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Jamie and the Tree Troll

a story of Underhill Lane in Clayton

by [Zsolt Kerekes](#) © 2005 - 2019

for my nephew James Huggett

Jamie and the Tree Troll

In my grandmother's day adults used to say that little children should be seen but not heard. And children used to go to bed when they were told. That could be as early as 7 or 8 o' clock.

Nowadays things are quite different. It's hard to get the Little Darlings to go to bed before 9 o' clock (on a school day). And if the following day is a weekend or a holiday, they'll try and talk you into letting them stay up as late as the adults.

Sometimes parents get so tired of providing nonstop food and entertainment they feel as if *they* are the ones who should be going to bed first.

And if you think getting the Little Whatsits to bed is the start of a quiet child-free night - you're sadly mistaken. Because, as everyone knows, what comes next is...

"I'm thirsty. Can I have something to drink?"

"I'm hungry. Can I have something to eat?"

Followed by another visit to the toilet and the rebrushing of teeth.

And next... comes the one which is hardest to resist.

"You said you would read me a story!"

This then, Dear Reader, is the true story of a real-life child of today called Jamie Huggett.

Unlike the fairy tale paragons of old who could be "seen but not heard" Jamie learned the interesting trick of turning invisible (when he didn't want to be seen).

But you could still hear him alright! He could howl like a - hungry baby tyrannosaurus at feeding time - when the occasion demanded.

All modern children can do this trick. You can see them practicing their natural born grizzling skills in any supermarket on a Saturday afternoon.

Howling like a baby dinosaur would not, in itself, make a very interesting story (even if it sounded truly and horribly authentic). But learning how to become invisible, so that no one can see you, even when you are standing right next to them in broad daylight, is rather more unusual. Most children can't do that no matter how hard they try.

This is the story of how Jamie Huggett learned the art of becoming invisible.

He learned this trick from a tree troll.

But Jamie's ear splitting trick of howling like a baby tyrannosaurus is one he invented all by himself...

It was one of those sunny Saturday afternoons which you can get in Sussex any time between April and mid September. Jamie and his father Mark were out in their woods sawing down trees, chopping up logs and collecting firewood.

They lived in a rundown old mansion. It looked just like the haunted house licked by lightning you see perched at the top of the hill in spooky episodes of Scooby Doo. But unlike the cartoon, their house - the Middle House at Clayton Holt - was real and was set midway up the north facing slope of a woody hill on the Sussex Downs. It was always gloomy inside and for half the year it was ice freezing cold.*

Visitors to the house - once they had settled politely inside...

What an amazing house! Such large rooms and high ceilings!
and having already commented on the location...

What a hidden gem - yet such wonderful views!
and the relief they felt at having arrived in one piece...

What a fright I had driving down Underhill Lane - I had to swerve to avoid hitting some idiot driving in the middle of the road coming the other way!

and having only just survived the crumbling track edges and car shaking potholes of the steep twisty driveway leading up to the house without wrecking their cars...

Of course I only have a normal car but I suppose everyone in the country has a 4x4?

would soon be rubbing their arms, wishing they had dressed in more layers and with shivering inevitability steer the conversation around to asking - as if their lives depended on it - the blunt question...

But I'm curious and do tell me if you know - compared to where I live and the weather outside - how come in here - it feels so fridgingly ice freezing cold?

One reason... was it was shaded by the hill behind and never got any direct sunlight. And being in a country lane with the nearest gas pipes miles away the central heating worked on oil which was stored in a dark rusting steel tank which perched on the only flat space in the back garden. The boiler was what you'd call a normal size for a house - which meant it was way too small to heat this mansion properly. So when the heating was switched on it was expensive to run - slurping up all the fuel greedily and running out before doing much more than defrosting the radiators.

Just top it up with more fuel you might say.

Have you seen the size of an oil tanker?

Have you seen the size of a single track country lane?

There's your answer in a nutshell.

The oil tankers were too wide and too long to drive on the local country lanes. So the fuel company used to send out what they called a mini tanker instead.

The mini tanker - not much bigger than an ice cream van - was narrow enough to brush through the hedges which lined Underhill Lane and short enough to twist around the bends under the canopy of fat branches as it crunched its way over fallen dead twigs and bumped across the potholes up the steep tree lined tunnel leading up to the house.

The mini tanker driver was always a welcome sight but he could only deliver a few days' supply of oil at a time.

And after that the boiler would run out again and sometimes it would stop working and need a service engineer to clear out the air lock or ungunk the clogged up filters before it would restart. (This kind of breakdown was especially galling if it happened just after the tank had been filled and 1,000 litres of heating oil was sitting there useless - all ready to be slurped up by a boiler which had run out of suck).

By then it would be Christmas and the family would have to shiver till after the end of the New Year holidays before anyone would come out to fix the problem.

On the plus side, there were a few really hot days in the summer when hardy visitors could safely risk taking off their jackets (inside the house) and would comment on how pleasantly cool it was compared to being outside.

Cooler than air conditioning and even better than standing next to the chilled food cabinets in the supermarket.

How refreshing!

But once it got dark - even on the hottest of summer days Jamie's father Mark would usually light the big open fire in their sitting room.

It gave out more smoke than heat, but it cheered the place up a bit.

One winter, fed up with always feeling so cold, Mark decided that the struggle with burning oil wasn't worth the candle. As the house was surrounded by trees and he was pretty handy with a chain saw, he bought two new log burning stoves.

The smaller of these was made of thick black iron. It had windows in the doors so you could see what was going on inside. Jamie and his sister Laura called it the **Black Knight**. They put it in the dining room.

The so called dining room was grand in size but not in style - which is to say it was easy to tell that children lived here.

Except on special occasions - the table was normally covered.

What with?

Well there may have been a wipeable plastic table cloth somewhere on the table but it was rarely seen as most of the time it lay buried under layers of sticky crumbs, amazing drawings of sharks and dinosaurs, melted wax (from Babybel cheese and dead candles), half empty tumblers of water, plastic toys and coloured pencils with broken points.

And stretched out on top of all this (as if daring you to test his claws by moving him) lay a large purry cat licking himself - called Wolfie.

Wolfie was a main coon - and he used to store the left over bottom halves of rabbits under the children's beds just in case he needed a snack before going out. That was a safe tuckaway for meaty morsels because the dusty gaps under the beds between shoes and socks and t-shirts were decluttered even less often than the layers on the dining room table and no one ever stole Wolfie's bits and bobs because the family were all vegetarians.

The other new log burning stove was for the central heating.

Unlike the titchy old sludgy oil boiler the new shiny wood burning furnace was the right size for the house. It was a big red metal monster which dominated the downstairs hall. As big as a sentry box with shiny fat steel pipes ascending up to the ceiling like the pipes in a cathedral organ.

When you opened the door a fan came on. Flames roared up and blasted you with comforting heat. And even with the door closed - when it was really going - you couldn't stand close for long without melting.

So Jamie and Laura called it the **Red Dragon**.

It was a hungry dragon and in winter the Red Dragon sucked in wheelbarrows of logs the way some people eat mince pies.

On warm sunny days, like the day in this story, the Red Dragon and Black Knight both stood quietly asleep. But if the family didn't plan ahead and prepare logs to start drying now in the summer they would regret it later. Because both stoves smoked sulkily and refused to give out any heat at all if fed on a diet of freshly chopped green timber.

Jamie and Mark were in a part of their woods which was a long way from the house. And the path for the little tractor ended a few hundred yards away. Mark had felled and sliced some likely looking trees with his chainsaw and split the logs with his long axe. They were now engaged in the easier task of collecting logs and kindling.

Years of practice meant Jamie and his father worked as an efficient team.

They had two wheelbarrows. Jamie would gather up the scattered pieces of wood and fill one barrow with logs while his father walked the other barrow down the windy track to where the tractor and trailer were parked. It took about five wheelbarrows to fill up the trailer. When it was full they would drive to one of the many covered log stores Mark had built in the clearings near the house. Jamie would ride on the tractor with his dad. The paths were on steep slopes and sometimes the trailer would tip over spilling out all the logs.

The hard work wasn't over when they reached the log store. They had to unload the trailer and stack the logs carefully so they would dry and burn better and be easy to collect in the dark winter months ahead.

Chopping logs and stacking them was something they did nearly every week, and often they did it after school.

In the first winter of feeding the Red Dragon they ran out of logs. So when the children came back from school Mark said "Come on Jamie, Laura. Get your torches. Let's go and find something to burn."

In the pouring rain it was miserable. They slid about in the mud looking for scraps of slimy wood and kindling which they had missed before.

And when they got the soggy heavy logs back to the house they carefully gathered up all the scraps of paper they could find, including every piece of junk mail, pizza boxes, the inner tubes from old loo rolls and even (when they got really desperate) the least loved drawings off the dining room table. ("Sorry Wolfie" said Laura. "Shift your butt.") All to give the precious fire the best possible start.

After the match was struck (Mark never used more than one) they watched hopefully for the first sign of flames from the wood, huffing and puffing with the bellows and touching the cold radiators testing for the first flow of heat. This time they were lucky. Another time all their efforts were in vain and all they got was dark smoke which meant another cold night and going to bed early. "Get your jim jams on. I'll fetch the hot water bottles." They got more organised about preparing the wood stores after that.

Their house is surrounded by 50 acres of woods. If you climb to the top of the slopes and turn right - a short walk along the South Downs takes you to the famous [Jack](#) and [Jill windmills](#). If, on the other hand, you turn left, you soon reach Ditchling Beacon. Standing here on a clear day you can see the countryside for miles around and even catch glimpses of the sea. It's hard to imagine how anyone could ever get lost. Although some people apparently [do](#)...

It's easy enough to get lost in the woods. When Jamie's school friends come to play they sometimes split up and it can take an hour or more to find them again. The trees grow close and you can't see far along the meandering mossy paths. Also sound has a way of getting lost in the leaves so that - even if you shout at the top of your voice - then someone a few hundred feet away can't hear you.

Jamie knew most parts of the wood quite well. But he hadn't

been in this part they were in now for a few years. None of the tractor wide paths reached it. And whenever they cut a new path towards it - by hacking at the undergrowth - it would grow back and be lost again just a few days later.

When Jamie was younger he remembered having a picnic here with his sister Laura and uncle Zsolt. They had brought up some food and drinks in a plastic carrier bag which they set down by a tree. Jamie and Laura had seen a hand coming out of the hollow at the base of the tree pulling the bag towards the hole.

