a game. It is dangerous. In fact it is literally a question of life or death for you, for Debbie—and for the Monster."



With that the Knight told Gavin to get out of bed and get dressed in his outdoor things. Then he began to teach him how to hold the heavy sword and how to wield it effectively. Gavin was delighted. Although the sword looked very heavy, it seemed light in his hands. He felt a strength he had never known before flow through him the moment he gripped it.

“With this sword I really will be able to slay the Monster, and rescue Debbie, you’ll see!” he exclaimed.

He began to leap around the room, attacking imaginary Monsters with the sword, “Take that, Monster! And that! Got you! Hooray!” and he ran the sword through the imaginary Monster. Triumphant he turned to the White Knight. “It’ll be dead easy with a real sword like this.”

The White Knight tried to tell him it would not be easy at all. He was worried by Gavin’s over-confidence.

"I'd better come with you," he suggested. "I think you're going to need me around to help you."

But Gavin would not hear of it and told the White Knight he would be able to manage perfectly well without him now, thank you very much. He wanted to prove himself worthy of the sword by setting out alone to tackle the Monster. "It won't take very long," he boasted. "I'll find the Monster, chop his head off, and then go straight back to bed."

"And what about Debbie?" questioned the White Knight, as they left the bedroom and crept along the dark landing.

"Oh, and rescue Debbie as well, of course," bragged Gavin.

"Aren't you afraid of going out alone?" the White Knight asked, following Gavin downstairs and out of the front door into the street.

"Of course not," boasted Gavin. "I'll chop that Monster into mincemeat. You wait. Hey! Monster!" he called up the street. "Look out! Gavin's on your trail. I'm coming after you!"

The White Knight thought that if Gavin was in that kind of mood then he had better leave him to continue his quest alone. So he quietly disappeared.

Suddenly Gavin thought the sword seemed heavier, somehow.



6. First Round to the Monster

Gavin was still shouting threats and defiance to the Monster in the dark and empty street when he thought he heard, not far off, that throaty roar which had frightened him so much the previous evening. He turned to the White Knight for reassurance, but the White Knight had vanished. Gavin was well and truly on his own. Suddenly he began to feel anything but confident. He wished he had not been quite so cocky and had accepted the White Knight's offer to come with him. He still had the sword in his hand but it felt really heavy now. Would he be strong enough to wield it against that powerful Monster without help?

Besides, it was very dark and still raining. He could not see very far ahead, and he had no idea from which direction the Monster might strike.

He was already feeling a little shaky when he heard that terrifying roar again, and then again.

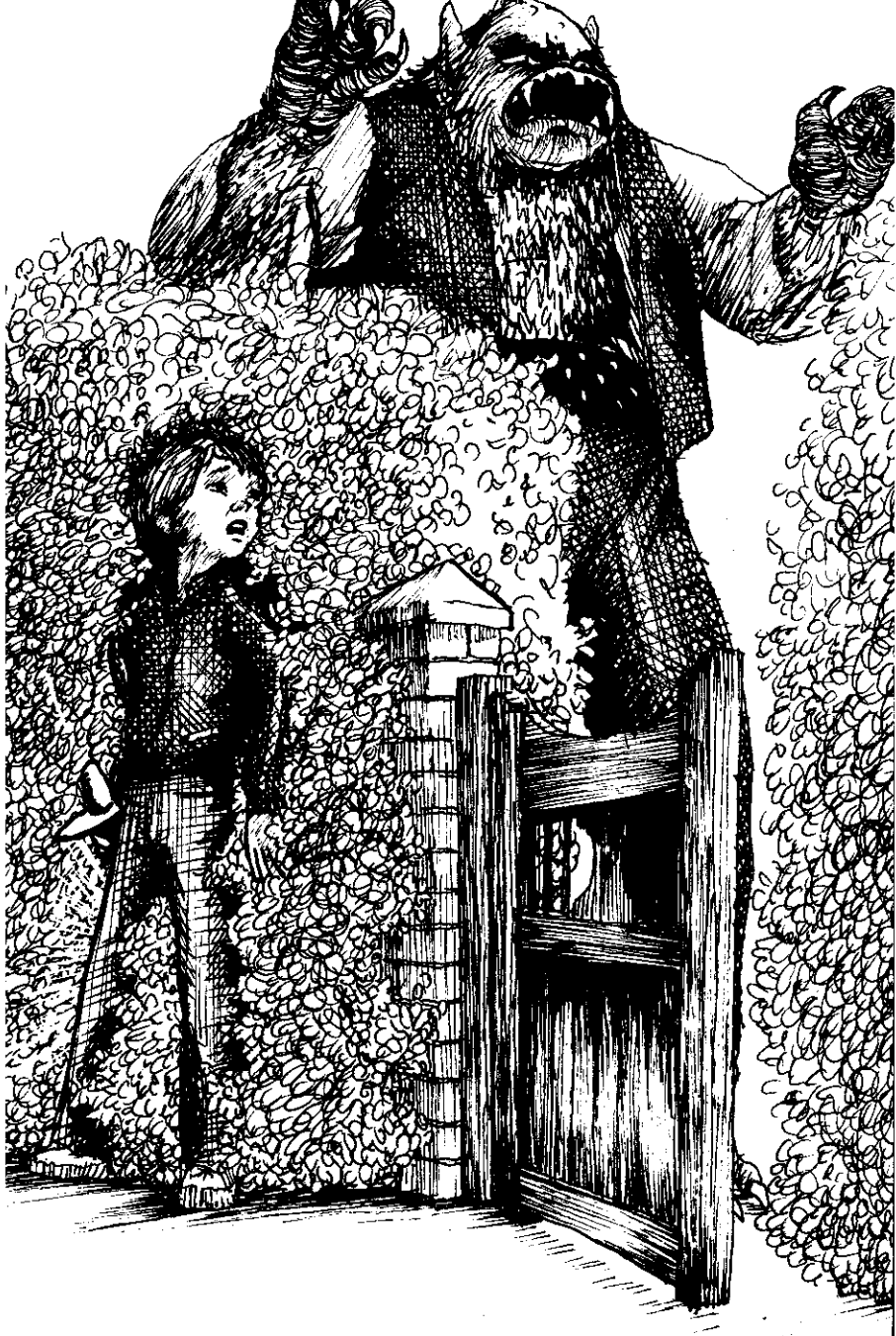
Each time it seemed to come closer. Now his

courage completely failed him. He was, he told himself, in no state to face the Monster alone. So he dived quickly behind a thick hedge in somebody's front garden and waited breathlessly for the Monster to appear.

He did not have long to wait. Louder and louder grew the approaching roar and then suddenly, out of the rain and the blackness of the night, came the Monster. His eyes were burning fiercely. His muscles bulged menacingly. His long clawed fingers were outstretched to seize his quarry. As he opened his giant mouth to let out another fearsome roar, his sharp fangs glinted in the pale light of the street lamps.

Gavin had never been so terrified in his whole life. He wanted to shut his eyes or turn away; but he couldn't. He wished a hole would open in the ground and swallow him up; but it didn't. He wished he was only dreaming; but he wasn't. He just stood, rooted to the spot, paralysed with fear. All he could do was hope that the Monster would not invade this particular front garden, or search behind this particular hedge. The next moment he thought that all was lost. For the Monster suddenly came to a screeching halt, right in front of his hiding-place. "He's seen me!" thought Gavin. "He knows I'm here."

Peering through the twigs of the hedge Gavin



saw the Monster cup his hands to his mouth and then heard him bellow at the top of his voice: "Where is he? Where is he? Let me get my great green grisly claws on him. I'll show him. I'll 'Monster' him. Gavin, where are you?"

"Help!" thought Gavin, shivering with fear. "He even knows my name."

"Mincemeat, eh?" roared the Monster, then laughed his evil laugh. "We'll see who makes the mincemeat!"

"He heard me," thought Gavin. "He heard my boasts and threats. No wonder he is so angry."

"Come on Gavin," the creature continued to shout. "Here's your Monster. Come and get me—if you dare!"

Of course Gavin had no intention of doing any such thing. He remained stock still behind the hedge, wishing the dreadful creature would go away. In the end Gavin was saved by the Monster's own blind fury. So angry was the giant creature that he could not stop still for long. He rushed off again down the street. Finally the roar died away in the distance.

Gavin waited a long time before he left his hiding-place behind the hedge. But when all had remained quiet for several minutes he crept out softly, looking about him carefully to right and left. He decided that fighting Monsters was

definitely not his scene. He would go back to the Digits' house as quickly and as quietly as he could—and go back to bed.

"I wouldn't go after th...th...that thing," he muttered to himself, under his breath, "not if I was paid a million pounds. And the White Knight—he can keep his sword. I just wouldn't stand a chance."

He was crossing the road in front of the Digits' house when the White Knight suddenly appeared beside him.

"Did you call?" he asked.

Gavin was taken aback. He had only muttered the White Knight's name to himself. "No... no...not exactly," he mumbled.

"Funny," said the White Knight. "I thought I heard my name."

Gavin could hardly bear to look the White Knight in the face. He lowered his eyes as he handed back the sword. "What's this?" asked the White Knight.

