

THE DUNDOODLE MYSTERIES

THE DENTIST OF DARKNESS



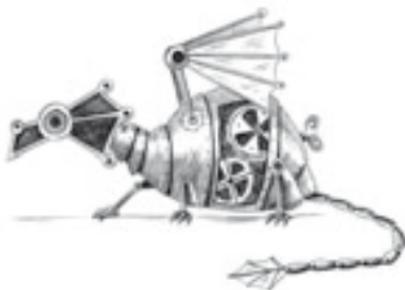
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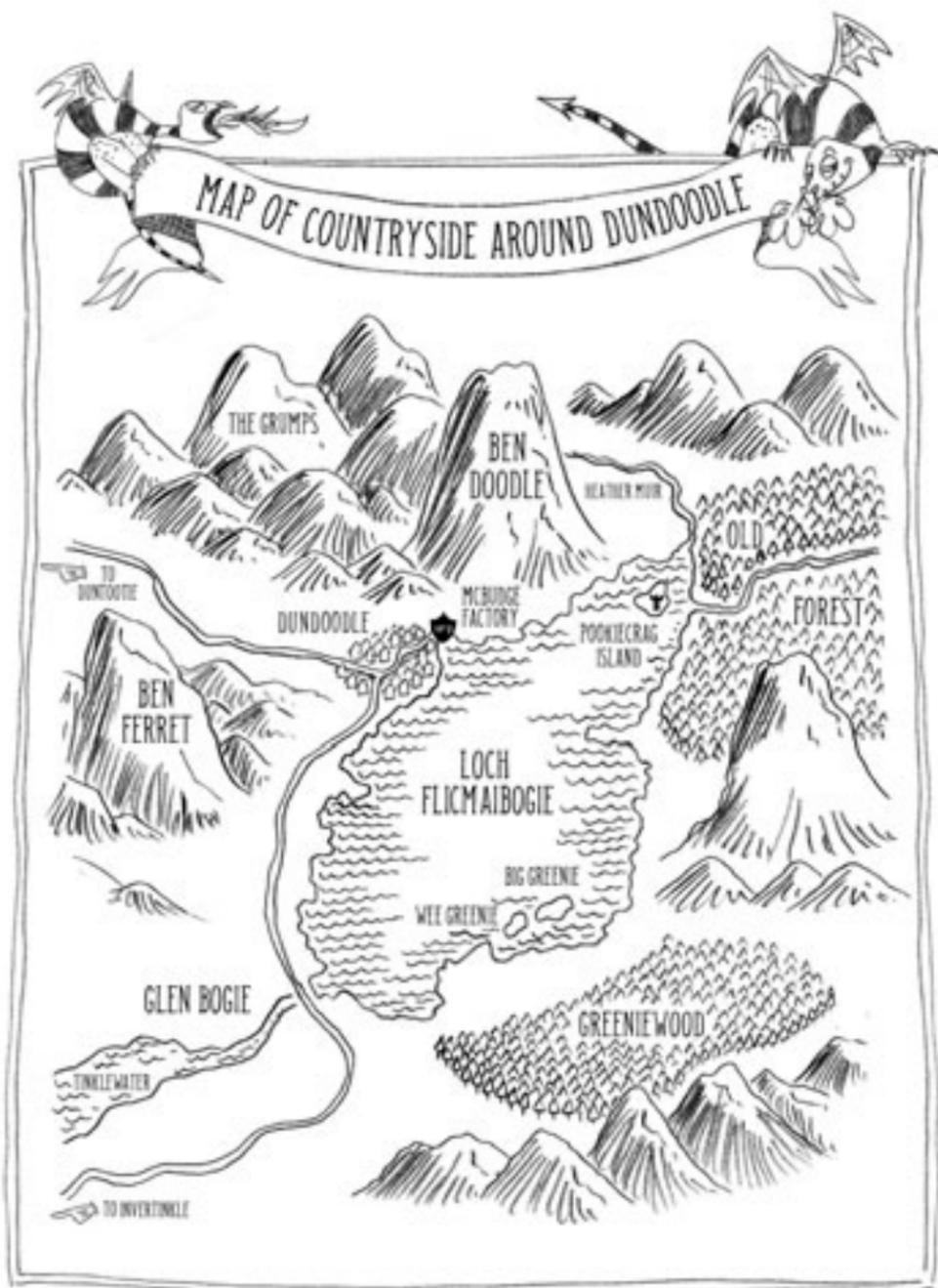


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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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The hills were alive with the sound of ... *dragons*.