When they said this to their uncle - the hand quickly disappeared. He hadn't seen it and joked that it must have been tree trolls. So they all watched carefully for a few minutes. They didn't see the hand again - but when they checked the bag - some of the food was missing.

"Maybe we left some of the sandwiches back in the kitchen" said uncle Zsolt. "Or maybe... it really was tree trolls."

Jamie knew his uncle was teasing and didn't believe in tree trolls. But sometimes if they left a bag of food on the path while they went to explore a short side path then - when they returned - the bag would have moved or have bits missing.

"It's probably a fox or a badger" said his uncle.

But on later walks they took their picnic food in backpacks rather than carrier bags and whenever they sat down to rest or eat they hung the packs on branches to keep them safe from anything which might sneak up from a hole in the ground when they weren't looking.

Jamie didn't believe in tree trolls. But sometimes when he was going for a walk in the woods he got the impression that if he turned around suddenly he would see things going in or out from the root bowls of the oldest trees.

Today - the sunny bright day of this story - Jamie and his father Mark were in the woods logging. They brought their picnic in a backpack and just in case of foxes or badgers or tree trolls hung it, as usual, from a branch while they worked together.

"The trailer's full" said Mark, wheeling back an empty barrow. "Why don't we have some lunch now and collect the rest up later."

Out of the rucksack came bread and hummus sandwiches, and lumps of cheddar cheese and tomatoes. And apple juice for Jamie and a bottle of wine for his father. When they finished that they dug in again and out came some apples and bananas and two bottles of water.

"We'll save the crisps and cakes till later" said Mark. He looked at the time on his mobile phone. "I don't know about you but I could do with a bit of a nap. We've got another three or four hours before Laura comes back from visiting (her friend) Indie."

Mark collected some moss and bark and made a snug nest for both of them up against the slope. Just to be on the safe side he set the alarm on his phone.

"I'm not sleepy" said Jamie yawning.

"Well I am. I'll just have a little snooze. You keep watch on the backpack. If any tree trolls try to steal the crisps just yell and I'll wake up and chase them off."

With that he closed his eyes and went straight to sleep.

Jamie was feeling dozy too. Collecting the logs and kindling had been hard work and the air was getting hotter. It was hard to keep his eyes open.

Swish...

What was that?

He thought he had seen something near the bag. He couldn't see anything now. There was a gentle breeze and the tops of the trees were swaying. But down here at ground level the air was heavy with the scent of moss. His eyelids were heavy. They blinked shut.

What was that!

A rustle. Eyes open again. He couldn't see anything, just the

rucksack swaying...

Wait a minute! That was a bit suspicious.

He shut both eyes but kept one open as the merest slit.

The rucksack was moving again. Twisting around. But this wasn't the breeze. The zip was definitely opening. He could see a pack of crisps coming out as if it was gently flying all by itself.

Jamie jumped up and made a grab for the crisps.

"No you don't! - You crisp thief."

He didn't know what he had grabbed but it felt like a bony wrist. It tugged and wriggled but he held it firm with both hands. Then the crisp packet rose in the air as if lifted by another invisible hand.

Still grasping the first invisible wrist with one hand and watching the crisp packet floating above his head, Jamie reached down with his other hand and blindly felt around for something on the leaf mould covered crumbly chalky ground.

Got it! A fat stick.

He whacked hard in the space between the invisible wrist and the floating crisp packet. The stick broke.

"Ow!"

The crisp packet flew in the air and landed on the ground.

Surprised by the sound Jamie dropped his stick, let go of the invisible wrist and went to pick the crisps up. When he turned around again he thought he could see a lump of earth and twigs which hadn't been there before.

He waved the packet around.

"It's here if you want it."

The outline of the pile of earth and twigs seemed to wobble in sympathy with his waving of the packet.

Jamie had seen leaf blowers being used to remotely brush leaves and dirt away. Jamie's waving hand was like a leaf blower pointing the wrong way and hoovering the dirt up in the air but without enough suck to stop it dropping back down again.

I've invented a leaf magnet - thought Jamie - experimenting with how high he could get to the leaves to leap in the air before snatching the crisps away again. I'll be famous.

[Sizzling Sauropods!](#) - said Jamie to himself in amazement.

For he did now indeed have a much better theory than the leaf magnet. Though for a brief instant in time he was a bit sad too about not being an inventor.

"I can see you" said Jamie. "You might as well make yourself visible. Then you can have the crisps and the cakes too."

"What did you hit me for?"

The earth and moss and twigs blew up and morphed into the shape of a man shaped creature a little smaller than Jamie himself. He was rubbing his head.

"That hurt!"

He stopped rubbing his head and quickly snatched the crisps back when he was sure that Jamie's outstretched offer to return them was for real. With a swift practised motion the moss man slashed off the top of the packet with a sharp claw which slid out of the end of his finger and then retracted like a cat's. He then poured the entire contents down his throat without pausing.

"That's better."

He blew into the bag, scrunched up the end and smacked his hands together. Pop! At this sound the whole of his body from the neck down disappeared.

"If you turn back to being invisible I'll whack you again and I won't give you any more food" said Jamie giving it a fair warning.

The floating head leaned down and seemed to be surprised it had no body. It twisted all the way around just to be sure that its body wasn't behind it and then noticed Jamie getting his stick ready

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking. As you've already seen me I might as well relax."

The floating head took a deep breath and held it. A few seconds later it was perched on top of its body again. But something was wrong. It looked down and realised it was seeing its back. Then with a crack it rotated its head so that its face was pointing the same way as its toes.

"I'm not quite sure why that happens" said the twig man.

Jamie was a bit surprised too and studied the creature to see if it had any more surprises. It was an interesting mixture of earth and twigs and moss and would be quite hard to see in the woods even when it wasn't being invisible. Jamie had seen nature films about chameleons but this was something different and much, much better.

"I'm sorry I hit you" said Jamie. "I thought you were some kind of ghost stealing our food."

"Ghosts don't get bumps on their heads" said the creature. "Lucky I had my hat on, otherwise you could have knocked me out."

Hat? What hat? - thought Jamie.

As if in answer the creature placed both its hands on the top its head. After a bit of tugging the twiggy top part of its head came off. Underneath the head was smooth and shiny like grey clay. If it had been human Jamie would have called it bald. The creature studied the mess of twigs which now, in its detached state, Jamie thought looked like an old bird's nest. It rearranged some twigs in the nest carefully and then replaced the hat / nest thing back on its head checking the effect with a small silver mirror it whipped out of a pocket. Jamie stared carefully to see where the head started and the hat began but he couldn't see the join.

"How is it I can see you now, and when I bashed you, but not before?"

"When I get hungry or lose concentration then my invisibility fades."

"I think I might have seen you before" said Jamie. "Or your claws - I mean hands. Did you pinch some food from our carrier bag when we had a picnic near here a few years ago?"

"Em, yes. It was me. Cheese and cakes make a pleasant change from worms and slugs. I was quite hungry when you happened to leave all that lovely food just asking to be eaten - and right outside the door to my house. The temptation was too great to resist. But I don't make a habit of pinching food so close to home. It might attract the wrong sort of attention."

"Home? You mean you live in our woods?" said Jamie.

"Our woods! That's a good one. My woods! - you mean" said the creature. "This is my home. I've been living here for quite a long time. Since long before you were born, and long before your parents came here. Since long before the house you live in was built actually. If I remember rightly I've been living here since long before the time there were any buildings round here, and before they built [that church](#) down the road."

Jamie had never been to the church. But he remembered someone saying it was Saxon. That meant it was more than a hundred years old and even older than his grandparents - who were the oldest people he knew.

"You must be very old!" he said.

"Well" replied the creature, whipping out his silver mirror and checking his hat. "Some of my friends say I look young for my age."

"You look short for someone who's really old" said Jamie doubtfully.

"You look like a short squirt yourself!" humphed the creature.

"I'm only seven!" squeaked Jamie. "I'm going to grow more!" He was just about to put his thumb in his mouth, but quickly

remembered that he was supposed to be giving that up. So he brushed his hair in embarrassment instead.

"Tree trolls are different to humans" conceded the creature. "If I was much bigger I wouldn't fit inside my house."

"Is that what you are?" said Jamie, relaxing and sucking his thumb thoughtfully. "I thought tree trolls were just a story."

"I used to think that human beings were just a story" said the tree troll. "But when I got older I found out they were for real, not just a tale to scare a young sprout."

Jamie stayed quiet. It was stories about vampires and werewolves that he found scary. He switched to sucking his other thumb and listened to the tree troll's story.

"Those old Saxons were scary at first. Chopping down trees with their double headed axes without asking if anyone was living underneath..."

"Anyway my people made a deal with them and they left our part of the woods alone. I was a curious sprout and got to play with some of the young Saxons who became friends of mine. Then they grew up and left the woods and strangers came - speaking a language we didn't understand.

"The newcomers didn't know the agreement about leaving our woods alone and we couldn't get them to understand. With their bright new axes they built new halls for their new kings. And they chopped down and burned many trees. So my people decided to pack up and leave and seek a new home in a forest they had heard about in the West. I went with them. But it wasn't long before I felt homesick. And I felt guilty in case my Saxon friends came back and found me gone. So I came back on my own. There's a magic in the air here which the new woods in the West didn't have. And there are treasures... of which it's not safe to speak above ground."

The tree troll whispered the last bit and then stopped talking and I looked around suspiciously to see if anyone else was hiding behind a tree and listening. Jamie looked too. His father was the only other person nearby and he was still fast asleep at the other end of the clearing.

The tree troll seemed satisfied and carried on talking normally. "Anyway, the strangers decided they preferred living in towns and cities and it's been quiet here for a VERY long time. Until you and your family arrived and started having picnics round my house and chopping down trees all over the place."

"I'm sorry about that" said Jamie, popping the thumb out of his mouth. "The disturbing you bit - I mean. But not the chopping down trees and the picnics... Our house gets very cold without logs, and we get very hungry when we go on long walks. And we need to pack picnics because we're vegetarians and don't eat rabbits or birds or deer or other creatures that we find in the woods."

He gave the tree troll a meaningful kind of look - as if to say - vegetarians are better neighbours than carnivores - because veggies don't eat tree trolls. He put his thumb back in his mouth. And the tree troll took the hint.

"No harm done. A bit of tree clearing is good for the woods. Encourages new growth."

"My dad says something like that" said Jamie. "He calls it coppicing." And remembering his dad, he took his thumb out of his mouth and turned round to see if all the talking had woken him up.