"It's no good," said Gavin. "I'm not brave or true. I pretended to be brave, but when I saw the Monster looking so angry and calling my name—well, I was just scared stiff."

"Good," said the White Knight.

Gavin was very surprised and asked him what was so good about being scared stiff.

"That's more like the real you," was all the White Knight would reply.

"You mean the real me is scared and frightened?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't be?" said the White Knight. "It's honest. Not like the cocky boy I heard earlier bragging away, pretending he didn't need any help."

"Will you help me?" asked Gavin simply, daring to look up at the White Knight's face for just an instant.

"Of course I will," replied the White Knight with his broad smile. Then he reminded Gavin that he had offered to come with him earlier, but Gavin had been too full of himself to accept his help.

Gavin felt more ashamed than ever. He lowered his eyes again. He couldn't bear to look at him when he spoke like that. The White Knight was not angry or upset like his mother was when he had done something wrong. He was firm and direct and kind all at the same time, which Gavin found more difficult to take. He wanted to burst into tears, but he bit his lip instead.

The White Knight asked him about the sword. How would he be able to face the Monster without it? Gavin said he hoped he would never have to face the Monster again—not on his own,

at any rate. The White Knight laughed. "But you don't have to meet the Monster on your own! You need never be alone again."

Gavin had to bite his lip even harder when the White Knight said that. He was often lonely. He was an only child and because his mother had to work long hours in order to pay the rent and keep them both in food and clothes she was often out and he was left in the house alone. That was why it had been so terrific when Debbie came to stay, even though she was a girl. That was why he had looked forward so much to his visit to the Digits. The White Knight's words rang in his ears: "You need never be alone again." Gavin thought that that was the most marvellous promise he had ever heard.

"If you came with me, I think I'd feel more like facing the Monster again," Gavin said at last. The White Knight put the sword back in Gavin's hands. "As long as you hold on to that," he said, "I'll always be by your side, whether you see me or not."

"Always?" asked Gavin, hardly able to believe it.

"Always," said the White Knight. "You've only got to call and I'll be there."

"I seem to feel less scared already," said Gavin, with wonder.

Just then they heard the roar of the Monster down the avenue. It had stopped raining now but a low mist hung over the avenue and clung around the bare trees. It was beginning to get faintly lighter. Gavin gripped the sword tightly with his right hand. He held out his left hand and the White Knight took it with a firm grasp.

"Ready, White Knight?" asked Gavin, turning in the direction of the Monster's roar.

"Ready, Gavin," replied the White Knight, with a grin that made Gavin feel as if he could go out and fight twenty Monsters before breakfast.

* * *

Professor Digit had woken early. The problem of Debbie's whereabouts was much on his mind and he had not slept at all well. One more session at the computer, he told himself, and he was sure to come up with the answer.

Now he worked patiently and methodically, feeding in all the facts he knew. He explored different options, one by one, eliminating them when they led nowhere. Finally he was convinced of one thing. He now knew the general direction in which they must look in order to find Debbie. At least that was something.

He rushed back to the bedroom to tell his wife

the good news. She was still sound asleep and did not take too kindly to being woken up so early and so abruptly. In fact she was decidedly grumpy. Then he went to Gavin's room to tell him of his important discovery. Imagine his surprise and dismay when he found Gavin's bed was empty and no sign of his nephew anywhere.

Professor Digit went to the window and looked up and down the street. It was foggy and he could not see very far. But he thought he caught a glimpse of a boy disappearing down the avenue in the mist. He threw the window open. "Gavin!" he called, "Gavin! Come back!"

Suddenly the next window flew open and Mrs Digit stuck her neck out, her head covered in curlers.

"What are you shouting about this time of the morning?" she complained to her husband. "You'll wake the whole neighbourhood."

"Gavin's left. He's gone already," said the Professor.

"But it's not daylight yet," said Mrs Digit.

"I know," replied her husband. "What can he be thinking of?"

"Well he's certainly keen to find Debbie, but I had no idea he'd set off *this* early."

"But the point is," cried the Professor, "I've been working at the computer half the night and



it shows without any shadow of doubt that Gavin has gone off *in the wrong direction!*”

“How can you be so sure?” shouted Mrs Digit forgetting about the neighbours.

“Don’t be silly, woman. Of course I’m sure. The computer says so. And computers can’t lie, can they?”

If the Digits had been listening instead of shouting to each other from their open windows, they might have heard a wicked laugh coming from the direction of the study. But they didn’t hear it. They threw on their outdoor clothes and ran out of the house and down the avenue, calling at the tops of their voices, “Gavin! Come back! Gavin! You’re going the wrong way! Gavin!”

The slow dawn had turned the mist a milky white, but it was too thick for them to be able to see to the far end of the avenue or to observe which way Gavin turned when he reached it. Soon their shouts were lost in the rumble of early morning traffic.



7. In the Monster's Cave

Debbie had been tricked of course. She soon realised that. There was no disco called THE CAVE, nothing at the bottom of that flight of stone steps, except the empty platform of an Underground station. She became frightened then. She could just see the headlines in the paper: **GIRL DISAPPEARS IN UNDERGROUND STATION.** Would she ever be found? Perhaps her mother's warnings made sense after all.

She tried to make a run for it, but the man with the weird and sinister face, who seemed to her more like a Monster the more she looked at him, quickly caught up with her. She forgot that he had locked the gates across the station entrance. Before she could climb over them he dragged her away and back down to the platform again. This time he did not let go until he pushed her into the disused lift, slamming the sliding grille across and locking it.

A cobweb brushed Debbie's face as the Monster shoved her into her prison. She felt ghastly. Although she was afraid she shouted and shrieked and rattled the metal grille. "Let me out, you wicked creature," she screamed with all her might. "You liar. You revolting creep. I'll get out. You wait and see!"

"I won't give up," thought a very dejected Debbie, "but I won't cry and rage any more." Her throat was sore from shouting for help. It seemed that people just did not hear her.

One day followed another in that dark tunnel until Debbie could not tell whether it was night or morning. The rounded walls were green with damp and constantly dripped with moisture. The air was thick and dank and smelt unhealthy. There was very little light. As a home it offered very few creature comforts, but as a strategic hide-out she could see it would suit the Monster admirably.

Now she felt just listless and flat. She sang to herself all the pop songs she could remember. She told herself all the stories she knew. What a fate! Her main complaint about life at home had been that nothing exciting ever happened. Now she was doomed to seemingly endless boredom in the gloom of her prison. What was the Monster intending to do? What was going to become of her?

Then something seemed to be happening at last. Debbie saw lights and heard voices. She got to her feet and pressed her face against the grille. She was just in time to see the Monster returning with two small characters, who were noticeably developing into nasty, wicked creatures like himself.

"Come along in, my little Monstrosities, my bright students," the Monster was saying. "Time for your next lesson. I have an example for you here. Take Debbie Digit in her nice comfy cage, which she loves so much," the Monster crooned. But he was interrupted by Debbie who rushed forward to the grille and shook it vigorously shouting, "Let me out! Let me out!"

"Debbie didn't believe in me," the Monster continued, raising his voice so that Debbie would not miss what he said. "Not quite, not in the beginning. She thought I was ever so nice and kind and clever, because I helped her run away from home. I thought at first this was a case of the onset of Monster-blindness, but I was mistaken. She was beginning to develop insight."

"You horrid Monster!" shouted Debbie.

"There you are, you see," said the Monster, turning to his pupils. "Sooner or later, with the development of insight, they discover our true identity. But hopefully, if we do our job properly, by that time it is too late. Like Debbie here they





are well and truly in our power. And of course," he added, "it now means I can't let her go...ever. She might tell others what we are really like."

"Then why don't you eat her?" asked one of the little Monstrosities. Debbie felt a shiver of fear run down her spine.

"What, a nice girl like her?" asked the Monster sarcastically.

"The nicer they are the tastier they are," said the other Monstrosity.

"Yes," added the first, "we'll help you. Why not eat her now?"

Debbie was now thoroughly terrified. Her confidence had totally vanished. Supposing the Monstrosities were to persuade the Monster? "You horrible Monsters," she cried.

"Why not eat her? Why not, indeed?" The Monster waved a green hand, "That shows how much you've still got to learn. I need her as a bait. That's why not. Others will come looking for her, and I shall capture and eat them. Then later, perhaps when she has served her purpose, I may eat her as well—if she is not too tough by then," he added.

At that point Debbie could stand it no longer and burst into tears. She despised girls who cried. But this time she just could not help it.

"Stop that snivelling!" shouted the Monster.

"No I won't," Debbie shouted back, stamping her foot. She had a terrible temper, especially when upset.

"Now, about this boy who has come to stay with Professor Digit," the Monster continued. Debbie suddenly stopped crying and rushed to the grille, calling out, "Gavin? Do you mean my cousin Gavin? Is he staying at my house?"

"Quiet!" thundered the Monster, "I wasn't talking to you."

"Gavin will come looking for me. I'm sure he will," cried Debbie, hope flickering for a moment. The Monster smiled and slowly licked his thin lips. "Exactly," he said.

