

## GUILTY OR NOT?

'That's so not fair!' exploded Mum when Tashi finished telling her the story.

'What?' asked Dad, walking into the kitchen.

'Well,' said Tashi, 'it was like this. At school today, Arthur Trouble drew a rude picture on the board with chalk but Angus Figment got the blame for it—'

'That's ridiculous!' said Dad. 'Angus Figment – as *if!*'



'Yeah,' agreed Jack, 'but see, Angus came into the classroom with chalk on his hands. The teacher wouldn't listen when he explained he'd just been drawing up handball lines in the playground, plus he wouldn't even *know* how to draw a naked mermaid because he's much more interested in Ancient Egypt and, by the way, did she know that the priests used to pluck out every hair on their bodies, even their eyelashes?'



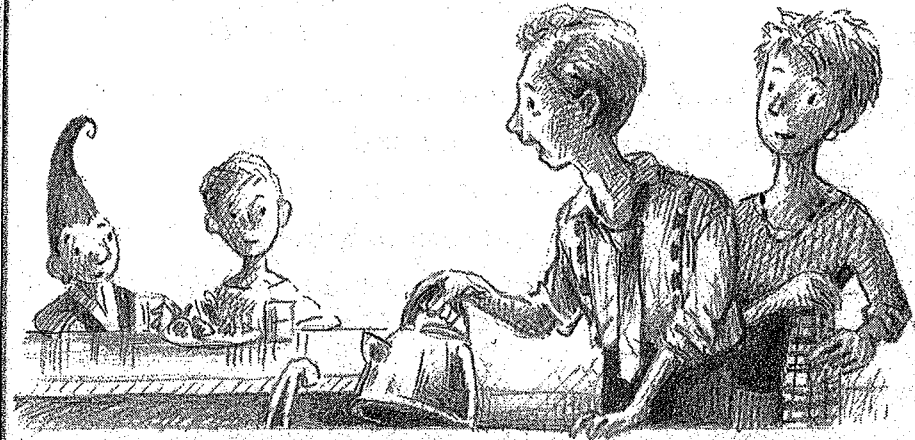
'It's true,' said Tashi. 'Angus is only interested in Egyptian mummies. He draws them all over his books, and people's arms. Although sometimes he draws jackal masks, which look quite spooky.'

'Well, anyway,' Mum turned to Jack, 'you said you actually *saw* Arthur Trouble drawing on the blackboard. Why didn't you go and tell?'

'It's not that simple. Arthur's already in so much trouble and he's got a mean temper, and anyway I don't like dobbing.'

'But it's not fair on Angus!' cried Mum.

'That's right,' said Tashi. 'Something like that happened to me once, over a ball game.'



'Really?' said Dad. 'What did you do? Wait a sec, I'll make the tea – oh boy, I'm just in the mood for a story!'



‘Well,’ Tashi started, when the water had boiled, ‘one day Ah Chu and I were playing a game of Catch when our ball flew over a wall and into Soh Meen’s courtyard. And there was a loud splash. *Wah!*

‘We had to run then because this furious man came barrelling out of the house. It was Soh Meen, chasing us with his broomstick. “Who did that?” he shouted. “Who threw that ball into my fish pond and very likely killed my precious carp!”

“We’re very sorry, Soh Meen,” Ah Chu called over his shoulder. “Tashi didn’t mean to do it.” I gave Ah Chu a dirty look and stopped running.’

‘I would have given him more than a dirty look!’ said Dad. ‘I would—’

‘You would have sat him down,’ said Mum, ‘and talked to him about what it means to be a friend, and sharing responsibility.’

‘How did you *know*? You took the words right out of my mouth!’ cried Dad.

‘Well, I didn’t have time for that unfortunately,’ said Tashi, ‘because Soh Meen was shaking his fist at me.’



“It was a bad mistake, Soh Meen,” I said. “Could we come in and see if the carp are hurt?”

‘Well, thank goodness the fish were swimming about quite happily, but still Soh Meen gave us each a good whack with his broomstick and refused to return our ball. Apart from a sore bottom, that was the end of the matter, I thought.



‘Until the next day.

‘When I went to the square the following morning a crowd was gathered there. They were listening to a loud and angry speaker. I knew that voice.

‘Someone let me through and I moved up to the front while the voice raged on, shouting “And then I saw them. My beautiful golden carp, lying upturned, dead, in a pool of stinking oil!”