"I spelled him" said the troll.

"You spelled him?" said Jamie . "But anyone can spell Mark. M, A, R, K - that's easy."

"No - I spelled him into a deeper sleep so our talking won't wake him up."

"Is he safe?" asked Jamie - who thought he saw a spider creeping nearby.

"Safer than houses" said the tree troll. "The only scary creatures in this wood are the children."

"Laura's gone to play with (her friend) India" said Jamie referring to his scary [sister](#).

"I'd be nervous about being visible to more than one child at time. Harder to explain away."

"What do you mean?" asked Jamie.

"What do you think will happen if you tell someone you've seen an invisible tree troll?"

It didn't take Jamie long to work that one out.

"But if two or more children start saying the same things - that's a different matter... People might start wondering."

"I'm wondering" said Jamie "what's your name?"

"Clayton" said the tree troll.

"Clayton? That's like the [name of our village](#)" said Jamie.

"To be more accurate - the name of your village is because of me. I came first."

"My name's Jamie" said Jamie.

"I know" said Clayton. "I've heard them calling you when you used to wander off by yourself."

The troll held out his hand. Jamie shook it. It felt a bit scratchy. Some black ants crawled onto Jamie's hand and he shook them off.

"You're not scared of ants are you?" said Clayton.

"Only red ants" said Jamie.

"Hm, I seem to remember last summer when you and your sister sat on a red ants nest..."

Jamie remembered too. He blushed but didn't say anything.

"You both howled like demons! It gave me a fright till I realised what was going on."

"They stunged me!" said Jamie.

Usually he and his sister were quite happy to play with slugs and butterflies and other creepy crawlies. But being stung by red ants crawling in their clothes made them jump up and down and scream in panic. He put his thumb back in his mouth. Then spat. It tasted disgusting. That was the hand he used to shake hands with the tree troll. He wiped it on his t-shirt and tasted his thumb again. Not so bad.

Clayton didn't seem to notice or comment on Jamie's thumb sucking. The tree troll had been thinking back to the red ant incident, and some other tantrums he had overheard before.

"Can you still howl and grizzle like you did then?"

"Of course" said Jamie. "Shall I give you a demonstration?"

"No, not now. Not here. It might wake your dad up (despite my spell). But it's given me an idea. Can you come back to my house for an hour or so and do a bit of howling for me there?"

"I suppose so" said Jamie. "But what about my dad?"

They both looked over to where Mark lay muttering and dribbling in his sleep.

"If he wakes up and finds me gone he'll worry."

"He'll sleep safe till we get back" said Clayton.

"I suppose that's alright then" said Jamie. "He needs a rest. Why didn't you spell me too?"

"I thought you'd both be snoozing soon without any help from me. I only spelled him when you surprised me so he wouldn't join in the fight. If he'd woken up I couldn't have managed the two of you together. My batteries are low."

This new information was a shock to Jamie who thought the troll was too realistic to be related to Buzz Lightyear. He peered around the back of the troll.

"What are you looking for?" asked the troll twirling away and wondering if his bum looked a bit big.

"The battery compartment" said Jamie. "We've got a charger

at home. It does all sizes."

"I meant" explained Clayton "that I was feeling run down. Till I ate the crisps. Anyway - what do you think about my proposition?"

"I don't know. What do I get if I come with you and do some howling?"

"If what I have in mind works - I'll be very grateful - and I'll show you some magic."

"What kind of magic?" asked Jamie suspiciously thinking back to the disappearing fork trick which Laura and his auntie Janet had perfected recently. It fooled him and his uncle. But then they showed him how it worked - with a piece of black cotton thread pulling the fork along the table.

"It's real magic" said Clayton, as if reading his thoughts. "No strings involved. I'll make you invisible."

"Really?" said Jamie.

"Really!" said Clayton.

"It's a deal then" said Jamie.

"Let's shake on it" said Clayton.

At that they both spat on their hands and shook again.

Clayton's twiggy hands still felt scratchy as before - but there was something else. Slime... After shaking Jamie found a small slug on his palm. He flicked it off and followed Clayton - who went back to the picnic bag and picked out some more crisps - before heading down the path.

After a few minutes of brisk walking, and taking right turns at the forks to head down the hill they stopped at a point where there was a big black hole in the path itself, on the left hand side. Jamie knew that hole well. When he was younger he and his sister and uncle and talked about what might be living there.

"Badgers" said Jamie.

"Foxes" said Laura.

"Tree trolls" said his uncle trying to scare them.

"There aren't no such thing as tree trolls" said Jamie.

"I wonder if anything lives there now?" said his uncle. He got a long stick and started poking it down the hole. But it snapped.

The children joined in and fetched long branches and even small trees to stick down the hole. But they didn't seem to hit the end. So their uncle got out his torch (which he always carried in his pocket in case they were lost in the woods after nightfall, and also because the [stairs](#) and the hallway in the children's house were very dark and it was difficult to find the light switches, which seemed to be located and wired at random). He shone the torch down the hole and stuck his head in.

"It goes deep" he said. "And whatever lives there is big."

"Nothing's coming out" said Jamie.

"Maybe we scared it into hiding" said Laura.

"Maybe it's already out and creeping up behind us" said their uncle.

"Arh!" screamed the children in mock fright and they huddled together and nearly fell down the hole. But luckily their uncle hung onto one of the many branches which was still poking out of the hole and that stopped them all tipping over. When they recovered their balance they were even more curious.

"I've got an idea for how to tell if something's living there. If we wedge a big stick across the hole you can see next time you come here if it's moved. If the stick is still there you know it's an old hole and nothing lives there anymore."

The children agreed it was a good idea. Next time they came that way the stick was still in place. And a few weeks later and a few months later. And now it was a few years later. The stick was always there when the children walked past. Jamie

was pondering this when he saw Clayton stoop down and carefully remove it.

"This is where I live" said the tree troll. "My front entrance anyway."

"You were there!" said Jamie accusingly "all those years ago when we were talking about the hole. You were there listening!"

"I've got good ears" said Clayton. And as he said that two floppy mushrooms popped out of stalks at each side of his head. They waggled and then slurped back in.

"Are you coming?" asked Clayton as he sat at the edge of the hole with his feet dangling in.

Jamie was feeling a bit scared but he didn't want to miss an adventure. And he thought it would be cool to learn how to be invisible.

"Are there any spiders?" he asked. Spiders and red ants were the only things he was scared of. Well... and vampires and werewolves. But vampires and werewolves weren't real. He was only scared of them if someone talked about them when he was going to bed.

"No spiders" said Clayton looking a bit sad and licking his lips. "Not anymore." The thought of Gollum flashed through Jamie's mind and what you can find to eat when you live underground. But that was a film. And these were his own familiar woods. Nothing to be scared of here.

"OK" said Jamie. "You go first. I'll follow."

With that Clayton slid down the hole and disappeared. Jamie was still wondering what to do when he heard Clayton's muffled voice coming out of the darkness.

"Remember to pull the stick back across the opening as you drop in."

Jamie sat at the edge of the hole with his feet dangling in wondering if this was such a good idea.

If I get stuck down there no one will ever find me. Dad and Laura and my grandparents will be very sad.

How do I know that Clayton can be trusted? But if I don't go - I'll never have an adventure.

"Are you coming?" said the tree troll. His voice sounded fainter as if he were already a long way off.

Jamie had an idea and scratched the letter "J" on the stick with a piece of chalk.

If I do get lost and they look really hard - they might see that.

And with that uncomfortable thought he slid feet first on his bottom down into the mysterious dark hole leading to the lair of the old tree troll taking care to "shut the door" behind him by pulling the chalkmarked stick back across the entrance hole above him.

in Clayton's lair

Jamie had never been in the lair of a tree troll before and he didn't know what to expect. He *had* been to a zoo in Hungary last winter where they had hippos and rhinos - and some of the creatures lived in concrete caves which were warm and stinky. The entrance to Clayton's cave felt cool. It was refreshing after the heat above ground. And it smelled nice - like freshly dug potatoes. Jamie shut his eyes - to adapt them more quickly to the gloom - and he saw Clayton's feet and bottom disappearing into a low tunnel.

"We have to crawl here for a bit" came a muffled voice.

Jamie was nervous about following. The tunnel was a tight fit for the tree troll - and Jamie was a bit bigger. What if he got stuck? He thought back to all the adventure stories which had been read to him - and what came to mind was Bilbo Baggins approaching the hoard of the dragon Smaug.

"I promise not to fart in your face" came the now slightly echoey voice of the tree troll. "Whoops. Oh well, that should clear soon."

Jamie laughed. This was the best chance in his life to have an

adventure. If he gave up now he might regret it forever.

"I'm coming" he called. He got down on his hands and knees. The earth floor wasn't as rough as he had expected. It was packed hard and smooth. As he crawled along it was getting darker and darker. The roof of the tunnel was pressing down just above his bottom. It was also getting very quiet. The only thing Jamie could hear was his own breathing. The space was getting tighter and it was too narrow for him to turn around and go back.

Urgh disgusting!

He felt something stroke his hair and then his nose. He couldn't see anything. It was pitch black. But he went on. A flicker of something on his eyelashes. He closed his eyes and went on. Something on his lips. In his mouth. He spat, and stopped. Leaning face down and taking deep breaths through his nose he probed the low tunnel roof with his left hand. It felt like a wave of velvety thin stringy things which he realised must be roots which had sprouted through the roof of the tunnel and were dangling in his path.

It seemed like a long time since he had last heard the shuffling of the tree troll.

"OK Jamie nothing to be afraid of" - he said to himself. "Just plants. Nothing for it but to keep going."

Then keeping his mouth tightly shut he crawled on past the tickly tendrils. After a few minutes he could tell that the tunnel roof was a little higher. Either that or the roots had stopped.

A revolting stink like maggoty meat and rotting cabbage hit his nose. He could almost taste it in the air. It made him feel sick. He suddenly felt hot and bothered.

"Sorry about that" came the cheery voice of the tree troll from not too far ahead. "I like crisps but they don't like me. It will clear in minute."

Jamie held his breath and struggled on. The tunnel was getting less dark and a bit wider. And the air was cooler again. He couldn't hold his breath any longer. Just as his lungs were

about to burst he breathed in clean fresh air. Well, in comparison to the tree troll's fart, the air smelled clean. There was a strong woody smell of trees. But it was pleasant. Not nasty at all.