Suddenly, the full horror of the Monster's wicked plan began to dawn on Debbie. He was going to use her to trap Gavin. "Oh no!" she cried, "Not Gavin!" But the Monster just laughed his evil laugh and the little Monstrosities giggled with glee. They began dancing up and down in front of the lift, chanting:

You're the bait! You're the bait!
You're the bait for the mortals!
You're the bait! You're the bait!
For all those tasty morsels!

When the Monster had called them to order

again he continued, "We shall have to teach that boy Gavin a lesson. You see, he has a bad case of insight. He believes in us already."

"The wicked boy," said one of the Monstrosities.

"Ah, but that is not all," the Monster went on. "Insight can be catching, especially in families. The danger is that he might persuade that old fool the Professor that we really exist."

"Nasty, mean, spiteful boy," said the other Monstrosity.

"But that is not all," continued the Monster. "The Professor might then start sifting all that information flowing into his computers much more carefully."

He explained to the Monstrosities that computers are, after all, merely machines. What you get out depends on what you put in. Therefore, if they could influence, or better still control the input, then they would also control the output. And, as everybody believes what computers tell them, they would soon control the world.

"Hooray!" shouted the Monstrosities, as if the objective having been stated, had already been achieved.

"But that's not all. The boy Gavin, like all our enemies, is in league with that dreaded opponent of all Monsters—the White Knight."

That wiped the smile from their smug faces. At the mere mention of the White Knight the Monstrosities began to quail and shudder. The Monster noticed their look of terror. He was afraid he had gone too far. So he decided to divert their minds from the White Knight with a practical question. "So, my bright, intelligent students—what do we do?" This rather threw the Monstrosities off balance. They were not used to practical questions.

The Monster's green eyes flashed with cunning. "The answer is we shall have to be subtle. We shall have to use disguise and flattery. The boy Gavin is vain."

"No he's not!" protested Debbie angrily from behind her grille.

"Quiet!" thundered the Monster, and bared his fangs at her. "The boy Gavin is also greedy."

"That's not true!" shouted Debbie again. The Monster walked up to the lift, pressed his ugly face against the grille and leered at her. "Proud of our cousin Gavin, are we?" he said.

"We had brilliant fun last Easter," protested Debbie defiantly.

"Then you shall have the pleasure of seeing him eaten alive," drooled the Monster.

"Not Gavin," said Debbie stoutly. "You'll never catch him."

"We'll see about that," said the Monster and turned back to his students. "Vain and greedy. Greedy and vain. You must work on these two failings. Lead him into a trap, so as to get the White Knight's sword away from him. Once that sword is out of his hands he will be powerless and defenceless."

The Monstrosities squealed with delight. "Hee! Hee! Hee! Defenceless and powerless! Powerless and defenceless!"

"Now," said the Monster in a loud voice. "Stand by while I summon up your disguises. Ready?"

Peering out from behind her grille Debbie saw the Monster wave his arms dramatically. There was a colossal bang, then a brilliant flash, like lightning, which made everything seem dark for several minutes afterwards. In the

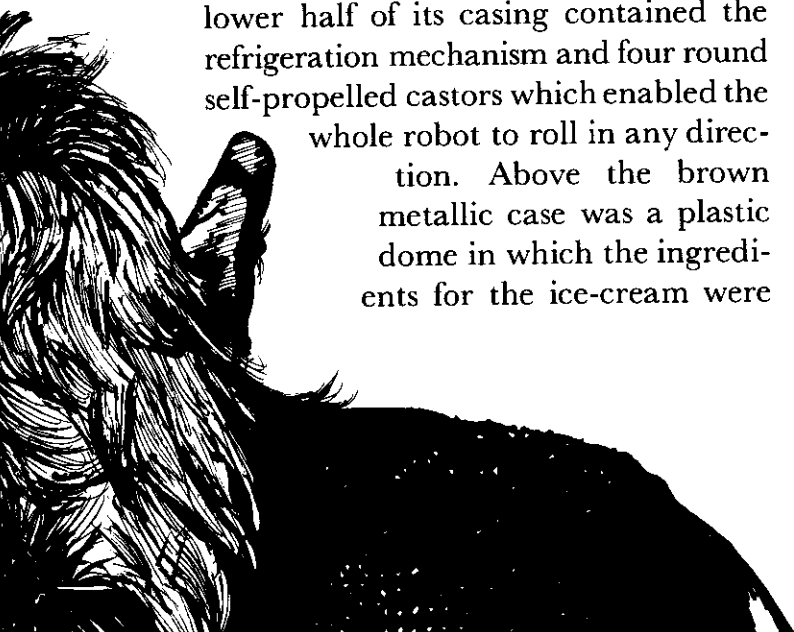


blackness she could hear the Monster chanting:

Little Monsters, good at lies,
Baffle Gavin with your disguise.
Clever Monsters, brave indeed,
Trap young Gavin with his own greed!

When her eyes became accustomed again to the gloom in the tunnel Debbie saw an amazing transformation. Both Monstrosities had vanished. In their place stood two robots. One looked like an ice-cream dispenser. On one side of its brown metallic case was a shiny ring in which were stacked giant cones. In the centre was a glistening spout which produced soft whipsy ice-cream when you pressed a shiny knob on the other side. The

lower half of its casing contained the refrigeration mechanism and four round self-propelled castors which enabled the whole robot to roll in any direction. Above the brown metallic case was a plastic dome in which the ingredients for the ice-cream were



stored. Just below this was a perforated section behind which lay the robot's speaker. It had a very limited speech range.

Beside it stood a squat space robot, a self-propelled mobile computer, with all sorts of buttons to press and lights which flashed on and off. The robot had been programmed by the Monster to do all sorts of things and especially to simulate human speech patterns. It was armed with a deadly-looking ray-gun to protect its priceless circuitry and modules. This one was obviously intended as the leader of the expedition.

"Excellent, excellent," said the Monster, delighted with the results of his own magic powers. "Off you go, now, to waylay Gavin."

"Ices, lovely ices," called the Ice-Cream Robot.

"He's going to specialise in fast-food technology," said the Space Robot, who could say almost anything.

The two robots rolled away down the station platform.

The Monster turned back to Debbie. "We should have Gavin here by sundown, to visit his dear cousin Debbie," he boasted with sarcasm. "Now, isn't that nice?"

Debbie was sure that Gavin would never be trapped. With her hazel eyes burning defiance she

rattled the bars of the grille. Fired with the possibility of rescue, she now had fresh energy and hope.

But the Monster turned and was off down the station platform.



8. Debbie and the White Knight

As the Monster followed the robots out of the station and up to the street, Debbie shouted after him louder than ever, "You'll never get Gavin. You'll see."

When the Monster's footsteps had stopped echoing down the empty tunnel, she suddenly felt very alone. The Monstrosities may have been ugly and stupid, but at least they were some company. But now they had gone off in disguise to trap Gavin. She felt helpless and afraid again. She was so fully at the Monster's mercy. She started to cry. "Won't somebody help me? Please!" she pleaded through her tears. "Help me, somebody. Anybody. Please. Just let me out!"

Then almost without realising it, she began to hear strange enchanting music. Looking up, she became aware of a bluish-white light approaching down the station platform. Before she knew it a Knight in shining white armour stood before

the lift gates. She did not know whether to feel relieved or scared. She had no idea who he was or how he got there. "Let you out? Certainly," and the gates across the lift entrance opened as if the padlock had never existed. "There you are. You can come out now," said the White Knight.

Debbie came cautiously to the lift entrance, now open before her, and then stopped. The brilliant white figure with a black face was not part of a dream. There he stood, grinning at her. "Who are you?" she asked in amazement.

"A friend," said the White Knight simply.

"A friend?" questioned Debbie doubtfully. How did she know he was a friend? After all, the Monster had claimed to be a friend and she had believed him—and look where she was now.

It was as if the White Knight read her thoughts because he pointed to the open gates.

"You are free to come out now," he said. "You don't have to stay down here any more."

"You really mean I can go?" asked Debbie hardly daring to believe it.

"If you want to," said the White Knight.

Debbie drew a deep breath and stepped out of the lift. Freedom! She could hardly believe it. It almost felt strange at first. It was marvellous to be able to move, to stretch, to jump, to run. She ran along the station platform, looking for the exit.

But all the tunnels leading off it seemed blocked up. Which way had the Monster and the robots gone? There must be a way up somewhere. She ran back to the White Knight puzzled and breathless. "Which way do I go to get out?" she asked.

The White Knight already seemed like an old friend and she looked at him trustfully.

"There are many ways out of this place," he began.

"But they are all blocked up," Debbie interrupted puzzled.

"That's because for each person there is only one way. For you there is your way," said the White Knight.

"What do you mean? My way? Well, please show me then."

"Certainly, but I'm not sure you will like it when you see it," warned the White Knight.

"I don't mind. As long as I can get out of here," said Debbie.

The White Knight took Debbie's hand and led her to one of the tunnels leading off the platform. At first it seemed blocked up like the rest. But as she looked at it the blank wall across it seemed to dissolve. Peering down the tunnel she could see a house at the far end of it. It had number "seventy-seven" on the door.

"That's my house!" cried Debbie.

"I know," said the White Knight, looking at her thoughtfully.

