

The Conjuror's Game

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Random House Children's Books

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About the Author

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About the Book

Alick is fascinated by Luke Ferris - the Conjuror! Where does he get his strange powers of healing? Why has he got six fingers? What is his connection with the sinister goings-on at the Mere in Halcombe Great Wood?

Then Alick follows the Conjuror to the secret chamber under the hillside. There he discovers the ancient game of Fidchell and accidentally removes a key piece in the game - unleashing dark and terrifying forces on to the world.

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To My Parents

'And as they looked they could hear a rider coming towards them, to the place where Arthur and Owein were over the gaming board. The squire greeted Arthur and said that Owein's ravens were slaying his bachelors and squires. And Arthur looked at Owein and said, "Call off thy ravens." "Lord," said Owein "play thy game." And they played. The rider returned towards the battle, and the ravens were no more called off than before.'

From 'The Dream of Rhonabwy' in the Mabinogion
(translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones)

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The Brown Ointment



'THERE HE IS,' Mr Webster said.

'Who?'

'Luke Ferris. The chap I was telling you about. The conjuror.'

Alick stood up and had a look. Out in the street, on the opposite pavement, a thin, dark-haired man was looking in the shop windows. Just behind him trotted a white dog.

'Is that him?' Alick sat down again, and picked up the pen. 'I've seen him about before. He looks just like anybody else.'

'Ah, yes. I expect that's just what he wants you to think.' His father's mouth twitched. Alick knew something had amused him. 'Anyway, he's coming over, so you can find out for yourself.'

They watched the man cross the street, weaving between the cars. He came up to the window of Webster's Second-hand Bookshop and paused, looking in at the bright display of Christmas books and posters that Alick had spent the morning arranging. Then the bell on the shop door jangled as he came in.

It was nearly five o'clock on a late December afternoon, and the shop was already quite dark. Down at one end, the

fire had smouldered into embers, and the three shelves of musty, leatherbound books that never sold, gleamed in the warm glow. Mr Webster switched on the lamp near the window. 'Cold enough for snow, Luke,' he observed.

The conjuror nodded, and gave Alick a quick glance. His face was white with cold, and a gold earring glinted in the fire light. He wandered among the shelves, picking a book up now and again. Mr Webster searched the desk for his glasses, and Alick leaned his elbows on the counter and watched their customer.

A conjuror. And in Halcombe Great Wood that meant the real thing — not the man you saw on the television doing tricks with cards and white rabbits. And they said he was good. Well, he certainly looked at you in an odd way; as if he could see what you had for breakfast, if he wanted to. But *he* wouldn't be able to do anything about it either, Alick thought bitterly. No one could. The whole thing was hopeless.

A movement by the door caught his eye, and he saw that the white dog was lying there, watching him. Chin on paws it lay, and there was an odd smirk about its mouth, as if it found something funny.

The ashes of the fire crackled. The lights in the butcher's opposite went out. Finally, Mr Webster straightened up and slid the accounts book back to Alick with a satisfied nod. 'Good. All done.' He looked up.

'Anything you want, Luke?'

'Just these, I think.' The conjuror came and put two books on the counter, and Alick took a sideways look at the titles. *The Medicinal Properties of Herbs and Simples* was the first, and the other was a small paperback called *Poisons*. He swallowed. Perhaps it would be better not to ask after all. But it was too late; as he wrapped the books his father had already begun.

'I'm glad you called in, Luke, I've been wanting a word for a while now. It's about Alick.'

‘Oh?’ Alick felt the man stare at him. ‘What’s he been up to?’

‘Nothing.’ Mr Webster laughed, pressing down a piece of sticky tape. ‘No, it’s his hands. Show him, Alick.’

Feeling foolish, Alick put both hands on the shop counter and stared at them gloomily.

Warts!

They looked horrible, and dirty, and they itched like mad. There were four on one hand and three on the other, including a big hard one like a knob of dried glue on the end of his thumb. He’d had them since he went fishing with Jamie in the Greenmere, but his father didn’t know about that. The Mere was strictly out of bounds — a man had drowned in it last year. The kids at school had been calling him Frog-face ever since. He was just about sick of it.

The conjuror looked down at the warts thoughtfully. ‘How long have you had these?’

‘About three weeks.’

‘And did they just appear?’

‘Sort of,’ Alick stammered.

‘I see. You hadn’t been anywhere wet? Mucky pools? Ponds?’

‘No.’

Luke Ferris nodded. ‘I see,’ he said again. Suddenly he smiled at Alick; Alick felt himself go red. He knew!

‘I’ve tried everything,’ his father put in, pushing the parcel of books across the counter. ‘Calamine, chilblain cream, every wart paint you’ve ever heard of. Then the doctor gave him some nasty, white burning stuff. None of it’s done the slightest good ... That’ll be eight pounds fifty, please, Luke.’

‘I think,’ Luke said evenly, ‘that I may be able to help. It’ll cost you ... eight pounds fifty. Payment on results.’

Mr Webster laughed. ‘Fair enough.’

The conjuror gave Alick another grin, and reaching into his coat pocket, pulled out a few, small, round boxes which

he scattered along the counter. Then he spread out a clean, white handkerchief and told Alick to put his hands on it, palms down. Warily, Alick obeyed. The warts itched like crazy. Mr Webster bolted the shop door, turned the sign to 'Closed' and came and leaned on the counter, filling his pipe and watching the proceedings with interest.

Humming, Luke opened one of the boxes. Immediately a sharp, pungent smell began to fill the shop, making Alick's eyes water. The dog by the door made a small noise in its throat.

'It's all right, Tam,' the conjuror said, without turning his head. Dipping one finger into the sticky, brown ointment, he carefully put a small dab of it on each of the warts, and two dabs on the large one, all the time humming and muttering words that Alick, close as he was, could not catch.

The smell made him feel dizzy, but the ointment did not sting as the doctor's had — it was just cold, like chocolate ice-cream. At last, the treatment seemed to be over; the shop was dim with a faint smoke. Luke wiped his finger clean on the edge of the handkerchief and replaced the box lid. He gathered the others up and dropped them in his pocket. Alick watched the brown blobs of ointment harden into crusts. 'Can I move now?'

'Not yet. Let it dry.'

Impatient, he kept still. Luke and his father began to talk about people they knew, and he had to wait. The smell bothered him, made him think of deep woods and wet, mushy leaves. And he felt daft, with his hands out flat like someone at a seance.

'I hope it works,' he said when the talk had stopped.

Luke did not answer.

'It's horrible having people stare at your hands all the time.'

For some reason this seemed the wrong thing to say. His father glared at him angrily. He couldn't see why. But then