As Jamie's head emerged from the tunnel into a big cave - lit by - he didn't know what - he could see the walls were lined not with earth or roots but with tree bark. That reminded him of the story told by his uncle about a weekend break in [Robin Hood's hut](#) in Somerset.

The holiday hut set at the edge of woodland and miles from any roads, had bark walls and a fantastic view. But when the lights went out the click, click clicking of fat black beetles falling to the stone floor during the night and creeping up into the bed had made sleep impossible. Jamie had drawn a picture of the hut after hearing about it. But he wasn't scared of beetles, and he didn't hear or see any now. Thinking about it Jamie guessed that Clayton probably ate them.

"Here - take my hand."

Jamie's knees felt stiff and weak from crawling - and he wobbled a bit as the troll helped him up.

"Well - what do you think?" said Clayton.

Jamie was standing upright but the ceiling was a long way above his head. The troll's cavern was huge. But even though it was a lot lighter than the impenetrable black of the tunnel his eyes had played trick on him and it was too gloomy to see more than a handful of yards away.

"I can't see much. It's too dark" said Jamie.

"Your eyes aren't used to it" said Clayton. "I forgot about that. Here, let me put the light on."

He walked along the edge of the wall, climbed some steps and untied something. Then a round shield sized wooden hatch fell open and with it came a blinding light which made Jamie's eyes water. When he opened them he realised that a searchlight beam was pouring in through a hole in the ceiling. Curious he walked over and instead of what he expected to see - a hole in the ground - he saw - when his eyes adjusted - a

long tall tunnel going straight up in the air.

"It's a hollow tree" said Clayton. "The light comes in through the top. It means I don't have to worry about some curious person sticking their nose in and seeing me when I'm reading a book."

"It's very ingenious" said Jamie who was genuinely impressed by the bright light in this dark space.

"And I can adjust it with this dimmer control" said Clayton proudly showing Jamie how the light shield could be tied up at varying angles to adjust the light level.

"I preferred it being lighter" said Jamie.

"I'll leave it fully on then" said Clayton. "Anyway - you haven't told me what you think."

As Jamie looked around he realised he couldn't see much of the cavern anymore because he was standing in the middle of the beam. He stepped aside and waited for his eyes to adjust back to the paler light beyond.

That's when he saw the dragon's head.

Standing taller than a grown man - with bright green eyes and flashing red breath. Jamie was standing rather close to the mouth end.

Behind its thick scaly neck he could just about make out the rest of the dragon's body - which was at least 50 feet long - stretching back into the shadows.

Unlike the intrepid heroes in old stories Jamie didn't have a sword.

And he didn't have anything to offer the dragon to keep it calm.

He felt in his pocket. No gold ring or treasure - just a small pebble with a plant shape on it which he had picked up on the beach last year. Jamie thought it was a fossil which is why he kept it. But the shape wasn't very clear. Laura had said it might just be a scratch from other pebbles rubbing when the

tides changed. Jamie liked his fossil pebble but didn't think it would be enough to impress and bribe a dragon.

He wondered what dragons ate.

He should have saved some food from the picnic. But the tree troll had eaten everything that was left. He felt a desperate urge to suck his thumb - but that didn't seem very heroic - or helpful in this predicament.

I wish I never saw those crisps being lifted from the backpack - thought Jamie. We wouldn't have missed them. There are plenty more in Budgens. If I didn't see the tree troll stealing our food I wouldn't be here.

Jamie stood very still hoping the dragon wouldn't see him.

He knew it was a vain hope. He and Clayton had been standing in the best lit part of the cave and they had been talking much too loudly.

How could the dragon fail to notice them?

It was staring right at them - but sitting calmly still.

Jamie's cat Wolfie used to do that when it was watching birds.

Jamie half expected to see the dragon's tail swish from side to side. But it was too dark in that part of the cave to see. He was trying to think of some riddles but couldn't think of any.

If I get home I never want to see another dragon in a film again.

Jamie slowly started to back away. But the tree troll held his hand firmly and tugged him towards the dragon's open mouth.

Dad and Laura will never find me now - thought Jamie sadly. All they'll find is my "J" carved on that stick and a pair of smoky trainers. (He mistakenly thought that trainers were difficult to burn because he had often stepped into the edge of big bonfires in the woods with no harmful effects.) I wonder if the ash from my body will all fit in the trainers or if some will spill over the edge? I'll never know - mused the little explorer whose first adventure now seemed to be coming to an

untimely end.

The dragon watched them approach but didn't make a sound. Then Clayton, still holding tight onto Jamie with one hand stroked the dragon's chin with his other.

"How do you like it?" said Clayton with a mischievous glint in his eye.

A horrible thought went through Jamie's mind. So that's why he brought me here - to feed his pet! Cruel wicked tree troll!

Jamie stared at the dragon.

The dragon stared back at Jamie unblinking.

Jamie decided that if this was going to be his last moment being alive he might as well... He faced the dragon defiantly thumb in mouth ready to be turned to a crisp.

Then he realised something.

The dragon was made of wood and it was the front part of a ship.

Slowly and carefully Jamie stepped forwards and stroked his wet sucky hand under the dragon's chin and along its neck. It was crinkly and cool to the touch like crocodile skin but it was definitely painted wood. It was too tall for Jamie to reach into its mouth and feel its teeth. But even this close it sure looked realistic.

"Well, what do you think?" said Clayton.

Jamie looked at the tree troll who was a bit shorter than Jamie himself. He looked back towards the tunnel he had squeezed through to get here. He looked up at the dragon's enormous head and along its body and non swishy tail.

"I've got a question" he said regarding Clayton in a new light. "How did you get it in here?"

"Do you mean - how did the cruel wicked tree troll - small as he is - drag that full size dragon ship through the tunnel?"

He can read minds! - thought Jamie desperately trying to make his mind go blank.

"I can't read your mind" said Clayton unconvincingly "but the answer to your question is... it wasn't me. It was buried here by my old friend Aelred Sharspear."

"Shakespeare!" said Jamie. "I've heard of him. He was in that [film](#) where they burned someone's boots - because he owed them money."

"No, not [Shakespeare](#). *He* wasn't born till over a thousand years later. I'm talking about the most famous Saxon who ever lived in these parts. Surely you have heard of him?"

Jamie thought back to his history lessons. He had a book about the [Horrible Romans](#) - but the only Saxon he could remember was [King Arthur](#) - who had a round table at which they always ate [burnt cakes](#).

"We haven't done him yet" said Jamie. "I'm only seven. By the way - how did he get his name?"

"The Saxons had a great sense of humour - always laughing and joking - when they weren't fighting. That's how he got the name Sharspear - from a fight he had down on Brighton beach.

In those days, and I'm talking about more than fifteen hundred years ago, [there wasn't a pier on Brighton beach](#). And there wasn't any Brighton. It was woods all the way from here down to the sea. Aelred and his mates went down to the sea to do a bit of fishing. They were poking around in the rock pools to see who could find the biggest crabs and that's why they didn't see the Vikings sneaking up on them until it was too late to run away. The five young Saxons were surrounded by dozens of nasty looking tall Vikings. One of whom said they would chop the little Saxons into tiny pieces to feed to the crabs. Aelred didn't have to understand much Danish to understand that bit.

He laughed along with the Vikings and bending over on all fours walked sideways along the rocks like a crab. They thought that was very funny. He picked up a big crab he had found earlier and flung it in the face of the closest Viking and

that's when the fighting began.

Having a crab clawing your face is not very nice, but it's fascinating to watch, and that distraction gained the Saxons a few vital seconds to grab their spears. Then all [helle](#) broke loose.

As the pack of angry Vikings moved in for the kill they focused on Aelred.

The rocks were slimy so they had to watch their steps. But Aelred stood firm. There were so many Vikings pressing towards him he didn't have time to turn his spear around.

He stabbed the first one in the shoulder. It got stuck. The Viking went down screaming with the pain.

Standing with one foot on his neck Aelred yanked hard and as it came out with a crack the blunt end of the spear went deep into the chest of another Viking behind him who was about to smite.

The Vikings got mad when they saw that. And one Viking with a black shield got very annoyed at seeing a succession of his friends falling this way.

"You're supposed to use the sharp end!" he shouted. "It's not sporting using the haft."

"Oh sorry" said Aelred. "I'm just a youngling amateur fighter-not a big experienced warrior like you strong Vikings."

The Viking turned to his friends for acknowledgement that he had scored a good point against the upstart Saxon who used this moment to whack the Viking's helmet off with the blunt end of his spear. With a swish Aelred spun his spear round and poked the sharp end through the Viking's mouth.

The Viking didn't say anything to that. He fell stone dead still holding his black shield.

As the fight went on Aelred poked backwards, forwards, and sideways causing pain, anger and mayhem among the attackers who had the added problem of climbing over the slippery bodies of their comrades.

Aelred's friends too did much damage to the attackers and soon it was all over as the more timid Vikings fled.

The rock pools were red with blood and the crabs were starting to peck on Danish bacon - but the Saxons would not go home empty handed. As they collected up the best of the weapons and arm rings they talked about the fight.

"This one had a good point" said one of Aelred's companions unclasping the black shield from the dead Viking who had mocked Aelred at the start of the fight. "You're supposed to use the sharp end of the spear."

"Now let me explain to you Aelred" said another Saxon demonstrating with his spear. "This is the sharp end - which you use for poking into boars and Vikings. And this is the blunt end - which looks completely different."

"Maybe Aelred had sand in his eyes and couldn't see" said another friend.

"Both ends of the spear kill Vikings" said Aelred trying to stop his friends' teasing. But the legend of the fight by the rock pool stuck - and ever after that he was called Aelred Sharpspear.

"Like David and Goliath" said Jamie breaking into the tree troll's story.

"I don't know them" said Clayton. "But going back to the tale about this dragon ship... One year there were rumours of a great battle brewing in the east. Sharpspear was the leader of a big war band by then - because he was good at fighting. He wanted to go and join with the other Saxons but wanted to travel light for speed. So one day he and his friends dug out this hole in the back of the cave and dragged in this old ship which they filled with all their treasure. Then they hid the mouth of the cave with branches which they packed over with moss and earth.

"I'm going now Clayton" he told me. "And I'd like you to look after everything till we get back. If you can use your magic to hide our valuables from any Vikings who might wander this way while we're gone I'd be very grateful."