Archie McBudge lay back on the sun-warmed grass and watched as a flock of honey dragons circled overhead, their little wings a blur of skin and scales. Occasionally, jets of fire would erupt from their mouths, leaving clouds of sunset-coloured smoke trailing across the blue of the summer sky.

'Completely bonkers!' sighed Fliss. She stood on a rock nearby, one that overlooked the blanket of heather and gave a view across the hidden valley all the way down to the loch. 'If anyone had told me last year that I'd be friends with dragons, I'd have said they were completely *bonkers*!'

Archie grinned and grabbed a piece of McBudge Fudge from his bag and popped it into his mouth. His friend

Fliss loved watching the honey dragons. He had to admit he couldn't think of a better way to spend a Saturday morning.

The two children looked on as the small, amiable creatures descended and then buzzed about the heather, making a noise like the hum of a thousand bees. Archie's little dog Sherbet barked and wagged his tail every time a dragon swooped close by them. He wanted to play chase but the dragons' wings gave them an unfair advantage.

'Careful, Sherbet,' Archie warned. 'You'll be a dog kebab if you get too close.' Dragons from old stories and legends used their fiery breath to barbecue courageous, armoured knights like they were human-shaped baked potatoes wrapped in tin foil. Not the honey dragons. They were more like flying blowtorches, but they could still do some damage.

One dragon paused briefly nearby. Its long, thin tongue whipped out of its golden mouth and deftly licked the nectar from each tiny flower in a row.

'Do they eat all the nectar?' Archie said, sitting up on his elbows. 'Don't they need it to make honeystone?' Fliss had become something of an expert on honey dragons, ever since one – named Blossom – had hitched a ride home in her pocket. Archie would never forget that

snowy winter's night when they had first discovered the honey dragons, in the Cavern of Honeystone.

'They have cheek pouches,' she explained. 'They're like flying-lizard-bee-hamsters! They store some nectar in their pouches and use their magical Dragon-fire to spit it out as crystals of honeystone when they get back to the cavern.' She screwed up her nose. 'Honeystone is magical dragon drool. It's a bit gross, if you think about it too hard.'

Archie wrinkled his nose, remembering the massive cave filled with honeystone, hidden under the mountain of Ben Doodle. He, Fliss and their friend Billy had discovered it whilst on a quest to prove Archie was worthy of inheriting the world-famous McBudge Chocolate Factory and all the magic that came with it. They had never imagined the sparkling honeystone was made of dragon spit.

'We'd better get back home,' Archie said, getting to his feet. 'Or Billy will think we've abandoned him in the library.'

'Don't worry – you know he's in his element. Billy loves your great-uncle Archibald's collection of books. It's all material for his *Book of Wyrdivness*.' Billy Macabre (whose real name was Billy MacCrabbie) was obsessed with collecting stories about local legends and magical

mysteries – or *wyrdiness* as the people of Dundoodle called it.

‘I’m more worried about him stumbling across another secret passage or a hidden trapdoor into a dungeon. There are still so many rooms in that house I’ve not explored. We might never find him again!’ Archie grinned at the idea. ‘And anyway,’ he added, ‘I’m supposed to be going to the dentist before lunch.’

Fliss jumped down from the rock and whistled. One of the honey dragons sped over and landed lightly on her shoulder.

‘You’ve got Blossom well trained,’ laughed Archie. ‘I wish Sherbet was that obedient.’

‘The honey dragons are really intelligent,’ said Fliss. ‘I’m teaching Blossom to speak human. Isn’t that right, Blossom?’

‘Completely bonkers!’ croaked Blossom in reply, burping a smoke ring into Fliss’s face.

They left the other dragons to their nectar-gathering in the heather and tramped across the moor, following a sheep track down to the shore of the loch. As they trudged along the path that would lead them back to the little town of Dundoodle, Archie suddenly had the feeling they were being watched. A movement in the bracken caught

his eye and he froze as a small figure appeared in front of them.

Sherbet growled at the stranger, a bearded man with a mud-splashed face. He wore a green hood and a cloak made of leaves. Clumps of grass sprouted from his moss-coloured trousers. The odd character bowed low, disturbing a little robin that was nestled in his beard.

‘Guardian,’ the man said solemnly. He had a strange accent. ‘You are summoned. The Tree sends its first signal. A time of great danger is upon us!’ He produced a large, yellow leaf from under his cloak and handed it to Archie. The man eyed Archie’s face expectantly.