"You mean I have to go that way?" asked Debbie. The White Knight nodded.

"Well, I'm not going there. I've only just escaped from home. Nothing ever happens there and I'm not going back. I want to go my *own* way," said Debbie defiantly.

"That *is* your way," replied the White Knight. "The way you will discover your true self."

"You mean there is no other way?" pleaded Debbie.

The White Knight shook his head. "Not for you. But you don't have to take it. You are free to choose."

"Some choice," remarked Debbie, angrily, looking back at the lift-cage. "Stay locked up here or go back to that... prison," pointing to her own house. Then she turned on the White Knight with fury. "I thought you said I was free to go!"

"You are free to go," replied the White Knight. "I promise you that if you follow that way you will become free. Really free." And then he added, "I'll come with you if you like, and help you."

"No thanks," said Debbie glaring at him in defiance. "I don't trust you. You make me feel,

well, sort of... uncomfortable.”

“Perhaps that’s how you ought to feel,” said the White Knight.

“You’re just as bad as the Monster, telling me what to do,” replied Debbie. “I bet you think I ought to go back home and tell Mum and Dad what I’ve been up to and why I ran away.”

“Does it matter what I think?” asked the White Knight. “It’s what you think that matters.”

Then Debbie felt as if something exploded inside her at the thought of going back to her home. It was so empty and dull and her Mum and Dad were always too busy to listen or to talk things over with her. “They’ve always got



something more important to do," she complained bitterly.

"So it's all their fault, is it?" asked the White Knight.

"Of course it is," replied Debbie. "They just ignore me most of the time. After all, I didn't ask to be born their daughter, did I? So why don't they pay some attention to me now and again?"

"Is that why you ran away?" asked the White Knight. "To get their attention?"

Debbie could have hit him. "Well, I'm not going back there, that's for sure," she said.

"You mean you'd rather stay here?" asked the White Knight pointing to the empty lift.



"Doesn't seem as if I have much choice, does it," replied Debbie.

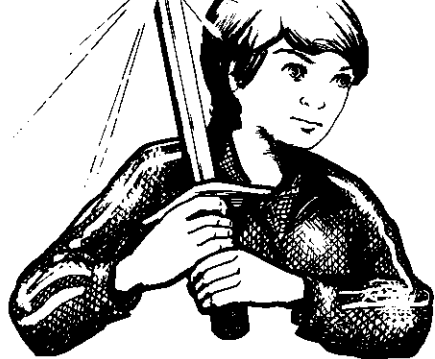
"But that's just it. You do have a choice," he said.

Debbie turned away from the open tunnel leading to her home. As she did so the blank wall closed on it again. Now it looked like all the others. "Get lost," said Debbie bitterly. "And leave me be." Slowly she walked back down the platform to the empty lift. She hesitated for a moment and looked back at the White Knight who stood there, his hand still held out towards her. Then she turned her back on him and walked into the dilapidated old lift. The metal gates rattled behind her and then clanked shut. It was her own decision, but she had to blame somebody else. She turned, her eyes blazing, and shouted at the White Knight through the grille, "I don't want anyone telling me what to do. Do you understand? No one. Not even you. Why don't you just leave me alone?" She was screaming at him now, at the top of her voice. "And drop dead!"

The White Knight just smiled at her a little sadly. "Goodbye Debbie," he said, "we'll meet again, I'm sure." The next moment he had vanished. All Debbie could see was a bluish-white light slowly fading away down the platform.

"Good riddance," said Debbie to herself, as she

sat on the floor of the lift. But afterwards she thought, "What have I done?" And later she began to think of her home and her parents. Maybe she had not been quite fair about them. After all, they had their work to do. Perhaps it was not all their fault that she was so unhappy. Perhaps she made them unhappy? They must be dreadfully worried about her now. Yes, it would be good to talk things over with them. If only they would listen....



9. The Trap is Sprung

Gavin missed the White Knight. Where had he disappeared to? And why had he left him just as they were approaching what the White Knight himself had described as real Monster territory?

All Gavin knew was that they had been doing sword practice in a quiet square near the locked up gates of a disused Underground station. "Your swordmanship has come on quite well," the White Knight told him. "You need to keep on your toes and stay on your guard. You never know from which quarter the Monster will strike."

Then the Knight added, "I shall have to leave you for a while. I have another job to attend to, not far from here. But I will come immediately, if you call for me."

Before leaving he reminded Gavin to keep hold of the sword at all costs. "My strength will only flow through you while the sword is in your hand."

Let go of it, even for an instant, and you will lose your contact with me."

Gavin was worried about this at first. However, the White Knight reassured him, "As long as you are thinking and caring for others the sword will be safe in your hands. But if you begin to think only of yourself then you will be in grave danger of losing it." Gavin promised the White Knight that his one aim was to rescue Debbie and to defeat the Monster. "If that is so, you need have no fear," the White Knight told him. Then he disappeared.

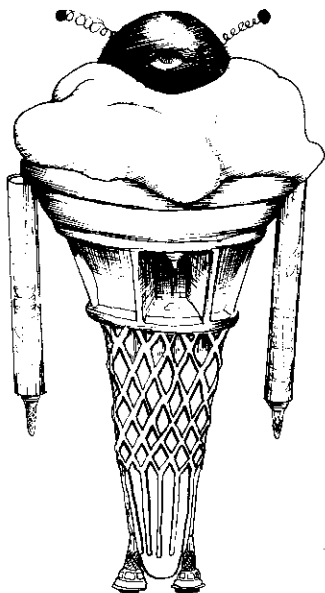
That was half an hour ago. Gavin continued to practise with the sword and to look about him for any sign of the Monster. He searched up and down the narrow streets and alleys of the neighbourhood. They always seemed to lead him back to this quiet square. He had no clue where the Monster was hiding.

The square had been built up to pavement level with dark red bricks, laid in interesting zig-zag patterns. Bollards prevented any traffic from entering the precinct. There were concrete tubs, filled with brown earth, which in spring and summer sported brightly coloured flowers. Now they contained just green shrubs. Young trees, newly planted, stood guard over freshly varnished wooden benches.

Although it was December, by mid-morning it was sunny and bright. Gavin felt hot inside his warm anorak and he was tired from practising with the sword. So he decided to take a rest on one of the benches to cool down. The square was quite deserted. After all, people don't sit out much in city squares in mid-winter.

No sooner had he settled down than he heard a strange metallic quavery sort of voice calling out: "Ices, lovely ices. Cool and refreshing. Lovely ices!"

"Ices?" he thought to himself, "in December?"



He looked around to see where the strange voice was coming from. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw, rolling towards him across the square, an ice-cream machine on round shiny metal castors, with no one attending it. Gavin had read about robots, but never expected to actually meet one, least of all a robot selling ice-cream.

His fascination with the Ice-Cream Robot was interrupted by another strangely artificial voice behind him. "Track right, twenty degrees. Hold and lock beam on stranger at ten metres." It was another robot, all coloured push buttons and flashing lights and holding a magnificent looking hand gun. "A ray-gun, I bet," thought Gavin.

"Identify. Identify," the robot said, pointing a metal arm in his direction.

"Do you mean me?" asked Gavin.

"Identify. Identify," repeated the robot in its cracked tinny voice. Gavin gave his name.

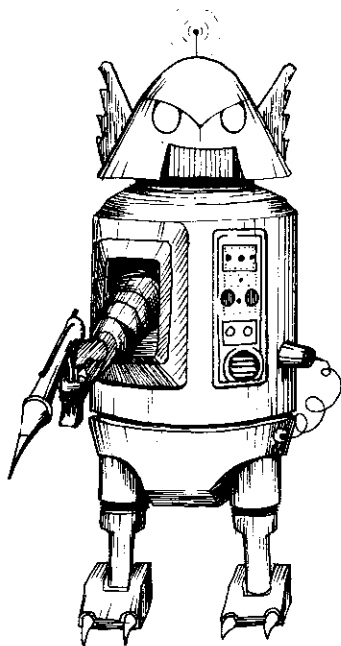
"Name Gavin accepted," said the robot.

"And who are you, may I ask?" Gavin added politely.

"Return question not validated," replied the robot. "Space Robot's identity self-evident to all humanoids of even minimal intelligence."

"No need to be rude," thought Gavin. But he said, "Thank you for telling me."

"Ices, lovely ices,"



said the Ice-Cream Robot, now quite near him.

"Suggest offer ice-cream to boy Gavin," said the Space Robot.

"Now you're talking," thought Gavin.

"Ice-cream, big as you want, all for nothing. Help yourself," replied the Ice-Cream Robot.

Gavin thought he deserved an ice-cream. He had walked a long way and had been practising hard with that heavy sword. And the robot was offering him an ice-cream as big as he wanted—and all for nothing. He saw no point in refusing such an offer.

Then he suddenly remembered the White Knight's warning. Could this be a trick? But the White Knight had said nothing about refusing ice-creams. His only instruction had been not to let go of the sword. He could easily hold the ice-cream cone in one hand and still keep the sword in the other. So he went up to the Ice-Cream Robot and helped himself to the soft creamy substance until it not only filled the huge cone, but was piled up on top of it in a giant whirl.