"That was a long time ago" said Clayton. "I heard stories about many battles between Sharpspear and the Vikings and I kept the cave clean and hidden. And then I stopped hearing new stories about them. Every time I saw Saxons wandering nearby I'd listen for news about Sharpspear's band. But they were old stories which I'd heard before. And then the stories stopped. And then the Saxons stopped. And those who came by spoke another language. It's been a long time, maybe he's having other adventures. But I still keep his treasures safe for the day that he comes back to these woods."

Jamie didn't say anything. But he thought to himself that Saxons probably didn't live as long as tree trolls and that the faithful tree troll's Saxon friend was probably dead.

"Come and have a look." Clayton sprang up into the dragon ship and reached down a twiggy hand which Jamie grabbed to haul himself up. He felt something tickly and saw a big black beetle crawling down his wrist and up his arm. When he was standing on the deck he flicked it off. There was a click as it landed on a black wooden chest just behind the base of the dragon's neck. The beetle wriggled around to get upright and began scurrying away. But it didn't get far. Quick as a flash Clayton scooped up the stunned beetle, delicately popped it in his mouth and crunched it.

"Shame to waste it" he said. "I wondered where it had got too. Here Jamie come and have a look at this."

He swept some bat droppings off the top of the chest and opened the lid to reveal... Gold.

Gold in glowing golden heaps. Jamie's eyes welled up with tears from the bright light coming out of the black box. At first he couldn't focus. So he blinked and rubbed his eyes. Then he could see the different shapes clearly - plates, arm bands, rings, goblets and chains all in the same warm looking bright metal. Heaps and heaps of Saxon gold.

"Well what do you think?" said Clayton.

"It explains something" said Jamie. "It explains why I never found any Saxon gold with my metal detector."

Jamie's uncle had bought him a metal detector for his seventh birthday. And looking down the hill from Jamie's house he could often see treasure hunters in the fields below like ants looking for crumbs and sugar. The weekend ants with their metal detectors and spades were lured by the time misty legends of a lost Saxon hoard somewhere in the parish of Clayton. Now Jamie knew that the legends were true.

"All I ever found in the woods was a broken lawn mower which my dad had buried the week before and a small Roman shield which turned out to be the rusty hubcap of his old Citroen 2CV. Oh yes - and an old razor blade and then an old ring pull from a can of beer. It's a good detector and can find things upto a foot deep - but it can't detect this deep down."

"That's good" said Clayton. "It means Sharpspear's gold is safe. From time to time I bury a few rusty nails as decoys to put treasure hunters off the scent."

He carefully picked up a gold buckle.

"Would you like to feel it?" he said.

Jamie was interested in touching the buckle. It almost asked to be stroked like a cat. But he noticed that his fingers were black from crawling through the tunnel. He wiped his hand on his t-shirt and held it up to the light. But it still looked mucky.

"I'd better not" he said. "It would be a shame to get it dirty."

"Right" said Clayton. He blew on the buckle and polished it on his mossy beard before carefully replacing it exactly where it had come from.

"I sometimes come and look at the shiny pieces - in the depths of winter - when I'm thinking about the old days - and the laughing Saxons. But back to the here and now."

He gently shut the lid, and the darkness of the cave seemed to close in around them.

"I need to mix you up some magic potion to make you invisible. The ingredients are secret, so I'll have to leave you on your own for a bit. But feel free to wander around and explore while I've gone. If the dark starts getting to you and

makes you feel gloomy just open the lid and look in the chest. It might cheer you up. I'm used to the dark but I know that humans are different."

Jamie didn't feel worried. Somehow knowing that the bright gold had lain safely hidden in the old Saxon ship for hundreds of years made him feel quite safe here now.

"I'll just do a bit of exploring" he said.

"That's fine. And if you get lost or feel scared just shout - Clayton! at the top of your voice - and I'll come running."

"If you feel scared..." Jamie was to remember that exact phrase later. For now he was just curious. He jumped off the ship and looked up to ask Clayton one more thing. But he wasn't there. Never mind. It wasn't important.

Jamie decided to explore the cavern until Clayton came back. But apart from the dragon ship there wasn't much to see. The only way he was going to see something different was if he went down one of the many tunnels leading off.

"No way!" said Jamie to himself.

He started pacing round the edge of the cavern. After three circuits he started to get bored and walked the other way round.

How long is he going to be? Jamie asked himself. He wasn't wearing a watch. He had lots of watches back home. They sometimes stopped working when he reached into ponds to pick out newts. And he had lost some watches which mysteriously slid off his wrist when sliding down the slopes in the woods. How long does it take to make magic potion? This was starting to be irritating.

Where is that tree troll?

I'll call him now.

Then Jamie remembered that Clayton had said he should call him only if he was lost or scared.

Well he wasn't lost. He could always go back up the tunnel

they came in and return to the normal world outside at any time. But that wouldn't be much of an adventure would it? Which tunnel was it? Yes - that one.

And he wasn't scared. That was the other reason Clayton said to call. Thinking about it - it was probably only a few minutes. Jamie started estimating how long it had been.

That's a good point.

He was still sucking the same thumb as when Clayton vanished. So it couldn't have been that long.

He stuck the other thumb in his mouth and decided to pace around the cavern and count how many tunnels there were leading off it. Seven. Not counting the opening where the light came in. A few more circuits. Jamie was getting really bored and swapped back to sucking his other thumb.

Was it five minutes? Or ten minutes? Or half an hour?

Then he remembered there was no compelling reason he had to stay here. Clayton did say he could go for a wander. And if he got lost he could shout.

Fair enough. He stuck his head down the next tunnel. And pulled back.

Way too dark and spooky!

Let's try the next one.

That's better.

A bit dark at the entrance but there's a pale white light at the end.

Here goes.

Getting down on all fours Jamie started to crawl down the tunnel. He felt like an expert.

There was plenty of head room and none of those irritating tendrils brushing his face - so - nothing to worry about. The tunnel curved round a bit to the right. And as he went on it

started to get lighter.

This is more promising - he thought. I wonder what I'm going to find here?

As he got nearer the light he speeded up. When he got to the exit and stood up he was amazed to see - another dragon ship!

It looks just like the other one - he thought.

He ran towards it in excitement.

Clayton didn't say anything about two ships. But then he didn't say there was just one either.

As he walked round he realised that it did look remarkably similar. Was that bit different? He wasn't sure. He couldn't remember all the details. Hm. As he walked round the ship he started to have some doubts. He stuck his left thumb in his mouth.

Maybe they dug two caves to hide two ships. Big Saxon villages probably had lots of people and lots of ships. Thinking about it - there must have been a lot of Saxons to build that church down the lane. Hm.

He went back to the tunnel he'd just come out of and peered back in. Pale white glow. Same as before.

He was suspicious. But how to be sure?

He took off a shoe and left it by the tunnel entrance. Then crawled at high speed back down the way he had come.

As expected - when he came out - there was the original cave and the original dragon ship. But was it the same as the one he had just left behind?

It was uncomfortable standing lopsided on one shoe. So he took it off - but held onto it.

He had an idea.

On his way back up the tunnel he had veered to the left. That was anti-clockwise.

So clockwise would be the quickest way to check. But which way was that?

He sometimes got his left and right and clockwise and anti-clockwise mixed up.

He was starting to confuse himself.

He got down on all fours with the shoe on one hand and backed his bottom into the tunnel he'd just come out of. His body remembered which way he had come. He stood up. Confidently turned left and strode to the next tunnel. Where he found... No shoe!

This is amazing. It really is a different cave and different ship - which just looks the same.

But what if he had got his left and right mixed up after all? It's easy to do in the dark when you're only seven.

He remembered. There were seven tunnels leading off from the first cave. So if he walked past seven tunnels and found no shoe - that would prove it.

Just to be on the safe side he decided to make it eight.

Hang on a minute. What's that? Jamie's heart sank as he walked on and saw another shoe lying by the entrance to the next tunnel.

He sniffed it. It might be his.

He tried it on. Mysteriouser and mysteriouser. It didn't fit.

He looked around half expecting to see someone else hobbling on one shoe.

Then he had an idea. It fitted perfectly on the other foot.

So he hadn't discovered another ship after all. But there was still a puzzle to be solved.

He put the other shoe on and sucking his thumb walked back along the cave wall wondering how two tunnel openings at

floor level which joined up together in a loop behind the cave wall could have a third opening in between them which didn't connect up to any of them.

He went back to the mysterious in between opening - which was at about his waist height from the floor. He leaned on the shelf of the tunnel floor and poked his head in. With his body blocking the light from behind him he thought he could see still see a dim red glow somewhere reflected in the shadowy darkness of the hole. Unlike some people he knew (including an uncle who was colour blind) Jamie really could reliably tell the difference between red and white.

"Well that's something different!"

He climbed up and perched on the flat ledge of the middle tunnel opening.

"Aha!" -When he pulled himself right in and with only his toes still sticking out in the big cavern behind - he could feel that the way ahead was level at the beginning but then sloped sharply downwards.

Maybe this goes under the other passage way - he thought. That's why it didn't join up.

At this stage you or I might have paused and wondered if it really was a good idea to go exploring another mysterious tunnel on our own. But on this action packed sunny afternoon Jamie had already collected lots of logs, captured an invisible tree troll, gone down into some old tunnels at the back of his garden, been scared by the wooden statue of a dragon at the front of a buried treasure ship and he was growing in confidence. And he had already walked around the big cavern so many times waiting for Clayton to come back that he had lost track of how many changes of sucky thumb had gone by. He knew every inch of it now by heart. Its original air of mystery had gone. This hanging around forever was boring. Maybe this way wouldn't be any more interesting than the others. But there was something different about it. Harder to climb into and get started. But how scary could it be?

Clayton's been living safely here for hundreds of years. And he's smaller than me. If I get worried or lost I'll just shout for help.

Decision made.

The tunnel roof wasn't high enough here for Jamie to crawl farther on his hands and knees so he wriggled around on his left hand side and started to drag himself along. This was slow and jerky at first but he soon got the hang of it and before long his fluid motion stop-start was like a sidwinding caterpillar.

Jamie had been going downhill in the tunnel but the slope wasn't so steep as to make the blood rush to his head. He enjoyed his mastery of the caterpillar crawl and he was going quite fast and when all of a sudden he slithered down a steeper bank of the crumbly chalk tunnel floor.

"Whoa - that was interesting. What should I do now? Go on? Or turn back? This is definitely going somewhere I haven't been before."

Jamie half twisted and looked back up the way he had come. The pale white glow behind was a long way off.

"How do I get back?" said Jamie to himself. "Now that's a good question."

He had been bumping along the sides of the tunnel with his knees, hands and bottom on the way down so he knew he it was too tight to turn around here.

