

Joshua, Katie, Gary and Amber went and sat in the bus shelter across from their front door.

'I think I have made a very important journey,' announced Amber after they'd all sat in silence for a while. 'What was it like just before I arrived? Were there whirlwinds and flashes of lightning and fiery dragons flying through the air?'

'I suppose it was a bit misty,' said Gary.

'And there was a funny noise this morning three doors up at Mrs Gray's,' added Joshua.

'That's her washing machine,' said Katie knowledgeably. 'She has endless trouble with the spin cycle.'

'I came across the *Gunningagap* – the great void,' continued Amber, 'the abyss of emptiness, the *Niflheim*, the land of dark and freezing fog to journey here to . . .'

'Pegwell Bay,' said Joshua helpfully.

'Pegwell Bay,' repeated Amber. 'Have I come to the end of the earth?'

'No,' said Katie. 'It just feels like it in winter. Are you hungry?'

Amber nodded. 'I could devour an ox, eight salmon and three cups of mead in a single meal.'

Katie went inside and got her a small cheese sandwich and half a packet of prawn-flavoured crisps. She struggled back to the shelter carrying the food, along with a large red bundle. 'I found this,' she said.

'It's our old play tent!' exclaimed Joshua, excited at the prospect of a new game. 'We could set it up in the garden.'

Gary shook his head. 'We can't leave her in the garden. It's freezing.'

'She is a Viking,' replied Joshua. 'I think they must be used to the cold. Eric the Red was a Viking and he went to Greenland, which isn't green but is very cold.'

Katie was firm. 'We can't take her in the house. Mum will know straight away. She knows if you bring in some mud never mind about someone from history.'

Amber was looking carefully at the play tent. 'I believe this may be the very thing I shall need.'

The children led Amber round to the back gate and into the garden. She still clutched her plastic leg as she munched crisps and wondered how potatoes could be made so flat and why they tasted so strange.

In a clearing among some bushes, Katie set to work and, after making a fuss about which way the door should be facing, Gary lent a hand. Before long, they had put up their old play tent. It was bright red and shaped like a London double-decker bus. Amber peeked inside.



'A house, you've made a house!' she cried, delighted, and crawled inside.

'Do you like it?' asked Katie, laying out an old blanket for the floor. 'I thought you could stay in here for the moment.'

'It's wonderful. It's the very thing I...!' Amber lay down on the blanket, cuddled her shop dummy leg and instantly fell asleep.

'I suppose she's had a long journey,' said Joshua.

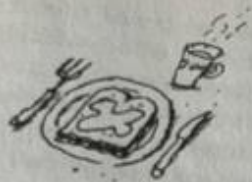
'Of course she has,' said Gary. 'Must be at least a thousand years.'

The children went inside for tea, passing Mrs Marchmont, who was on her way out.

'We've got a Viking in our garden,' shouted Joshua, who had terrible trouble keeping a secret.

'Get out of my way!' barked Mrs Marchmont, sweeping past to post her weekly letter of complaint to the *Pegwell Bay Chronicle*.

Down in the garden, in the clearing in the bushes, Amber the littlest Viking snuggled down in her tent. She was dreaming of sailing across the oceans by the stars and cutting off the heads of a nine-headed troll - who looked remarkably like Mrs Marchmont - just as easily as slicing through butter.



Chapter Two From Bad to Verse

It had been a very strange morning in the Lloyd household. Katie, Gary and Joshua had tried to act as if it were just another day – as if they hadn't found a small Viking girl called Amber on the beach yesterday afternoon and as if she weren't now living in the garden. They knew their mum wouldn't believe it, and, to be absolutely honest, they weren't completely sure that they hadn't imagined it themselves.

The three children ate their breakfasts without being told, cleared their plates away without discussion, and not one of them put up a decent

fight over the free pencil rubber shaped like a vampire that had come with the cornflakes. This should have been enough to make Mum suspicious that they were up to something except that she was too busy thinking about the post. There had been a phone bill and a red reminder from the gas board. Even worse, she'd just read a letter from Gary's teacher, Mrs Johnson, saying that if he didn't stop reading comics in school and start doing his homework, then something very official would have to happen.

'We might . . . pop out, Mum,' said Katie, trying to sound casual.

'Oh, I don't care if we go or not,' added Gary, shining the tops of his trainers with the carpet. Mum looked at Gary. 'We need to have a talk about school, Gary. You've got to work on your reading.'

'Not now, Mum,' said Joshua. 'Amber will be starving and . . .' At this, the two older ones lost their cool and picked Joshua up between them and left.

'Sorry, Mum,' shouted Gary over his shoulder. 'Got to go.'

Mum sighed the way only mums can.

The frost was still crunchy under their feet as Katie and Joshua ran down the stone steps into the large garden behind the row of houses where they lived. Gary followed more slowly, sliding along on the especially icy bits of the path.

'Stupid school,' he muttered to himself. 'What's wrong with comics anyway? It's reading. They've got words in them.' Gary kicked a lump of ice. Of course he hadn't done this week's homework. Mrs Johnson wanted him to write a poem! How could *anybody* find that interesting?

Still muttering to himself, Gary caught up with the other two. There, hidden away in the bushes stood the small red play tent shaped like a bus, in which Amber, the Viking they had found on the beach, had spent the night. Joshua ran up and lifted the flap to look inside.

'She's gone!' he cried.

'Oh dear!' said Katie, disappointed. 'We should have taken her inside yesterday.'

'Perhaps she was never really here at all,' wondered Gary.

'No, her leg's still here,' said Joshua, giving his

brother and sister a nasty turn until he pulled out the plastic limb from a shop dummy that Amber had picked up on the beach the day before.

'Morning,' came a voice booming through a mulberry bush. 'Look what I found. The very thing I needed.' Amber stood before them, holding a milk bottle. 'The gods have left milk as an offering for my great journey.' She examined the bottle carefully, for she had never seen a milk bottle before. 'Must have been a strange cow that made this.'

'Amber, where did you get that?' asked Katie, half afraid of the answer.

'From a great doorway with a terrible metal face that tried to frighten me but did not, for I am brave and sturdy. I am Amber, Hammer of the North.' The miniature Viking smiled and began drinking the milk from the bottle.

'Mrs Marchmont's door knocker!' Katie and Joshua whispered together.



'Mrs Marchmont's milk!' said Gary. They all knew that Mrs Marchmont, their next-door neighbour, could be spectacularly bad tempered when she wanted to.

'You mustn't take that,' said Joshua. 'It's naughty.'

'I don't think you'll stop a Viking by telling them that they're naughty,' explained Gary. Sometimes he wished that the others wouldn't be quite so feeble, though he was also hoping that Mrs Marchmont didn't actually know where they were.

'We thought we'd imagined you,' said Joshua.

Amber pinched herself. 'No, I'm definitely here,' she beamed.

Amber finished the milk with a great flourish and put down the bottle. 'Come, we must get on.'

She looked up at the sun. 'It's already late. Sleep is the great thief; he will always steal half the time. I have a mission I must complete.' With that, she set off through the bushes and across the garden. There was nothing for it but to follow.

'Where are you going, Amber?' asked Joshua.