

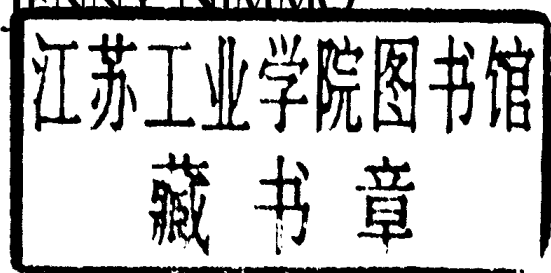
# THE CHESTNUT SOLDIER

JENNY NIMMO



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THE CHESTNUT SOLDIER

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THE  
CHESTNUT  
SOLDIER  
JENNY NIMMO

# Chapter 1

The Prince did not come entirely unannounced! There were messages. They slipped through the air and kindled Gwyn's fingers; the joints ached, things fell out of his grasp and he knew something was on its way.

They had nearly finished the barn; it only needed a few extra nails on the roof to secure it against the wild winds that were bound to come, and planks to fit for the lambing pens; that was Gwyn's task; he had never been much of a carpenter and today he was proving to be a disaster. But he could not pretend that cold or damp was causing his clumsiness. A huge September sun glared across the mountains, burning the breeze. The air was stifling!

Gwyn hated hammering on such a day. Sounds seemed to sweep, unimpeded, into every secret place, and with his father on the roof banging away at corrugated iron, the clamour was deafening.

'Aww!' Gwyn dropped his hammer on to a bucket of nails and thrust his fist against his mouth.

'What've you done, boy?' Ivor Griffiths called from his perch.

'Hammered my thumb, didn't I?'

'You need specs!'

'Take after you then, don't I?' It was a family joke, Ivor's spectacles. They were always streaked with mud, or lost.

Gwyn could see them now, balanced on a pile of planks.

‘Is it bad?’ his father asked.

‘Mmm!’ Pain began to get the better of Gwyn; the numbing ache aggravated by a bruised and bleeding thumbnail.

‘Better go and see Mam,’ his father suggested. ‘You’re no good wounded, are you?’

‘No, Dad!’ Gwyn slid a chisel into his pocket, wondering why he felt compelled to do this. Perhaps something at home needed his attention. He didn’t know, then, what it would be.

He stuck his thumb in his mouth and jogged down the mountain track towards the farmhouse. In spite of the urgency he could not resist a look back at the barn. It would be a grand shelter for the ewes; something to be proud of, for they’d done it all themselves; he and his dad, his cousin Emlyn and Uncle Idris. It was a family affair.

‘Idiot!’ Gwyn told himself. ‘There’s nothing here.’ It was such a bright and beautiful day. He could see it all from his high field and all was well. Nothing threatened from the valley, where trees glowed with early autumn colour. There were no phantoms hiding in the mountains that stretched calm and splendid under an empty sky. But the warning in his hands could not be ignored.

He was tired of magic, of intuition and the unnatural power that rippled through him sometimes. Once, he’d been tall for his age. But in four years he’d hardly grown. Now information slipped in and out of his mind too swiftly for him to make sense of it. In class he dreamed, wondered about the distance between stars instead of trees, drew crescents where he should have made straight lines, forgot his English and wrote Welsh poetry that no one understood.

Perhaps soon, he thought, when I am thirteen, the wizard in me will fade away and I will grow and be like an average boy. To be average was Gwyn’s greatest wish.

Bending his head over his injured thumb, Gwyn began to



run, really hard this time, so that the stitch in his side would distract him from the painful little hints of bad tidings.

His mother was in the kitchen, baking for the school fête. Her face glowed pink, with triumph or the unnatural temperature, Gwyn couldn't guess which. The long table was mounded with extravagantly decorated cakes and the stove was still roaring. Mrs Griffiths had a reputation to maintain. Her cooking won prizes. Two sticky flypapers hung above the table, diverting insects from chocolate sponges, iced buns, jammy gâteaux and waves of *bara brith*. The papers buzzed with dead and dying creatures.

'Duw! It's hot in here, Mam!' Gwyn exclaimed. 'How can you stand it?'

'I've got to, haven't I?' Mrs Griffiths mopped her flushed cheeks with a damp tissue. 'Your dad's not shifted the muck from the yard and if I open the window there'll be stench and bluebottles all through the house. I don't know how the wasps get in, the sly things!'

'Dad's still on the barn. He's nearly done. It's going to be just grand, Mam!'

'I know! I know! What've you done then?' she eyed Gwyn's bloody thumb.