“The murmur of the crowd was like a wind whooshing through the rice paddies. My heart sank.

“And there is the culprit!” Soh Meen roared, pointing right at me. “Yesterday he attacked my carp with a ball. Then last night he sneaked back and finished my poor fish off! He poured bad oil into my beautiful clean pond!”

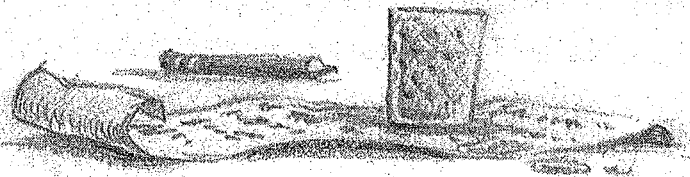
“I didn’t! I didn’t! The ball was an accident...”



“But it was no use, Soh Meen went on and on until people started to believe him. The next few days were terrible. Ah Chu tried to explain what had really happened but Soh Meen wouldn’t let him be heard. I kept turning the question over in my mind. How do you prove that you *didn’t* do something?”

“I know, I know!” Dad cried. “By proving that someone else *did*.”

“That’s exactly right. But that was the easy bit – finding the real fish-poisoner would be the hard part. So I made a list of all the people who had a grudge against Soh Meen. There were quite a few, actually, but that didn’t prove anything. And then my mother poured a glass of lemonade for me and there, suddenly, was the answer. “I have to go and see Wise-as-an-Owl straight away,” I told her.





‘Wise-as-an-Owl looked at me calmly over his spectacles, just as he always does. He said, “Sit down, Tashi, and get your breath. Now, why do you need the Truth Potion? You know I don’t use these magic brews without serious thought.”

‘When I explained my problem to him he chuckled and shook his head. “I would really like to be a cricket in the corner of your kitchen tomorrow evening, Tashi. You must be sure to tell me what happens when they all find themselves speaking the honest truth.”

‘So my family invited all the people on my list to come to our house that evening to discuss the situation. My mother told each one that their advice would be really important. Besides Soh Meen and his wife there were: the Wicked Baron, Mrs Ping, Mr Ping, Not Yet, Teacher Pang, Granny White Eyes, Tiki Pu and Luk Ahed.



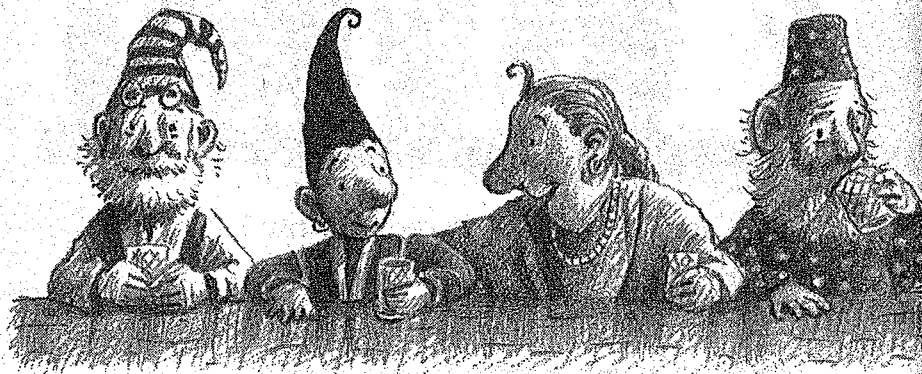
‘As soon as the guests arrived my mother poured them a glass of her delicious lemonade, which she had mixed up in a big jug, together with a cup and a half of Truth Potion.

“This is very good,” said the Baron, surprised, as he held out his glass for another helping.

“It’s the best I’ve ever had,” agreed Mr Ping, “What’s your secret?”

“I know the secret of this lemonade,” crowed Mrs Ping. “I peeked through the curtain one time while it was being made. They use limes as well as lemons, you know.”

‘My mother looked annoyed but Grandma poked me in the ribs and whispered, “It’s working! Now we’ll see what they *really* think about each other.”



‘My uncle Tiki Pu joined us at the table and nodded to Luk Ahed. “You haven’t come along to our card evenings lately, Luk Ahed.”

“No, and neither will any of the others if you keep cheating like you did last time, Tiki Pu,” growled Luk Ahed.