"I suppose I could caterpillar crawl backwards up that slope. It might be slow but not impossible. I can push instead of pull."

"And I can always call Clayton if I get stuck or scared. He'll have a hard job dragging me up. He's not that strong. But maybe there's another way out. Well I'm not scared and I'm not stuck. And I'd like to see where that red light is coming from. The tunnel must get bigger up ahead - and I can always turn around later if I feel like it."

As you can see - Jamie wasn't unduly nervous. I think many people would have started to worry by now. But Jamie was thin and less likely to get stuck than you or me. And he was used to climbing in tight spaces in cupboards when playing hide and seek with his sister - and climbing muddy slopes and making secret camps in the woods from moss and fallen

branches. And he was looking for an adventure. And he didn't have a mobile phone to call for help. And the only person he could call was a tree troll who was smaller than him. So he stuck his thumb in his mouth - spat out the chalk - took his thumb out - and pressed on.

After crawling a bit further the going got easier as the space in the tunnel got wider and higher.

"What's that smell? It seems familiar." Jamie shut his eyes to imagine where he had smelled it before. Of course! The sitting room at home. There was something sooty in the air - like a damp chimney or an old bonfire. He was able to go faster now crawling on his hands and knees, and very soon the floor levelled off. Maybe this is where Clayton cooks his potions - thought Jamie.

The red light was all around Jamie as the tunnel opened to another cavern. Unlike the one above - this wasn't lit by a hole in the roof - but seemed to glow from the inside.

When Jamie got to his feet he didn't see any sign of the tree troll - but his long crawl had been worth it. He couldn't stop grinning. Because there - not more than 20 feet away - was another dragon ship.

As he got closer Jamie realized it wasn't as big as the ship upstairs - more like a large rowing boat. But the design of the dragon's head in the front looked just as stunning.

He felt a bit embarrassed and silly remembering how scared he had been by the dragon ship before. This looked just as realistic.

Well, nearly. The dragon upstairs was a lot fiercer. Jamie was very good at drawing and painting so as a true artist he stood back and admired it.

Yes - that's why the other one was scarier. This one's eyes were tightly shut as if it was asleep. Or dead. Or maybe the artist who made this one wasn't good at doing eyes.

As he swapped sucky thumbs he breathed in some dust from his sleeve.

"Ah choo!" he sneezed.

It's impossible to sneeze without blinking.

You try it sometime and you'll see it's true.

A lot can happen in that blink of an eye.

If you're driving a car you might crash.

Or if you're crossing the road and sneeze you might not notice a fast turning bike or car heading straight at you.

No danger from cars here, under this quiet hill on the South Downs. And no roads at all above either. If you're standing still under the hill it's safe to sneeze and blink as long as you like.

"Ah choo!" - Jamie sneezed again. But in that blink of an eye something had changed.

"Hm. That's interesting. I didn't notice before that one of those eyes is partly open. The light down here isn't as good as I thought."

"Ah choo!" Another sneeze. Another blink by Jamie.

"No. I was wrong both times before." He leaned closer. "It's clear now that both dragon's eyes are in fact wide open. They must have been open all the time but were covered with dust or soot which my sneezing blew off. And I didn't notice before those glistening pink gums. But everything looks red or pink down here because of the light."

Jamie wondered what the second dragon ship was used for. Could this be a lifeboat for the big one?

Unlikely. They didn't even have enough lifeboats in Titanic. But when did they start using them?

He was sure Vikings came before Titanic. And he supposed that Vikings didn't have lifeboats. It didn't suit the image. Viking ships didn't have an upstairs and downstairs for storage. No stairs, lifts or chandeliers. They needed all the open floor space for food and weapons and passengers.

But what about Saxons? They had ships too. Did they have lifeboats?

They might...

Until now he had always thought of Saxons as being extinct cuddly locals who built flint stone churches and when they settled down and retired got beaten up by burgling Vikings. But Clayton's tale of Aelred Shardspear showed that some Saxons could be even tougher than Vikings.

Jamie couldn't imagine Aelred's ship towing a lifeboat behind it. Aelred seemed like the kind of person who would take his chances swimming home and twisting the fin of a shark to tow him along faster.

"Ah choo!" Another sneeze. Another blink by Jamie. And was that a blink of the inner eyelid by the dragon? Or just more dust blowing off?

"It's very dusty here. That's why I didn't see those two rows of small sharp red teeth before either. Everything looks red in this dim light. I wish I had a torch."

Actually Jamie did have several torches. But he and his sister Laura had buried them one night next to one of their camps on the steep slopes outside to make it darker. And when they found them again a few months later the combination of rain, mud and time meant they didn't work. They preferred candles. Because you could make new ones out of old bits of wax from candles and cheese.

Jamie stared hard at the dragon. Trying not to blink. But in the end he had to. The dragon stayed still as a statue.

"Don't be silly Jamie. This is just like what you imagined before."

Jamie thought he saw its tongue flick out and back in again. Like a lizard.

"Stop imagining things" said Jamie to himself. "And try to stop sneezing."

Jamie thought he saw the dragon wiggle its head from side to side.

"Nice scary thoughts - Jamie! Now stop thinking them."

Then the dragon swished its tail from side to side like their cat Wolfie used to - when facing a cornered rat.

"This is very, very silly" thought Jamie. "I'm just scaring myself for no good reason. If Laura was here she'd be laughing her head off."

Then, unlike what happened before in the big cavern up above, the dragon stretched its neck towards Jamie like an angry hissy goose - and unfurled its wings.

Time stood still.

From Jamie's point of view it now felt like all the events of that afternoon - from meeting the tree troll to waking the dragon - were replaying in his head like an "as previously seen on Jamie's life story" tv episode - except he couldn't skip the next bit and fast forward to the rest of his life but was doomed to watch the next bit play out in real-time slow motion.. But luckily his arms and legs reacted to the danger faster than his thoughts.

In less time than it takes to say "Sizzling sauropods!" and only just before the dragon had screeched awake from its sleep and puffed out a ball of warning flame aimed at the very spot where he had been standing admiring it just a few moments ago Jamie realized he was already hot shoveling his way back up the tunnel and going much faster than he thought he could possibly manage it when he was on his mission of exploration on the way down.

And the hearing part of his brain realized that he was doing some screeching of his own.

"Clayton! Where are you? Clayton! I need you. Clayton! Now!" and he thought - but he didn't shout - when he realized he was still (amazingly) alive. You dratted tree troll. Why didn't you warn me about that dreadful dragon?

Clayton had finished mixing up the magic potion and was

returning to Aelred's treasure ship when he saw Jamie's giant shadow projecting like the Batman signal onto the roof of the cave. Whoops!

The Jamie signal hovered a few seconds while he caught his breath at the mouth of the tunnel. When he looked up and saw his own scary shadow on the roof he didn't know what it was. But dashed towards the comforting safety of the Saxon treasure ship and didn't stop running till he had climbed on the deck.

When he looked back the middle tunnel was clearly lit up and glowing bright orange. He knew it was too narrow for the dragon to follow but wondered what would happen next.

The glow brightened and there was a long muffled moan - like a cow lowing far away. The glow dimmed. Then it brightened again. More moaning. Jamie guessed the sound and light effects from below were because the dragon was angry his mouse had got away.

This protest went on for the next few minutes. But just as Jamie thought it was getting boringly predictable his ears were hurt by a much louder blood curdling cry of complaint like a screech owl. His first thought was - the dragon has found another way up.

But as he looked around he realized he was wrong. The tunnel mouth went bright yellow, almost white, then faded back to orange and then changed to pale red. And after what seemed like ages it went back to being just a dim hole. And then finally disappeared into the same blackness as the other tunnel entrances.

It was very quiet. The only sound was Jamie breathing. He wiped his hand and sucked his thumb.

"I don't usually go down that one myself!"

Jamie jumped in shock.

"Clayton! You scared me to death creeping up like that. And where were you when I was calling for help?"

"Sorry" said Clayton. "I didn't creep. I was here before you."

When I saw you running I got scared and became invisible. It's a natural reaction. And when you came up here I didn't want to scare you any more by suddenly reappearing behind you. So I waited for the fuss to die down before reappearing. I should have warned you about that tunnel. I don't go down there any more unless I'm already invisible."

"So you know about that thing down there?" said Jamie.

"Hard not to know. Living in a place like this. I did hope you might be able to help me get rid of it. That's why I mixed up this potion so you could sneak down and make it go away."

"You must be joking" said Jamie. "That dragon toasted my pants. I could feel my farts catching fire as I rocketed up that tunnel."

To emphasize this point Jamie half turned to try and see the seat of his trousers. He picked off a lump.

"Look" he said. "It's black and crumbly."

Clayton picked up a piece and sniffed it.

"It's not poo" he said. "And it's not charcoal."

He licked it. Jamie cringed at that.

"It's only mud" said Clayton. He spat into it - worked it into paste and dabbed it on his shoulder.

"I'm sure it's soot" said Jamie and brushed some more of the dirt off. But when he looked closely at his hands weren't black. Just covered with crumbs of earth and chalk and dried mud. And when he sniffed them - they didn't smell of ash.

"It really burned" said Jamie. "I didn't imagine it."

"The farts were real. The flames were not. I don't think our dragon can do flames properly. Just lighting effects. It's still a baby."

"It's the scariest baby I've ever seen" said Jamie.

"I agree with you there. It terrified me to start with. I'm not so

scared of it now because it spends most of its time sleeping in a nest of dried mushrooms in a corner - but if I can't persuade it to bugger off soon - it will grow and soon be able to do its flame throwing for real. And that little tunnel won't stop it. A full grown dragon can split a mountain in two. A dragon pup can easily do the same with a little hill like this one. That wouldn't be very good for my Saxon gold hideaway."

"That wouldn't be very good for our house either" said Jamie. "Tell me more. Where did it come from? When did it get here? How are you planning to persuade it to... bugger off?"

"So many questions... I'll tell you what I know. As you may have gathered I've got used to living on my own down here. Nice and peaceful like. Then a few months ago I was rooting around for some mushrooms in that other cavern down below when something popped out of the shadows and hissed at me like a bad tempered goose. It scared the twiglets out of me. I dropped everything and ran as fast as I could back here. Aelred's ship has been here over one thousand years. It felt safe." Clayton grabbed the nearest piece of timber . "It feels safe."