'Hammered my nail, didn't I?' Gwyn grinned sheepishly.

'You're not going to tell me it was the cold made you clumsy?'

'Naw! It was the sun, made my eyes water.' It was a pretty lame excuse since he'd been inside the barn, but it would have to do. He gave up all attempt at bravery and grimaced. 'It hurts, Mam!'

'Come on then, let's put it under the cold tap!' His mother took his hand.

The water was icy. It calmed the pain in his thumb but now his fingers tingled unbearably. Something needed to be done, but what? 'That's enough! I'm O.K.!' He pulled his hand away.

'It's still bleeding, Gwyn. I'll have to bandage it.' His mother brought a first-aid box from the cupboard by the sink. 'Tch! I've no wide plasters. Hold still!'

Gwyn hopped from foot to foot. Things took so long when you needed to be finished with them.

'What's your hurry, boy?' His mother spread yellow cream on to the torn nail and began to wrap it up. 'Anyone would think there was a time bomb here!'

Perhaps there is, of a sort, Gwyn thought.

The bandage swelled into a giant grub.

His father peered in through the window. He tapped a pane. 'I'm off to Pendewi, Gwyn. Want to come?'

'I...well...' Was it here, or was it there that he was needed?

'Make up your mind, boy. I'm late as it is!' Mr Griffiths vanished.

'Go on, Gwyn. Go and have a chat with Alun.' His mother pushed him gently away.

The landrover hustled noisily from the lane.

Gwyn hovered by the door. 'O.K.,' he said and rushed through it. He needed to talk to someone.

As he flung himself into the seat beside his father, he realised it was not Alun he wanted to see, but Nia, Alun's sister.

Alun was a good friend and would be, probably, forever, but he drew away from magic and all talk of it. Only Nia understood. Only she had glimpsed events beyond the world that surrounded her, and welcomed spells as naturally as she did spring flowers.

The journey to Pendewi took twenty minutes. It would have taken ten if the lane had not been so steep. The town was only five miles away. But the Griffiths' farm was the highest on the mountain. It lay at the end of a track that was hardly more than a twisting channel carved into the rock. Even in the landrover, progress was slow until they reached the main road. Then it was a few minutes of racing with

coast-bound cars and caravans, over a bridge and down into the town.

Traffic between the Lloyds and the Griffithses was frequent. They had been neighbours until the mountain drove the Lloyds down to the valley. Its pitiless winters had almost done for Iestyn Lloyd, father of eight. Such a man must be master of his home so he had left farming and sold his old house to Gwyn's Uncle Idris. Now Iestyn was a butcher in Pendewi and doing very nicely. But five miles and a different way of life could not interrupt a friendship which was as constant as time.

The Lloyds lived at Number Six, the High Street. Their tall terraced house had two doors, one blue for the shop, the other black for the family. Gwyn and his father went into the shop. Iestyn was placing chickens on to shiny trays in the window. 'Alun's not here,' he told Gwyn. 'Gone swimming with the twins.'

'Doesn't matter,' Gwyn said.

'Wife's out too, showing the baby off again!' Iestyn gave a smug wink.

'I'll go and see Nia!'

Leaving the men to discuss the price of lamb, Gwyn turned through a door that led into the house beyond; the Lloyds' living quarters.

It was a rare, quiet moment in a house that held eight children.

Gwyn walked down the passage to the open back door, but he did not step into what they called the garden: a small square of dry grass confined by ivy-covered walls and the back of the house. In one wall a glass pane revealed scarlet carcasses hanging in the butcher's room. And beside the low wall that held the garden back from the river, Nia had planted bright flowers, almost, it seemed, as a distraction from the lifeless gaudy things behind her father's window.

Today, however, the distraction came from elsewhere. The boys had made a hammock and slung it between the

branches of next door's apple tree. They had joined rope and twine and their mother's rags into a bright lattice, and where the rags were knotted, thin strips of colour floated like tiny breeze-blown flags.

Catrin was lying in the hammock while Iolo, who was eight, gently set the swing in motion.

Catrin was sixteen; she had cornflower blue eyes and abundant yellow hair. Gwyn thought her, probably, the most beautiful girl in Wales. Lately he had found it difficult to talk to her. He did not even come up to her shoulder.

Catrin turned and waved. She looked like a princess, swinging in a basket of silk ribbons.

'I'm looking for Nia,' Gwyn mumbled and stepped back into the passage. He could hear voices at the top of the house, Nerys and Nia arguing.

He walked to the bottom of the stairs but decided against interrupting.

The shouting subsided. A door slammed.