"Mmmm. It's good," he said after he had taken first a lick and then a bite. "Thank you, Ice-Cream Robot. You are very kind." But the Ice-Cream Robot just repeated the limited range of words it had been programmed to say, "Help yourself. As much as you like. All for nothing."

“Thank you,” said Gavin politely, “but I mustn’t be greedy.”

To his surprise the Space Robot interjected, “Why not? Normal behaviour. All young male humanoids are greedy.”

Gavin did not quite know how to answer this, but then he remembered something. “I have to be on my guard, you see.”

But he was even more surprised when the Space Robot answered him again, “I will guard boy Gavin while he enjoys ice-cream.”

“Really, you are both very kind,” was all Gavin could say. The Space Robot explained that he could guard him well because his ray-gun could make anything disappear within a range of fifty metres. Gavin was fascinated and asked if he could have a look at it. To this the robot readily agreed. Gavin had never seen anything like it. He was desperately anxious to try it out and could hardly believe his ears when the robot gave him permission to do so.

But then Gavin realised he was faced with a problem. In one hand he held the White Knight’s sword. In his other hand he still clutched the giant ice-cream cone. It was so huge that he had hardly eaten half of it. So he thanked the Space Robot and asked if he could wait until he had finished his ice-cream.

"Why wait?" asked the robot. "Robot will hold sword while boy Gavin enjoys ice-cream and ray-gun."

"Well, you see, I am on the lookout for a dangerous Monster," explained Gavin. "So I couldn't possibly let go of the sword."

"Robots have not seen any Monsters in these parts," the robot countered. "But if Monster does appear then robots can wield sword on boy Gavin's behalf. Besides boy Gavin could turn ray-gun on Monster. Ray-gun far more deadly than any sword."

Something inside Gavin told him that if he gave up holding anything it should be the ice-cream, but by now he was well and truly fascinated by the robots and all the wonderful things they were offering him. All thoughts of rescuing Debbie and defeating the Monster had been crowded out of his mind. He wanted more than anything to try that ray-gun—and he wanted to keep his ice-cream. So in one fatally rash moment Gavin handed over the sword, and took the ray-gun.

At that same moment the Monster pounced. He had been lurking nearby waiting for such a chance, keeping well out of sight while his students the robots laid the trap for Gavin.

In the next two minutes everything happened

at top speed. At the sight of the Monster, Gavin panicked. He tried to recover the sword, but the robot kept it out of his reach. Then, in desperation, he tried to fire the ray-gun, but it turned out to be a dud, a replica left over from a film set. He was quickly overpowered by the Monster who soon had him in an unbreakable hold.

“Powerless and defenceless!” gloated the Monster as he returned the ray-gun to the Space Robot. “Defenceless and powerless,” replied the robots as the Space Robot handed over the sword to the Monster. “Greedy, greedy, greedy,” they all chanted at Gavin as he struggled helplessly in the Monster’s powerful grip.

Just then they heard voices approaching the quiet square. It was Professor and Mrs Digit, calling for Gavin, still trying to warn him that he was going the wrong way.

The Monster reacted quickly. He gave instructions to the robots that they were to delay the Digits at all costs, in order to give him time to get Gavin away from there and down to his cave. Then they were to rejoin him there as soon as possible.

Gavin was still kicking and struggling. He had heard the voices of his uncle and aunt. He realised that if he could delay the Monster just a few



minutes more, they would arrive in time to rescue him. But without the sword he found his efforts were puny and useless. The Monster was far too strong for him. An enormous hand was clapped over Gavin's mouth to stifle his yells, and before he knew it he was being half-carried, half-dragged down the steps of the disused Underground station. Seconds later the Digits arrived in the square, puffing and panting.

* * *

The robots did their delaying work all too well. Professor Digit was, of course, immediately interested in the Space Robot and wanted to try all its push-buttons and switches to see how it worked and what functions it had been programmed to perform.

Mrs Digit was more interested in the Ice-Cream Robot. She was tired and hungry and her feet, she complained, were killing her. She sat on one of the wooden seats for a few minutes to rest her weary legs and when the Ice-Cream Robot offered her an ice-cream, big as she wanted, all for nothing, she just could not resist it.

While she was enjoying her enormous ice-cream, Professor Digit discovered that he could engage the Space Robot in conversation. He was

most impressed with the way it could reproduce human speech patterns and was anxious to discover with what range of vocabulary the robot had been programmed. He asked the Space Robot about its ray-gun for example. The robot repeated to Professor Digit the lie it had told to Gavin—that its ray-gun could make anything disappear within a range of fifty metres. Impressed more than ever, the Professor asked if he might try it. To this the Space Robot readily agreed.

Professor Digit looked around him for a suitable target. What could he make disappear? His eye fell on Mrs Digit, sitting on the bench with her shoes kicked off, licking an enormous ice-cream cone. What fun, he thought, to make Bridget disappear. Temporarily of course. The robot could probably tell him how to bring her back again. He took aim slowly and carefully. But as he was peering at her down the barrel of the gun, she happened to look up. Imagine her fury that he would even think of trying to make her disappear—his own wife!

In a fit of fear and ill-temper she threw the remains of her ice-cream at him with colossal force and scored a direct hit across the bridge of his nose. The ice-cream splattered across the lenses of his glasses, making it impossible for him

to see, let alone aim the ray-gun. "I was only joking," he complained, taking off his glasses and wiping away the ice-cream. "I wouldn't have actually fired it at you."

"I wouldn't put anything past you," she snapped.

"You're just frustrated," the Professor flung at her.

"No wonder I'm frustrated. You think of nothing except your own work. You never give any consideration to me or Debbie, and now we've lost our only daughter," she wailed.



"That's your fault," said the Professor. "You should have spent more time with her, instead of living in your own world."

"I like that!" exclaimed Mrs Digit. "*Me* spend more time with her! What about you?"

So the argument went on, each blaming the other, neither willing to accept or admit where they were to blame. The robots were, of course, delighted. This all played wonderfully into their hands. The row delayed the Digits more easily and longer than they ever could have done.

Finally the Space Robot very kindly offered to guide Professor Digit to a place where he could wash the ice-cream off his spectacles and his face. "One of those underground places," he said. "Just down here. Mind the step." The Professor and his wife soon found themselves being steered gently but firmly down a steep flight of stone steps.



10. The Monster and the Sword

While the robots were detaining the Digits, dramatic events were taking place below ground.

As the Monster dragged Gavin, still kicking and struggling, into the old Underground station, Debbie leapt to her feet and peered through the metal grille. With dismay and horror she realised that the Monster's new prisoner was her cousin. So the Monster had succeeded. Gavin was trapped. All hope of rescue now seemed remote. The Monster dragged Gavin along the platform to the lift and hauled him up in front of Debbie as if to rub the point in.

"Hello, Debbie, great to see you," said Gavin rather miserably.

"Great to see you, Gavin," said Debbie, equally miserably.

"So here he is, Debbie Digit," the Monster gloated. "Here is your hero. The brave boy who was going to rescue you and defeat me! Me! The

very idea! Now look at him. Completely in my power."

Gavin tried to show defiance. "The White Knight will come and help us, I know he will," he blurted out as forcefully as he could. He wanted to keep up his own courage as well as Debbie's. But the Monster simply reminded Gavin that he had the sword. "The White Knight cannot help you now!" he chortled.

"No, and I don't suppose he'll ever forgive me for letting go of it, either," said Gavin despondently.

"Don't worry," said Debbie. "I don't much like that White Knight anyway."

"But you mustn't say that, or even think it," said Gavin, alarmed. "The White Knight is my best friend."

"Well, he's not *my* best friend," replied Debbie stubbornly.

"Aha! And he won't be *your* best friend any longer, now you've given away his sword to his arch enemy," said the Monster to Gavin triumphantly. "No one can help you now."

"Your mother and father are sure to rescue us," said Gavin, rather unconvincingly as he only half believed it. He realised they might so easily fall into the same trap that he had.

He was not too surprised when the Monster

replied, "Oh no they won't. I've seen to that. They won't find you now until it's too late."

"Too late for what?" asked Gavin, more alarmed. But the Monster only chuckled.

"He means he's going to eat you," said Debbie flatly.

"But he can't do that!" exclaimed Gavin, quite frightened now. "I mean eating people is wrong. It's not allowed. In fact, it's against the law."

The Monster only laughed his wicked laugh. He unlocked the gates of the lift and threw Gavin inside. "Now be quiet both of you. I want some rest. I can never enjoy my food unless I've had a good sleep first." So saying he settled himself down, a little way from the lift, carefully laying the precious sword by his side.

Gavin waited until he was convinced, by the Monster's deep and regular breathing, that he was sound asleep. Then he whispered to Debbie, "Are you awake?"

"Yes," Debbie whispered back, "are you?"

"If only I'd obeyed the instructions the White Knight gave me," sighed Gavin.

"You think this White Knight's pretty terrific, don't you?" said Debbie. It hurt Gavin that she did not like his friend. He tried to explain that if he had listened to the White Knight they wouldn't be in the mess they were in now. "Why

don't you like him?" he asked Debbie.