It's safe for now - thought Jamie - thinking back to what Clayton had said - and picturing the size of the dragon - safe as long as it can't get up the tunnel and as long as it can't do fiery dragon breath. But splitting the hill or setting fire to the woods... that would be something quite different to hot pants. Awesome. Definitely something to worry about.

"I didn't get a good look at it the first time" said Clayton. "So a few days later I went back..."

That was brave - thought Jamie.

"This time I drank a double dose of invisibility potion..."

Brave but careful - thought Jamie.

"It's very dark down there so I took a candle..."

Idiot! - thought Jamie.

"I was confident that after hundreds of years of not being seen when I didn't want to be seen and with the extra dose of magic

potion inside me I was doubly super invisibly invisible. No doubt about it. In sunshine or shade - you could be standing right in front of me - and you wouldn't know I was there. Unfortunately I didn't take into account the light from my candle."

"Not such a brilliant plan then" said Jamie - thinking - or maybe too brilliant by half.

"That's one way of putting it" said Clayton. "My mistake is obvious now. But when I first heard scary noises in the mushroom cave I wasn't able to see what was causing them. It sounded big. But little creatures are sometimes the yappiest. I thought if I waited for things to get quiet it would be OK for me to have a peek."

"How come you didn't know it was a dragon?" said Jamie. "It looked obvious to me." - Thinking - after it started moving about.

"I didn't see it because it wasn't glowing then like it does now. You don't think I would have gone in again with a candle if I knew what it was - do you? I suppose it had lost colour because of being tired and out of condition after its long journey coming here. I worked that out later. You can probably guess what happened in the instant when I saw what it was and realised it was looking directly back at me."

"Doesn't take too much imagination" said Jamie... thinking - you silly twiglet.

"Instinctively I tossed the candle to one side to get it as far away from me as possible. Then faster than a dog catching a naughty flying biscuit the dragon's tongue lassoed it in midair, twirled it back into its mouth and crunched it to soggy bits while the wick was still glowing."

"What happened next?"

"Let me just say that in addition to losing my only good candle, I also left my dignity behind. My hair was gray before - but I went completely bald. I spent the next few days huddling here on deck trying to remember everything I had ever heard in my childhood on the subject of getting rid of unwelcome dragons."

"Can't help you there" said Jamie (and thinking - I really must be going soon). "The only dragon stories I know - like the Hobbit or [Princess Laura and the Unsuitable Dragon Suitors](#) - are pure fiction."

Unlike dinosaurs - continued Jamie in his head. Dinosaurs are real.

He was an expert on dinosaurs and could tell you which ones ate which others and which ones would win in a fight (if you could magically bring back all the carnivorous ones from different epochs back at the same time). He had over 200 plastic dinosaurs scattered on his bedroom floor and sitting room and dining room floor back in his nice safe house.

Maybe not so safe house any more though - if the dragon decides to pop its head out from under the floorboards.

"Now Jamie, I know you were surprised to learn about tree trolls - even though we were here long before you - and we belong here. But according to the legends of my own people - dragons don't belong here - although they do appear from time to time. And when that happens it's by accident. They come from another world. You would probably call it another dimension. Sometimes their navigation is a bit wonky so instead of going where they planned they end up here."

"I know someone like that" said Jamie. "My uncle. He nearly always gets lost when we go for a walk."

"It's rare for dragons to get lost" said Clayton. "But when it does happen and they go off course and arrive here in our lands they tend to get stuck. Because not all of their powers arrive with them. And without those special powers it takes a long time to recoup their energy here enough to get back to where they came from."

"So it's just bad luck that it's here?"

"Partly it was bad luck, yes. But the more I thought about it the more I realized there were three special factors here which - when seen out of focus from afar - might have looked a bit like elements from the dragon world. The dragon ship, the big fires you've recently been having in your log burners - and I'm

sorry to say this - but the other new factor is your own howling - Jamie - which sounds just like a baby dragon. I think the dragon downstairs must have been passing through a worm hole somewhere close by in a neighbouring dimension when it heard the echoes of your cries, got distracted and confused and ended up landing in here instead of where it was going."

"How do we encourage it to vamoose?" said Jamie.

"Well, I'm pretty sure it doesn't want to stay here any more than we do. And that's a useful starting point. But it could take months or years for it to build up enough energy to relaunch itself back on course - especially if it's relying on the weak links back to its stronger powers still in the dragon world. There's nothing naturally occurring in the cave it can feed itself on. Dragons don't eat mushrooms. It won't starve but it won't be in a good mood. How would you feel if you got lost and stuck in a cave for a long time? It would be like being stuck in jail or delayed at an airport. The dragon will get very frustrated and annoyed. And once it has sucked enough energy from its own world - enough to get back - it might decide to smash its prison cell as a parting gesture."

"Our hill" said Jamie. He had a vision of looking up at his house from Keymer and - instead of seeing the familiar view of the Downs, and woods - peering through a new valley edged by steaming chalk faced cliffs opening a foggy view to the sea behind. We mustn't let that happen - he thought.

As if reading his mind Clayton continued. "We must stop that happening."

"How do we kill?" asked Jamie grimly.

"That would be cruel - the poor thing is lost. But we can't hurt it or kill it with any earthly weapons - even if we had any."

Jamie was relieved to hear it. He didn't want to hurt the dragon- but he was prepared to fight to save his family. Then he had an idea.

"What if we feed it? How can we get sheep down here?"

Jamie knew dragons in stories ate a lot of sheep. And there

were always sheep grazing on the grassland at the top of the woods. On the other hand he also knew that if you ever tried to get close to them - even to help a lost sheep on the wrong side of a fence get back to join its flock - they scattered all over the place or ran around in silly sheep circles.

Jamie pictured the long tangled steep way from the top of the hill and down through the woods and into the cave.

Even if they started out with a hundred sheep as dragon food at the top - they would be lucky to get one this far. And neither Jamie nor Clayton were big enough to pick up a lamb and carry it. In fact if Jamie did persuade one to come with him for a little walk he would probably have made friends with it before too long and would take it back to its family rather than trick it into becoming roast dinner.

"Sheep? - In our world dragons don't eat sheep. They eat fire. We'll light a big bonfire in the dragon's cave. When it soaks up the flames it will have enough energy to fly back into the void."

"That's your plan?" said Jamie. "It sounds a bit thin to me."

"My grandma used to tell the best dragon stories - which her grandma had told her when she was a young sprout."

Probably back in the days of the dinosaurs - thought Jamie - thinking about how old a tree troll grandma would be compared to Clayton. Or mammoths...

"In all the stories I remember they heat up the dragon to send it on its way. Everyone's happy it's gone. But a few weeks later it comes back. This keeps on happening until they learn the magic trick which stops the dragon coming back."

"What's the trick?" asked Jamie.

"It's a different trick in each story. That's why it took me a long time to think about what we should be trying to do here."

Clayton didn't want to alarm Jamie by admitting that it was so long since he'd heard these stories that he couldn't remember which parts were genuine folk tales and which parts he'd made up himself - filling in the gaps in his memory. When was a

young sprout he used to fall asleep part way through being read to - and would sometimes wake up after the tricky part in the plot had just happened. So even his memories might be just his dreams.

"As I was saying - when you've got the bonfire lit you'll have to start screeching like a baby t-rex . That will help the dragon understand why it made a mistake coming here. It will recognise your voice and won't accidentally steer back this way gain. One thing in our favour is that the dragon will be sleeping now - because it of all the huffing and puffing it did when you disturbed it. They're like cats. Don't have much stamina and sleep a lot.

"I've got everything prepared. All you have to do is drink this potion - creep down and start the bonfire. It's too dangerous for me to stand close to a big fire myself - for obvious reasons. Otherwise I'd come with you."

"You want me to go back down there? On my own?"

"He can't see you when you're invisible. And he'll be asleep until he feels the heat from the fire. That will make him put him in a good mood. And when he's fully wake and soaking up the fire - you start howling. Simple."

"You must be joking" said Jamie.

"I've been down there many times stacking up the bonfire. And I was just as scared as you to start off with."

Clayton proffered Jamie the mug of potion.

"Try it. When you're invisible you'll feel more confident."

Jamie sipped suspiciously.

"It's got a funny taste to it. What's in it?"

It's best if you don't know - thought Clayton - but what he said was - "The recipe has to remain a secret known only to tree trolls."

Pop! Jamie's left arm disappeared.

"Whoa" said Jamie. "That was cool."

He sipped some more.

Pop! "That was wobbly."

He looked down to see his legs had disappeared from under him. But he could still see his shoes down on the floor.

Pop! Not any more. Jamie's torso seemed to be floating in the air. He felt light headed.

"Better finish it off" said Clayton "before..."

Pop!

"Yuck! Before I spill it on myself - you mean" said Jamie.

"Well I can see you've had enough. Because I can't see you at all.

"I haven't agreed yet" said a voice which sounded like Jamie. But something in the potion was starting to make him feel confident and fearless - not just invisible.

That "something" may have been the big slug of sloe gin which Clayton had slipped into the invisibility potion to cover up the bad taste (and to kill any bugs which wouldn't affect tree trolls but might give humans a gippy tummy). Clayton swigged down a dose of potion himself just to be on the safe side.

"Ow! Sorry. How do we avoid bumping into each other?" said Jamie.

"I'll go first" said Clayton.

But Jamie remembered back to the crawl into the cave from the outside world - when he was following behind the tree troll's behind.

"No thanks. I'll go first" he said.

And so - occasionally bumping into each other - the invisible duo made their way quietly whispering down the tunnel to the

cave where the dragon was now (hopefully) sleeping.

"This is where I leave you now" whispered Clayton as they got close to the end of the red tunnel. "Remember what I said about the box of matches and the kindling."

"Yeah sure" - said Jamie. As he progressed along the cave floor he turned back and waved his hand in a silent and invisible goodbye.

He crawled for some time along the edge of the wall and tried to remember Clayton's directions.

"Turn left as you go into the cave and keep going quite a long way keeping close to the edge of the wall till you reach the bonfire. The matches and kindling are hidden round the back. You should be able to find them by feel. It's really dark there because the dragonlight comes from the other end of the cave where it normally sleeps. Good luck."

He hadn't reached the logpile yet.

Did he get his left and right mixed up?

No. It was getting darker just as Clayton had said.

He went a bit further. What did Clayton mean by - "keep going quite a long way".

"Ouch!" - He found it.

That was a log smacking into Jamie's forehead.

"Shh!" - said Clayton from safely inside the tunnel.