Gwyn sank on to the only seat in the hall; a low oak box where outgrown boots and shoes waited for the next child to find and approve them.

The hall was cool and shady. Gwyn expected to be soothed, but if anything his agitation increased.

Could it be here, the menace that was troubling his hands? Surely nothing could invade this cosy house. It was too crammed with children, it was barricaded with noise, constant movement and the smell of washing. Could a demon slip through a swinging door or slide on a draught beneath loose windows? And if so, where could it hide? None of the small low-beamed rooms was empty for long.

Gwyn hummed tunelessly.

And then, from the top of a bookcase the telephone shrilled. He stared at the instrument, vibrating on its perch, hoping that someone would come to put it out of its misery. Perhaps he should answer it? Take a message. But he found

that he couldn't touch it. He was about to escape through the front door when Iolo bounded in exclaiming, 'Is it for me? I bet it is! My friend said he'd call.'

Perhaps Iolo was too eager, for the receiver slipped out of his hand and swung on its black cord, back and forth across the dusty books. For some reason Iolo couldn't touch it either. He shrank from it as a voice called from the instrument, 'Who is there? Who is there?' And Nia ran down the stairs.

Taking in the scene she stepped towards the telephone ready for conversation but suddenly she recoiled. And still the receiver swung on its shiny cord, impelled by nothing, unless it was the voice tumbling through it.

All three watched it, helplessly, until it came to rest and then words spilled towards the reluctant children, clear and strong: a man's voice deep and anxious, 'Who is there? Who is there?'

It was only a voice but, somehow, as potent as electricity, and Gwyn was reminded of a black snake he'd heard of, very small and unremarkable, but with enough venom in its tongue to kill an army.

He clasped his hands and leant over them as little stabs of pain shot through his fingers right up to his elbows.

'What've you done to your thumb?' Nia inquired, glad to find a reason for ignoring the voice.

'Been clumsy again,' he said.

Catrin came into the hall. 'What's the matter with you three?' she asked. 'There's someone on the phone,' and without waiting for them to reply she took the receiver and soothed, 'Catrin Lloyd here! Who is it you want?' Her hair was all tangled gold from the swing.

'Catrin?' Gwyn could hear the voice. 'Ah, Catrin,' and it seemed to sigh. 'It's Evan here. Your cousin, Evan Llŷr!'

'Evan Llŷr!' Catrin repeated the name, frowning.

'You remember me?'

'I...I remember...'

‘I don’t believe you do.’ Here, a deep laugh. ‘It’s been ten years, you were a little child.’

‘I was six.’

‘How many of you are there now?’

‘Eight.’

‘Eight?’ There was an exclamation and a sentence inaudible to the listeners, except the words, ‘and you’re the eldest?’

‘No, there’s Nerys.’

The voice softened, its words maddeningly muffled.

‘You’re coming here?’ Catrin said.

Gwyn didn’t like the way she pulled at her tangled curls, as though the voice was watching her.

‘No, Mam’s not at home... I’ll tell her... Evan Llŷr is on his way... Oh, you’ll be welcome, sure...’ Catrin’s free hand was at her throat, the other gripped the receiver.

They were only words, ordinary, pleasant words spoken far away but they slid through the air like a spell.

Gwyn wanted to shout, ‘Leave it! Run, before he catches you!’

‘Goodbye, now!’ Catrin replaced the receiver. Her cheeks were pink. It could have been the heat. ‘You’re a funny lot, you are,’ she said. ‘Why didn’t you answer the poor man?’

‘It wasn’t for us,’ Nia said, illogically.

‘You can take messages, can’t you?’

Nia chewed her lip but was not put down. ‘Not that sort,’ she muttered.

‘Sometimes you’re very silly!’ Catrin swung away and ran up the stairs. Her feet were bare and her swirling skirt made mysterious shadows on her long golden legs.

Gwyn, watching Catrin, knew that Nia was watching him. He had never heard the sisters quarrel. Nia had come off badly. Nerys could scold, and did, often. Catrin was always kind.

Remembering the scene, weeks later, Gwyn wondered if that was when the strife began.

Iolo ran back outside, leaving Gwyn and Nia alone. Nia was troubled and Gwyn didn't know how to comfort her. He had wanted to see her but the disembodied voice had confused him and he couldn't remember his purpose.

'I wish I could grow,' he suddenly confided.

'Grow?' Nia said, as though the word had no meaning.

'You can't say you haven't noticed. Alun's much taller than me now.'

'Alun's taller than everyone.'