"Because he told me the only way I could escape was by going home."

"Doesn't sound a bad idea," said Gavin.

"It wasn't a bad idea. Only it was *his* idea. I want to do things *my* way," she sighed.

"The White Knight only wants to help," protested Gavin.

"Do you think he would help us now?"

"Perhaps we should ask him."

"You ask him," said Debbie nervously. "You know him better."

Gavin was not sure he could ask for his help again. After all, he had let the White Knight down very badly by parting with his sword.

"Well, I told him to get lost and drop dead," admitted Debbie.

"Oh dear," said Gavin, "we don't really deserve to be helped, do we?"

"We'd better think of some other way," suggested Debbie.

They were silent for a long time. Eventually Debbie said, "It's no good. I can't think of any other way."

"I don't think there *is* any other way," said Gavin.

They both felt pretty hopeless and sat on the floor of the lift looking thoroughly miserable. At

last Gavin could stand it no longer. He made up his mind. "It's the only way," he said. "I'm going to ask him." Then nervously and in a trembling voice he said, "White Knight, won't you come and help us? Or is it too late? Are we already doomed?"

Almost immediately they began to hear the strange enchanting music. "Listen!" said Gavin. Then they saw the bluish-white light coming towards them down the platform. "It's not too late," he cried.

"Ssshh!" whispered Debbie, "or you'll wake the Monster."

"I don't care," cried Gavin. "It doesn't matter any more. I can face any difficulty now. Any danger. The White Knight is here!"

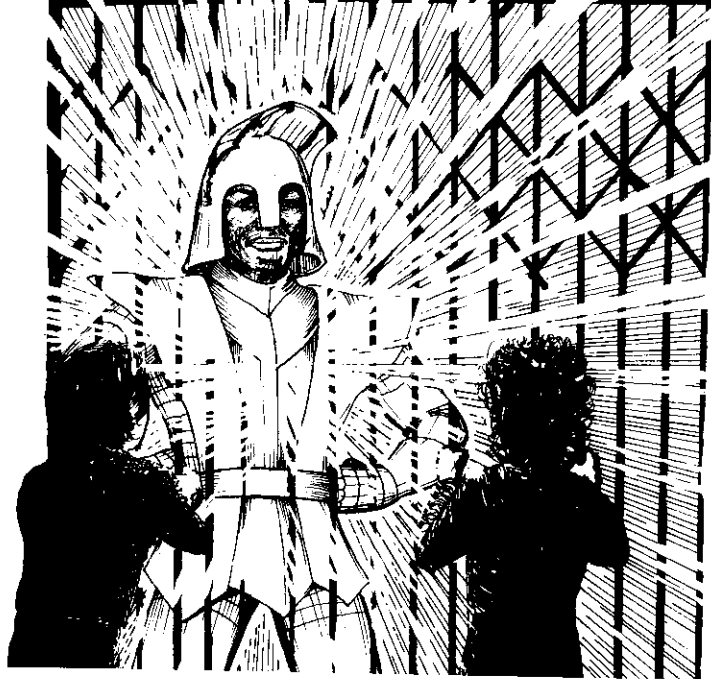
And there he stood, outside the metal grille of the lift, looking in at them with his broad grin. "Well, here's a fine sight," the White Knight said.

Gavin could hardly bare to look at him, he felt so ashamed. "I know. We're in a mess."

"And I'm still in my cage," said Debbie.

"And I've fouled everything up," added Gavin. "I know it's all my fault for letting go of your sword."

"Oh that!" answered the White Knight cheerfully. "That's all right. We all go wrong at



some time or another. You did just the right thing. You called for me."

"But what can you do?" asked Debbie.

The White Knight looked straight at Debbie and said calmly but firmly, "You know very well what I can do, Debbie Digit."

Debbie could not hold his strong clear gaze and averted her eyes. "All right," she said rather awkwardly, "but don't go on about it."

"This time," said the White Knight, "I am here to give you both what you most want."

"What's that?" cried Gavin and Debbie together.

"Another chance," said the White Knight.

Then he turned to Gavin and asked him if he knew why he had let go of the sword. Gavin felt dreadful, but he replied as bravely as he could, "I wanted that ice-cream, and that ray-gun. I was just greedy, I suppose."

Having admitted it, Gavin felt better already and hoped that would be the end of it, but the White Knight would not let it rest there. "Greedy, yes," he said, "but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

Gavin became even more uncomfortable. He threw a nervous glance at Debbie. What was she going to think of him now? But he knew he had to go through with it, so he said, "Yes, I suppose there is. I stopped thinking and caring about Debbie. I guessed she was imprisoned by the Monster, but I only thought about myself and what I wanted. That's why I lost the sword."

Then he turned to his cousin, who was looking at him wide-eyed. "I'm sorry, Debbie," he said.

Debbie's own conscience was already working overtime so she quickly said, "It's all right, Gavin. You don't have to...." Then she trailed off into silence, knowing that it must be her turn next. Sure enough the White Knight turned to her and said, "And do you know why you refused to walk out of this cage and go back home?" Debbie went

a deep red and bit her lip. There was a long silence. The White Knight had asked the question in a very ordinary, almost matter-of-fact way. It didn't sound at all judging, but Debbie was not used to admitting to anyone where she had been wrong.

"Come on, Debbie," said Gavin, trying to encourage her. "It doesn't hurt all that much." There was another awkward silence.

Eventually she said in a tiny voice that they could hardly hear, "I reckon I was too proud to accept any suggestion from anybody else."

"And too self-willed?" added the White Knight quietly. This was too much for Debbie! Who was he to accuse her of being self-willed? No one had ever spoken to her like that since she was a toddler. She stamped her foot and shook the grille and shouted at him, "I'm not self-willed!" The White Knight took no notice of her temper and said evenly, "You are, Debbie. And that's why you're still in that cage."

"Well, let me out then!" she shouted back at him. Gavin was amazed that the Monster had not been woken by all this shouting. But he still seemed to be sleeping soundly.

"Certainly," said the White Knight in a kindly voice. "If you really want to come out."

Debbie was silent for a long moment. Eventu-

ally she gave a great sigh that started deep down inside her. Slowly, all the resistance and ferocity went out of her. At last she said quietly, "I *do* want to come out now. Please, White Knight."

At that very moment the metal gates of the lift began to slide open with a clatter. Debbie stepped outside. "I'm free!" she exclaimed with a joyful cry.

"Free?" said a puzzled Gavin, also stepping out of the lift. "We're still in the Monster's cave, don't forget."

"It's funny," replied Debbie, "but I don't feel as if I'm in prison any more. I suppose I'm free inside."

"Well, I shall be happier when we're free outside," said Gavin.

"Debbie's right," the White Knight said. "You are free now, both of you. Look."

As they looked it seemed as though the rounded ceiling of the Underground tunnel expanded, then disappeared. The slimy green walls melted into deep blue light. Overhead and all around them they could see thousands of tiny stars. The enclosed and stuffy interior of the Underground station had given way to the freshness, purity and majesty of limitless space. They heard strange electronic music which made Gavin think of an expression he had heard at school—"the music of

the spheres". A light wind whistled. It was cold, clear, vast and incredibly beautiful.

The vision, if that's what it was—and Gavin was not sure what it was—only lasted for a few minutes. Then the music began to fade, the wind died down, the stars disappeared and the blue vault of the night sky gave way once more to the slimy green of the tunnel's damp roof and walls. They were back in the Monster's cave once again.

"That was fabulous!" breathed Debbie.

"Sure was!" agreed Gavin.

"Ace," added Debbie. She wished it could go on for ever and ever. "It can," said the White Knight. "For ever and ever."

"At the same time," said Gavin, trying to be realistic, "things down here couldn't be much worse. I mean, we're still stuck in this prison of a tunnel. The Monster still has the sword. He's going to eat me when he wakes up. The situation looks pretty grim."

"You know," said the White Knight, "it's a strange thing, but what real freedom means is that when things are at their worst, we can still be at our best. And when life looks darkest, that may be the moment to decide to shine, like the stars on a dark night."

"But what are we going to do about *him*?" asked Gavin, pointing at the sleeping Monster.

The White Knight suggested a plan, "The first priority is to get the sword away from the Monster," he explained. Gavin immediately volunteered for the job. "I'll creep up on the Monster and try to snatch the sword away from him while he is still asleep."

Very softly and stealthily on all fours, Gavin began to creep forward towards the sleeping form of the Monster. He was about two metres away from the huge creature when the Monster began to move. Gavin froze and then gently backed away as silently as he could. The Monster stretched, yawned and rolled over on his other side, and went back to sleep.

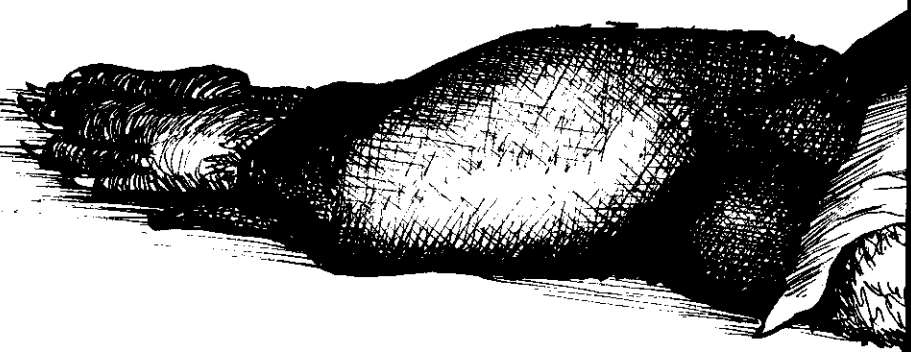
"Whew!" said Gavin, "that was close."