‘Um ... thanks?’ said Archie. The stranger gave him a confused frown before plunging back into the undergrowth.

‘Wait!’ called Archie, but the small man had disappeared.

‘Who was that walking compost-heap?’ said Fliss. ‘What was he talking about?’

‘The Tree,’ said Archie, staring at the golden leaf that lay on the palm of his hand. ‘This is from the Wyrddie Tree ... the source of all magic in Dundoodle!’



They hurried back to Dundoodle as fast as they could.

As they walked, Archie gazed across the loch to the dark and menacing forest on the far side. Somewhere in there was the Wyrdie Tree, whose roots stretched far underneath the strange little town, spreading the Tree's magic with them. Archie knew that the McBudge family were Guardians of the Tree, bound to protect the magic of Dundoodle, but he had yet to even set foot in the forest.

Finally, they reached the gates of Honeystone Hall, the grand, ancient and dust-filled home of the McBudges. Blossom flitted away to the giant greenhouse at the back of the building, where she had made her home amongst the tropical plants housed there. Meanwhile, Sherbet had dashed up the drive and into the hallway, and was sniffing at

the doors of the library. They found Billy inside, sat at the carved oak desk and surrounded by piles of old books, scrolls and other papers. He looked up at his friends as they entered the room, his big eyes even more extra-wide than normal.

‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost,’ said Archie, glancing up at the portrait of Great-Uncle Archibald. The painting had been haunted by the ghost of his great-uncle when Archie first arrived at the Hall. The face in the picture hadn’t moved or talked in a while now, and Archie wondered if he’d ever see the old phantom again.

‘Better than that!’ said Billy. ‘I never realised this library was such a treasure chest of wyrdiology! I’ve discovered so many new things.’ He pointed at a page in



a fat, red book Archie recognised as the *Encyclopaedia Dundoodilicus*. 'Did you know there's a were-squirrel that haunts the woods near Duntootie? Its fangs can reduce a spruce tree to toothpicks in less than a minute. Five point two on the Macabre Creepy Scale!'

'Never mind about that!' said Fliss, slamming the encyclopaedia shut so that a small cloud of dust blew into his surprised face. 'Archie has had a summons. From the Wyrdie Tree.' She told Billy about their meeting with the odd little man.

'I wish I'd been there,' groaned Billy as he examined the leaf reverently. 'You're such a wyrdie-magnet, Archie.'

'Remember what your great-uncle's ghost said, Archie?' Fliss continued. 'That you'll develop magical powers ...?'

'*Wyrdworking*,' interrupted Billy. 'That's what it's called.'

'Well this is your chance to find out all about it at the source!' Fliss said, giving Billy an annoyed prod with her elbow. 'You've *got* to go and find the Wyrdie Tree, haven't you? And we'll come along too, naturally. It's not every day you get to see paranormal plant-life.'

Archie flopped down on to the big leather sofa that sat in front of the fireplace and sighed.

'I'm not sure I'm ready for another adventure,' he said. 'Me and Mum haven't been living in Dundoodle very

long, and what with looking after the chocolate factory *and* Honeystone Hall we've got quite enough on our plate already. I'm not ready for magical powers. I just want a normal life for a bit.'

'But this is *big*,' pleaded Billy. 'Like, the ultimate in bigness. It would be the icing on the cake of my career of investigating wyrdiness. So far I've only got a few stale, crumbly bits and burnt raisins.'

'And besides,' said Fliss, 'Leafy McMudface, or whoever it was, talked about a "great danger". McBudges don't have normal lives. They have *destinies*. And there's no running away from yours.'

At that moment, normality arrived in the shape of Archie's mum. Archie put his finger to his lips. If Mum had known about the children's magical adventures, she'd have gone, as Fliss often put it, completely bonkers.

'Archie,' Mum called from the hallway. 'We need to go, it's time for your visit to the dentist. I'll give you a lift on my way to my meeting with one of our suppliers. But hurry, I'm late as it is.'

'Is that normal enough for you?' said Fliss, grinning. She grabbed Billy by the arm and dragged him out of the library. 'We'll see you later!'

'What was Fliss talking about in there?' said Mum, as

she and Archie got into the car. She was using her ‘worried mum’ voice. ‘About McBudges not having “normal lives”? You’ve settled in Dundoodle quite nicely, haven’t you?’