'Sometimes I think I'll never grow again,' Gwyn rambled on, almost to himself. 'I'll be a dwarfish sort of man, thoughts ramshackling in my brain beside the magic and never getting clear of it.'

'You'll grow,' Nia said. It sounded automatic. She was still not herself.

'You coming, boy?' His father emerged through a door from the butcher's shop. He was carrying a joint of meat, several red-stained bags and the Lloyds' evening paper.

'Yes, Dad!' Gwyn levered himself up from the chest. The tingling in his hands had eased. All at once he realized it was he who had, somehow, prevented Nia and Iolo from touching the telephone, and he didn't know why. But whoever he is, this Evan Llŷr, Gwyn thought, he has already reached Catrin and I can't match that.

He followed his father to the front door but before leaving he turned to Nia and asked, 'Are you all right?' He spoke softly, not wishing to call attention to his concern for the girl.

Nia nodded and replied, 'Mind your fingers.'

He knew she was not referring to his injured thumb. She understood. Nia, too, experienced irrational stabs of fear.

At least they had each other.

Something had invaded the house. They didn't know what it was, but it still smouldered there.

Mr Griffiths did not drive straight home. He pulled up where the mountain lane began to twist through arches of yellowing

ash trees. The landrover lurched on to a bank that had become part of the crumbling wall it supported. Beyond the wall a cottage could be glimpsed, through a jungle of giant shrubs and plants.

‘I’ve got Nain’s bacon here,’ Mr Griffiths said, ‘Coming in to see her?’

‘No,’ Gwyn replied.

‘What’s wrong, boy? Why d’you keep avoiding your grandmother? What’s the trouble between you?’

‘No trouble, Dad.’ Gwyn drew himself into the back of the seat. ‘I don’t want to go in.’

‘Don’t hurt her! It’s not much to ask, a quick visit, only take five minutes.’ Mr Griffiths opened the door and looked hopefully at his son. ‘You were once so close, Gwyn, but you haven’t visited her for weeks.’

‘No need to tell her I’m here,’ Gwyn said.

His father left him in peace. Gwyn watched him gradually disappear into the ocean of plants. You couldn’t see the front door any more.

Ashamed and angry with himself, Gwyn huddled down into his seat. His grandmother had a peephole through the plants, he knew, because once he’d been on the other side of her narrow window and seen his father herding his black cows up the lane.

He couldn’t go in there any more. Nain asked too much of him. Four years ago, on his ninth birthday, his grandmother had given him five gifts that had changed his life. For with the gifts had come the knowledge that he was a descendant of Gwydion, the magician, and inheritor of his power. Gwydion, who sent messages like fire in his fingers, who drew a force from him that could even search the stars.

Once Gwyn had been so triumphant, so proud of his talent; but being different led to loneliness. He had to watch himself, to curb his anger for fear of hurting. Being extraordinary was not a happy state.

But wrapped in her dark herbal-scented house, Nain



always wanted more from him. Her own great-great-grandmother had been a witch, but she herself hadn't the power, so she wanted his, even when there was nothing to be done. She couldn't see that it was stunting him – Nain was as tall as her own front door.

One of those birthday gifts was a small carving of a mutilated horse that Gwyn must never use, nor leave where it might tempt a stranger to set it free, for it held the spirit of a demon prince. Gwyn's fingers burned again and he exclaimed aloud in surprise, wondering why he remembered the Lloyds' telephone when he thought of the broken horse, and why he heard the disembodied voice crying 'Who is there?'

Mr Griffiths appeared at the gate. He looked grim. When he had climbed in beside Gwyn he said, 'She knew you were here. It's cruel not to see her.'

'I'm sorry!' He could not explain the reason to his father. Gwyn remained in his mute huddle.

His silence infuriated his father. 'I won't force you, Gwyn, you know that,' Mr Griffiths spoke quietly at first and then he suddenly railed, 'but, by God, you're a mean-spirited little beast.'

And you're a terror for losing your temper, Gwyn thought, but he said nothing.

Mr Griffiths wrenched the handbrake free and jabbed at the ignition. The landrover rocked off the bank and roared up the lane, its occupants cleft into an unwelcome quarrel.

The kitchen table was laid for tea when they reached home. Tins, bowls and messy ingredients had vanished.

'A genius you are, Glenys,' Ivor Griffiths told his wife.

Rows of cakes in plastic packaging were stacked on the dresser, neat as soldiers on parade.

'Wow!' breathed Gwyn. 'You'll break a record with this lot.'

His mother beamed and poured the tea so Gwyn couldn't