"Let me try this time," said Debbie. She approached the Monster from the other side, flat on the floor, wriggling silently as a snake towards the Monster, pushing herself along with her elbows and her knees. As soon as she got really near, the Monster began to toss and turn in his sleep and Debbie had to wriggle back again. But this time it was more serious because the Monster rolled right over on to the sword, which was now hidden beneath his huge ugly body.

All the same Gavin volunteered to make one more attempt. His task was far more difficult now, and more dangerous. He would have to

rescue the sword from underneath the Monster, who was far more likely to wake up, angry and hungry. Gavin crept really close, making practically no sound at all. Slowly and breathlessly he stretched himself out beside the Monster. Stealthily he reached out a hand to feel for the sword. He knew that if he so much as touched the Monster he might wake up and all would be lost. His fingers were centimetres away from the hilt of the sword when loud voices suddenly shattered the silence of the tunnel.

Every muscle in Gavin's body seized up with fright. He could not move. He could not go back. He just had to stay where he was, flat on the



ground beside the Monster. He was so close that if the enormous brute rolled over once more he would be crushed under his great weight.

The voices were those of the two robots proudly returning with their prisoners, Professor and Mrs Digit. "Master," they called. "Master Monster! Look who we have brought for you. Two tasty morsels. Master Monster, aren't we clever!"

The Monster woke with a start and turned towards the noisy robots and mercifully away from Gavin, who was holding his breath and was about to burst. The Monster got up to greet the robots, forgetting for one fateful moment about the sword which still lay on the ground. "My dear



little Monstrosities, I do congratulate you!"

Gavin immediately sprang for the sword and seized it by the hilt. At the same moment, the Digits, becoming accustomed to the gloom of the tunnel, caught sight of their daughter and nephew behind the ugly Monster. "Debbie!" called Mrs Digit.

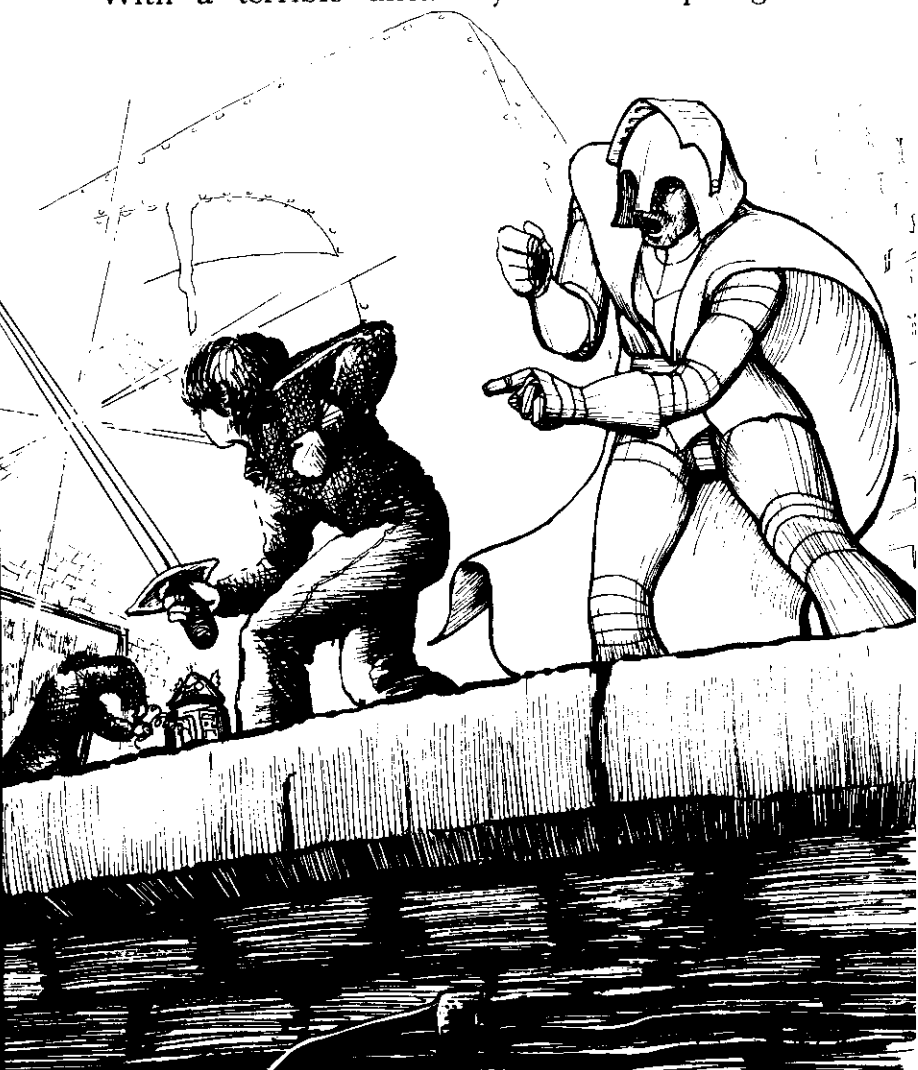
"Gavin!" exclaimed the Professor.

The Monster turned to find the lift gates open and his prisoners gone. Surprised and angry, he caught sight of Gavin and Debbie and gave a cry of rage that shook the very foundations of the Underground tunnel.



Then suddenly his evil face paled, as he glimpsed the figure of his dreaded enemy, the White Knight. Now it was clear to the Monster that this time it must be a fight to the finish.

With a terrible unearthly roar he sprang



towards Gavin. But it was too late. Gavin was already on his feet, brandishing the mighty sword with both hands. The Monster came at him grinding his fangs and attacking with his frightening outstretched claws. He had never looked more formidable.

The struggle that followed was long and terrible.

Debbie did her best to aid her cousin, by distracting the Monster, pulling his tail or trying to trip him when he rushed bellowing at Gavin. The robots attempted to come to the Monster's aid, but for once Professor Digit, seeing his daughter and nephew in mortal danger, took decisive and effective action. Using all his scientific skill, for both the robots were cunning and strong, he managed to immobilise them by simply removing their fuses.

The White Knight seemed to be everywhere at once, encouraging Gavin, Debbie and the Digits in their struggle.

Several times the Monster dodged the flashing sword successfully, as Gavin thrust boldly at him. Once, he even managed to seize the end of the sword, determined to wrench it from Gavin's grasp. He was amazed at the boy's strength. Gavin would not let go. In the end it was the Monster who let go, his hands all cut and

bleeding. Now he roared louder than ever with the pain.

At last Gavin had his weakened opponent cornered. Summoning all his strength for one final deadly stroke, he plunged the sword into the great creature's heaving chest. As he drew it out again, green blood dripped from the silver blade.

Enraged, the Monster rose to his full height and, though badly wounded, looked as if he would yet overpower Gavin. Then suddenly, he gave one last almighty roar and slumped heavily to the ground.

Breathing hard, Gavin stood over him triumphant, waving the green-spattered sword.

The Monster shuddered once more. Then breathed his last. As he did so there was a sizzling flash of lightning and a great roll of subterranean thunder, like the beginning of a primeval earthquake. Gavin and Debbie thought that the end of the world had come.



11. The Twist in the Tale

When the rumbling noise had finally subsided and the blindness caused by the dazzling flash of lightning had worn off, so that they were once again accustomed to the gloom of the tunnel, an amazing sight met their eyes. The corpse of the Monster, which Gavin had just slain, was nowhere to be seen. Nor were the robots. They had completely vanished. Now on the spot where the Monster had died, stood a boy, who, from every aspect, looked Gavin's exact double.

Debbie could not understand it. She took a quick sidelong glance at the sword which was still in Gavin's hand. The tell-tale green bloodstains were still on it. So where had the Monster gone? And where had this boy come from? Had the dying Monster turned into a boy? Or had the boy been inside the Monster all the time?

"Who is this boy? And why does he look exactly like me?" gasped Gavin.

"The real Monster is inside each one of us," explained the White Knight. "Sometimes our monster feelings swallow us up completely."

"So where do Monsters end and where do people begin?" muttered the Professor to himself. "I'll have to put that question to the computer."

"No need for your computer," said Mrs Digit, "I always said boys are the real cause of all the trouble."

"Not all the time," interrupted Debbie. "I know a girl who has given you a headache or two!"

"Girls, Boys, Monsters—they're all the same to me," said Mrs Digit.

But she was surprised and even shocked when the White Knight replied with unexpected force, "And Mums, Dads, Uncles, Aunts and Monsters—they're all the same to me!"

"Hooray!" said Debbie.