‘Yes – I have!’ Archie reassured her. He had some celebrity in the town, as the new owner of the chocolate factory and the business that went with it, and that had led to some teasing at his new school. But he had plenty of friends and the teasing was nothing compared to what he had faced from the Puddingham-Pye family: Cousin Jacqui and her foul children, the twins Georgie and Portia. Mrs Puddingham-Pye wanted Archie’s magical inheritance for herself and was quite happy to employ her children to try and bump him off so she could get it. Apart from that, Archie loved his new home. ‘I still haven’t got my head around everything,’ he said, which was the truth.

Mum smiled sympathetically. A lot had happened in a short time, and it had only been a few years since Archie’s dad had died. There was a thoughtful silence as they drove through Dundoodle’s twisty streets. The town had a peculiar look, to match its odd character, with meandering, shadow-filled lanes lined by crooked houses. The townspeople had an air of the unusual about them too: there were plenty of eccentric folk around, oddly dressed or with strange pets or habits.

For example, they drove past old Mrs Kronkilty, who always wore a metal warrior-helmet with antlers – even in the bath, it was rumoured, using the antlers to hang her bath sponge on. Then they saw Morris Pimple from McGreasy’s Burgers, who claimed to have a family of mini-yetis living in the café’s deep freeze, amongst the chips. Billy said this was unlikely, as mini-yetis (Macabre Creepy Scale rating of four point three) were allergic to potatoes. Archie wondered how many Dundoodlers had *actual* magical powers like Mrs Puddingham-Pye. Or like himself, according to Great-Uncle Archibald, though he had yet to learn how to make his wyrdworking powers ... well, *work*.

‘Perhaps you need a project to focus your mind a bit,’ said Mum. ‘How about you talk to Mr Fairbairn about doing something in the factory? Maybe you could invent a new sweet or chocolate bar?’ Mr Fairbairn was the McBudge factory manager, as well as Fliss’s dad.

‘I suppose so,’ said Archie. He did want to do more to help the business and this could be a good opportunity to do that. *But do I have to do it right now?* he thought. *Why is everyone in such a hurry to make life complicated?*

‘However, I want you to banish all thoughts of sugar from your mind for the moment,’ said Mum, as the car drew up outside the Dundoodle Dental Surgery. ‘I expect

a clean bill of health from the dentist. I'd better be on my way – see you later!’

Archie grinned and jumped out of the car. Mum gave a wave as she drove off. It was as he waved back that Archie noticed the strange little man on the other side of the road, watching him from a dark alleyway, his camouflage cloak failing miserably in the grey of the town. The man scampered across the road towards him.

‘The second signal, Guardian,’ said the man, an earthworm tumbling out of his beard as he gave a deep bow. He handed Archie another leaf, this time coloured golden-orange, and just as before, looked at Archie as though waiting for him to say something. Archie was about to speak when there was a squeak of alarm from a red squirrel that had been hidden in the stranger’s hood. The man let out a terrified cry and pointed skyward.

Archie turned to see a monkey-like creature swooping down from the rooftop, its leathery wings braking its descent. The stranger fled, disappearing into the shadows of the alley as the monster landed on the step in front of Archie. Its gargoyle-like face sniggered nastily.

‘Surprise, surprise, smelly bratling!’ the creature said. It was Garstigan the mobgoblin.



‘What do you want?’ said Archie, recovering himself.
‘Haven’t you got a handbag to go to?’

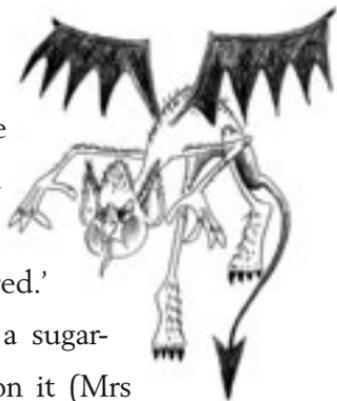
Garstigan looked fearsome – with his pointy teeth, bat-like wings and yellow eyes – but Archie knew the little monster wasn’t a threat. It was his keeper, Mrs Puddingham-Pye, who was the real problem. Garstigan lived in her large, black handbag, and she sent him out to do her nefarious bidding.

The mobgoblin stuck out his tongue and blew a raspberry.

‘The bratling should be pleased to see Garstigan,’ he said. ‘Garstigan has brought a treat for him.’

‘Really?’ said Archie, unconvinced. Garstigan looked offended.

'The roly-poly porklings are having a birthday party –' Archie couldn't help smiling at this unkind reference to the twins – 'and the bratling is invited. He is *most* honoured.'



Garstigan haughtily handed him a sugar-pink envelope with *Urchin* written on it (Mrs Puddingham-Pye could never remember Archie's name).

'There will be cake, and other yummy things that the porklings like to munch upon but make them fat and give them greasy spots and smelly, farty bottoms.' The creature giggled, then added daintily: 'Dress code is "smart casual".'

'It sounds *delightful*,' said Archie drily.

'There will also be *party games*,' Garstigan added, hissing the words in the same tone he might use for *torture*.



Archie shuddered. Georgie and Portia's idea of party games would probably be 'Pass the Poison' or 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey', where Archie was the donkey and the pin was a very large knife.

'You must be joking!' he said. 'I suppose they want me to get them a present too?'

‘Ooh, yes, yesss! Lots of pressies. With shiny paper and ribbons. Noisy toys and things that pop out and surprise you and make little bratlings chuckle. Like scorpionsss. Or dynamite. Or scorpionsss with dynamite.’

‘No way am I going to this,’ Archie said. ‘I may as well be going to my own funeral!’ He threw the invitation back at Garstigan. The Puddingham-Pyes must be up to something and he wasn’t falling for it. *All I want is a normal life for a while*, he thought. *A bit of peace and quiet.*

The mobgoblin gurgled unhappily. Then it flapped its wings and kicked away from the step, hovering in front of Archie’s face. ‘The mistress will be displeased, bratling,’ Garstigan spat. ‘The mistress will be very, *very* displeased!’ And with that he flew away into the sky, muttering miserably to himself.

Archie sighed and wearily pushed open the surgery door.

‘You’ll be seeing our new dentist, Mr McBudge,’ said the receptionist when Archie gave her his name. He hadn’t been waiting long when a tall, handsome man in a white surgical smock appeared in the doorway of the waiting room.

‘Mr McBudge, is it?’ said the man, flattening his black hair. His skin was so smooth it looked like it had been

polished, and he flashed a smile so unnaturally white and even that it could have been chiselled from a block of soap. 'I'm Edward Preen. It will be my privilege to care for your canines, investigate your incisors and maintain your molars this afternoon, ha ha!' The man ushered Archie into his room and gestured towards the large chair at its centre. 'Have no fear, young sir, even though you find yourself in the enemy camp, as it were, ha ha!'

Archie smiled politely as he settled into the chair. He'd always looked after his teeth, even more so after he inherited the chocolate factory. There was no point having a constant supply of sweets if your teeth were too rotten to eat them. But he knew some dentists might take a dim view of the McBudge family business. Mr Preen loomed over him, his eyes staring over the top of his face mask.

'Open wide,' said the dentist. Archie felt the metal explorer tapping around his jaw. 'How strange that we should meet on my very first day in Dundoodle,' said Mr Preen as he worked. 'It must be fate.'

'*Aug?*' said Archie, screwing up his eyes under the dentist's lamp.

'Indeed. For it is in Dundoodle that I intend to launch my campaign, this very week.'



'Awwaggawg?'

'What campaign, you ask? A campaign to rid the world of the poison of sweets and chocolate and fudge, to drive out all that is unwholesome and unclean.'

'Awwkeen?' Mr Preen's eyes glowed steely-blue and Archie could sense there was a cold, perfect smile underneath the mask.

'Yes!' said the dentist. 'I believe it is my mission in life to make the world safe for children to grow up in. I want to make the world ... *nice*.'

'Aigh?' Archie's head began to ache and he felt himself begin to panic. He realised he was trapped, at the mercy of this increasingly sinister man. He gripped the arms of the chair as the dentist scraped the metal tool along a tooth, like fingernails against a blackboard.

'N.I.C.E. Normal, Inoffensive, Cleansing and Educational. If it is not N.I.C.E, then it is naughty. Naughtiness will not be tolerated. And what is naughtier than a factory devoted to making sweets? Your business is very, *very* naughty. I have you in my sights, young Mr McBudge. Now rinse and spit, please.'

Archie furiously spat the pink mouthwash into a basin.

'I can't *make* people eat sweets, any more than you

can force them to *stop*,' he spluttered angrily. 'You have to let people have a choice!'

'We'll see about that,' said Edward Preen, calmly smoothing his hair back again as Archie walked quickly for the door. 'You'll be seeing more of me, Mr McBudge, ha ha.'

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