Gavin thought, "Good for you, White Knight," but just grinned at Debbie. Mrs Digit was most offended. "What do you mean?" she said hotly to the White Knight. "There's nothing monster-like about me!"

The White Knight just laughed, which made her even more furious.

"Come off it, Mum!" cried Debbie. But Mrs Digit was not to be pacified. She thought the

White Knight had been extremely rude. It always helped her to imagine that someone else was in the wrong. In fact, although she did not know it, that is one of the most common symptoms of Monster-blindness.

It was Professor Digit who spoke next. "Well, I must admit," he said, "I've been wrong about Monsters. And my computers have been wrong about them too. I realise one thing—I don't know everything. Nor do they."

"Well," said Mrs Digit, slightly less indignant. "That calls for a celebration, I must say. That's the first time you've ever admitted that you and your 'fancy' computers have been wrong about anything." And she laughed mockingly which, thought Gavin, was at least better than being cross and upset. But when she had stopped laughing there was an awkward silence and Mrs Digit had the sort of feeling that everyone was looking at her. After an embarrassed look around the company she said, "I don't suppose I've helped much by being so grumpy and moody all the time, either."

Debbie could hardly believe her ears. Were these the stuffy, boring parents she had run away from a week ago? What had happened to them? She ran to each of them in turn and threw her arms around them and gave them each a big hug.

"I want to come home," she said. "There's so much I want to tell you."

Then she hesitated as she caught the White Knight's eye. "That is," she went on, "if you can spare me the time."

"Oh, my dear child!" was all Mrs Digit could say, wiping her eyes.

"The point is," began Professor Digit in his usual way, "if we want to go home—how do we get out of here?"

"I only know what the White Knight told me," said Debbie. "For each of us there is only one way. Our own way. Right, White Knight?"

"Right, Debbie," replied the White Knight. "And you each seem to be finding it."

Then it began to happen again. All of a sudden, instead of being in the dank mouldy atmosphere of the Underground tunnel, they seemed to be moving effortlessly through the blue infinity of space. It was vast, cold, clear and beautiful. Stars shone all around them and one star more brightly than all the rest. The music Gavin had heard last time now seemed to be all around them and to be coming from the stars themselves. A light wind whistled. Somewhere below them, a clock chimed twelve.

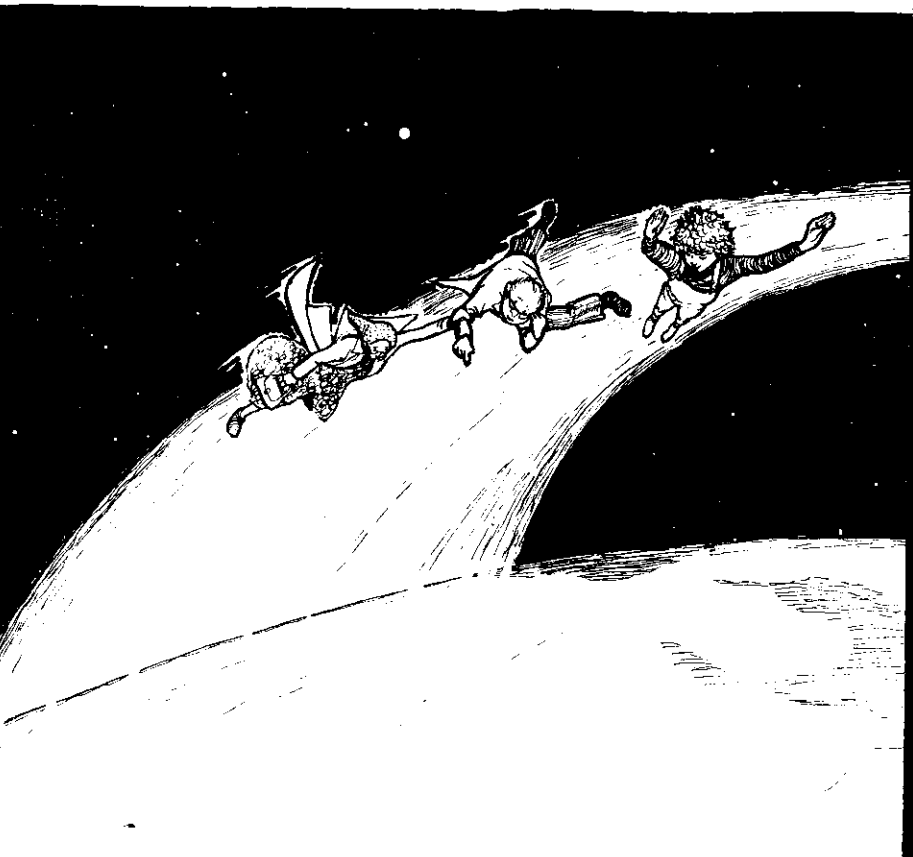
A choir of carol-singers started to sing, their harmonious voices drifting upward, mingling

with the music that filled the bright sky.

It came upon a midnight clear
That glorious song of old...

"It's Christmas Eve," said the White Knight,
"And even the stars are singing."

"Christmas Eve?" said Gavin, suddenly remembering. "I've got to go home today. Mum will be expecting me."



But Professor Digit said, "I think we ought to invite your mother to spend Christmas with us."

"Oh, yes please, Dad!" cried Debbie. "Then Gavin can stay."

"A boy in my house all over Christmas?" said Mrs Digit with alarm, and then caught Gavin's eye. Her face relaxed into a broad smile. "It'll be fun," she said.

"Well, I must be going," said the White Knight.



They were all very sad. "How are we going to manage without you?" asked Debbie.

"You're nearly home now," said the White Knight, pointing below them. They were indeed gradually floating downwards. "And remember, I'll always be by your side, whether you see me or not. That's a promise. You've only got to call, like you did in the Monster's tunnel, and I'll be right there."

Gavin went to hand the sword back to the White Knight. "No need for this any longer, eh?" he said. "Not now the Monster is dead." But no sooner had he spoken than a terrifying Monster-roar seemed to fill the whole sky and to echo menacingly throughout all of space.

"I wouldn't be so sure," said the White Knight. "You'd better hang on to it, Gavin. You never know when you may need it."

Then the White Knight held out his hand to the boy who looked so much like Gavin. He had been very quiet all this time. "Would you like to come with me?" the White Knight asked gently. "You really want to be a knight, don't you?" The boy nodded gratefully and took the outstretched hand.

As they started to move away, Gavin felt as if part of himself was leaving with them. "Wait a minute," called Gavin. "You mean we can

choose to be a Knight or a Monster?"

The White Knight just smiled and waved goodbye as he and the boy disappeared into a bluish-white light. Before long this too had vanished into the vastness of space.

A few moments later their feet touched the ground. "Look," said Mrs Digit. "We're on Einstein Avenue!"

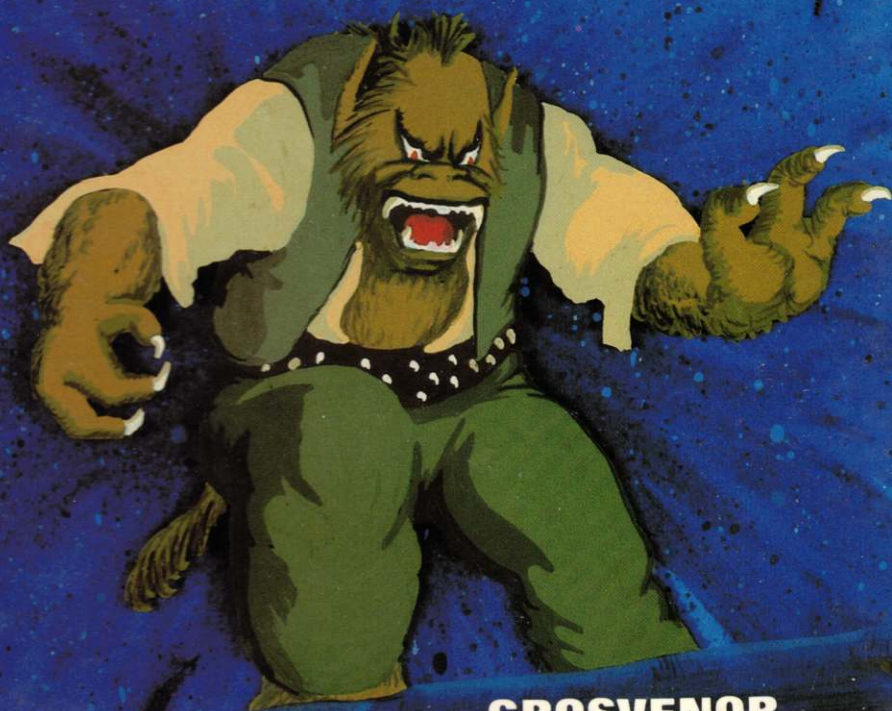
"And there," said Debbie, "is our house. Come on Gavin, I'll race you."



'...suddenly his evil face paled as he glimpsed the figure of his dreaded enemy, the White Knight, for now it was clear to the Monster that this time it must be a fight to the finish.'

In a subterranean cave, Gavin is trying to rescue his cousin Debbie. However, he has not reckoned on the cunning strategy of the wily Monster and his two apprentice Monstrosities.

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