Jamie didn't dare reply. Quietly he held his breath listening out for any sign that the dragon had been disturbed by Clayton's loud whispered warning. Nothing... except a gentle snuffle. Was that the dragon snoring? Good.

Carefully shutting his eyes and waving his hands in front of his face to detect anything that might poke him in the eyes he crawled his way around the woodpile and stopped when he started feeling sharp twiggy bits on the floor.

Getting the fire lit is going to be trickier than Clayton said - thought Jamie.

The good thing is - I'll be able to see what I'm doing. The bad thing is - the light will be like shouting and waving - "Hey wake up sleepyhead! Come and get your dinner!"

I'll have to get the fire started quietly and hope it goes up like blazes.

Jamie found the box of matches which Clayton had told him about and shook it.

Plenty in there judging by the rattle.

"Shh" - hissed Clayton.

"Shut up Clayton" Jamie hissed back.

"OK shutting up now" said Clayton.

Jamie stayed absolutely still - crouched low, behind the bonfire, listening out, alert and tensed up - ready to run if need be. It sounded like the dragon - which was out of Jamie's line of sight and presumably still sleeping at the other end of the cave - was still gently breathing and dreaming and snuffling the same as before. It must be a deep sleeper.

He waited for what seemed like ages. Everything was calm and peaceful.

He slid open the box of matches. Whoops! They spilled out. Most disappeared down into the tangle of twigs. He managed to recover a few from the top by feel and put them back in the box which he slid shut. Then making sure the sliding compartment in the matchbox was the right way round he carefully picked one out and nudged the box shut. He felt for the bulge of the match to see which way round it was and rubbed the head against the side of the box.

"Ow!" - Should've lit the match so the flame was above his fingers - not below. He dropped it. It went out. But Jamie was surprised by what he had seen in that brief flash.

As fast as we've been filling our wood stores - Clayton has

been emptying them. That's why we don't have enough logs.

But Jamie was impressed too. It was hard enough moving logs around the woods using the tractor and trailer and wheelbarrows. The sturdy little tree troll had lugged tons of logs all the way down here - carrying them piece by piece.

He felt for another match - but this time held it further away from the blobby end.

Here we go again.

Using the lighted match as a torch Jamie looked for a promising part of the kindling and carefully glided his hand towards it - taking care not to go too fast which would snuff the flame out - but approaching fast enough to avoid burning himself as the flame crept along the match to where he was holding it.

Done it.

As the match rested on the twigs the flame grew larger. But it was burning ever so slowly.

Is the kindling damp?

He blew on it gently. The flame split in two and each little bobble of fire spread slowly along the length of a different twig. The match burned out, curled up and dropped down through the pile. But the two strands of flame were still there. He blew a little harder. One of the flames went out.

Blowing too hard.

He stopped. And watched. Willing the other bit of flame to speed up and grow bigger.

It went out.

Jamie was nervous about lighting a third match without a better plan. The noise of the matches striking seemed very loud. And all that shushing. Was the dragon still snoring? He couldn't hear it. Yes there it was.

I need something that will burn really well. Jamie felt in his

pockets. No paper.

Hm - that might work... Jamie recalled last year's bonfire night when he and Laura had made a guy out of their old clothes.

He took off his t-shirt, scrunched it into a ball, and pushed it into the pile of kindling. He didn't feel cold, and it would be getting warmer soon. Still working by feel - he grabbed a few handfuls of twigs and dropped them on top of the t-shirt.

He noticed a dim red light appear at the bottom of the bonfire. Did that mean some of the ash from the burned up matches had slipped down and set light to something below? Maybe he didn't need to burn his t-shirt after all. No - the light was coming from around the other side of the wood pile.

"Jamie! "Watch out. It's coming!" - That was Clayton shouting - not whispering.

"Sizzling sauropods Clayton - what do we do now?"

"Just hurry up and get on with it. It's coming for you - not me."

Jamie struck a match. Using its light he poured the rest of his matches onto his t-shirt along with the match box as well - and then lit the whole lot.

Whoosh! They went up in a ball of evil smelling flame - his t-shirt started sizzling like a breakfast fry-up and he could hear the crackling of wood too. He stepped back from the smoke and the heat.

No going back now - thought Jamie - admiring his handiwork and the dancing flames. Now where's that dragon?

He looked around. The dragon was standing right behind him looking at the fire. Then it looked straight at him.

Don't be scared Jamie. I'm invisible. It can't see me. The dragon swayed its neck from side to side - but its gaze was fixed firmly on Jamie. As it sniffed him he realised that invisible as he was to light Clayton's magic cocktail had its limits. And his see through body was blocking the heat from the fire. So he stepped aside and backed away. The dragon

stopped looking in his direction and stuck its nose towards the fire.

As the flames took hold of the larger pieces of wood the dragon stretched out on the floor and rolled around exposing its stomach to the heat rays like a cat sunbathing.

Jamie had retreated as far as he could with his back right up against the wall but the smoke was starting to fill this corner of the cave. It didn't seem to bother the dragon though - which was wriggling around and almost purring.

I've got to get out of here - thought Jamie - taking a deep breath. Here goes...

He ran as fast as he could. Past the dragon.

"Remember to scream!" a memory of Clayton's voice came back in his head.

But he didn't need reminding.

What Clayton saw from the safety of the tunnel exit was Jamie dashing right in front of the dragon.

Then he heard an awful howling, screeching scream - like a fully grown t-rex saying "hello food" at feeding time.

Oh no! - thought Clayton - at the painful rending cry which hurt his ears so much they had instantly sucked back inside his earholes which flapped firmly shut.

"Poor Jamie! - So brave. I'm so sorry I dragged you into this."

What Clayton didn't know as his eyes welled with tears at the loss of his brave new friend was that the terrible screaming had not come out from the slavering mouth of the dragon. It was Jamie. And the reason for Jamie's scream of panic was that just as he was scraping through the narrow gap between the fire basking dragon and the bonfire he began to see his own arms and his legs quite clearly. This was the worst time to stop being invisible. Sizzling sauropods! - didn't come anywhere close to being Jamie's reaction to his predicament. There aren't enough letters and words to write his screaming down here. Just imagine the worst sounds you can and it was

much worse than that.

Shouldn't have spilt that last bit of potion - he thought. A few seconds more and I would have got away with it.

Jamie kept running as fast as he could but he imagined that any second a claw from behind would stomp on him or a tongue would flick out and lasso him. And that would be that. Just the scratched letter "J" on the stick at the entrance to Clayton's caves and a smoky pair of trainers would be all to remember him by.

Luckily for Jamie - Clayton had been right. Dragons in real life behave the same way as in the stories he had remembered hearing as a young tree troll sprout. And therefore despite the fact that the dragon could now see Jamie as clearly as if he had never even sniffed a drop of invisibility potion it wasn't interested in following him. It was too busy lapping up the heat.

When Jamie reached the tunnel entrance he paused and looked back.

It was difficult to see because of the swirling smoke but he thought he saw the dragon clambering to get on top of the bonfire. The flames didn't seem to hurt it. And oddly the dragon wasn't glowing red any more. It had turned black. The dragon seemed to grow taller as it unfurled its wings. Flames shot down from the dragon's head and poured into the log pile. Or was it the other way round? It flapped its wings and the flames around it burned more fiercely.

A bright flash. And a hollow sound like the long delayed echo of Jamie's earlier screaming. The smoke cleared for an instant. Jamie felt a chill draught on his back as a wave of cool air was sucked down the tunnel. The cave wobbled and his ears popped from the change in air pressure.

Maybe it was the dust or the smoke. Jamie always regretted what happened next when he thought back to this critical moment.

He sneezed. And so he blinked. And when he reopened his eyes again the dragon and the bonfire and the smoke had vanished.

It was quiet and peaceful and as if the dragon and the fire had never been.

"Bye bye dragon" said Jamie shivering. "I hope you don't get lost this time."

"It worked then. I thought it would " whispered Clayton behind him. "What happened to your t-shirt?"

And that was a good question in reply to which Jamie knew he would have to provide as good an answer. He rehearsed what he would say in his mind. So that a few hours later when his father, Mark, woke up and asked - "What happened to your t-shirt?"

Jamie said in all honesty and without blinking - "A tree troll came. I got hot. And my t-shirt burned in a dragon's fire."

"Hm... You look like you've caught the sun." Mark felt Jamie's temple. "You feel hot maybe you've been in the sun too long."

He looked at his phone. "I didn't realise that was the time. We'd better head back to the house and check your temperature"

The main wood store was on the way back and when they reached it Mark turned off the tractor's engine.

"Well that's odd. We both slept through most of the afternoon but somehow that log pile looks a lot bigger than I expected. Maybe that was the tree troll too." He gazed at the size of the pile in wonder.

Jamie didn't say anything to that. His dad may have been joking but he was right. For while he and Clayton had been walking back to the picnic spot congratulating themselves on their success with the dragon Clayton mentioned he didn't now need all the logs he had borrowed from the family woodstore. He had a hidden pile above ground where he queued logs to take underground later.

"I just took a couple of logs each day from your pile so you wouldn't notice" - he said. "But it wasn't always convenient to take them downstairs if it was raining or the dragon was

awake. So I've still got quite a stash."

"How big is your stash?" asked Jamie.

"I'll show you" said Clayton. "It's hidden around the back of the tractor shed."

"Wow!" - said Jamie when Clayton removed his hiding spell from the logs. "It's enough to last for ages. Let's put them back before waking Dad up."

And so - with Jamie and Clayton working together as an efficient team and with the help of a wheelbarrow it only took them about an hour to return the logs back to where they had originally been taken from.

"Well" - said Mark - recovering from his surprise at how the logpile seemed to have grown from his memory of lunchtime - "if I ever meet that tree troll of yours I'll be sure to say - thank you."

They both unloaded the trailer and as they headed back to the house Jamie realised something. He wasn't sucking his thumb. And he didn't want to. From that day on everyone noticed he seemed more grown up and confident in himself.

Laura will never believe me when I tell her about Clayton and Aelred's treasure ship and the lost dragon - thought Jamie sadly. But she did. Even before she met Clayton and saw the treasure for herself.

In the years which followed Laura and Jamie had some interesting adventures with the tree troll - all of which involved being invisible - and some of which nearly turned out to be disasters. They didn't tell anyone the details - not even me.

When Clayton heard I was writing this story he moved his main entrance and made it invisible. Not even a fox or badger can find it. So Clayton and his treasure ship remain safely hidden as they have been since the time of Aelred Shardspear and his band of laughing Saxons. You can't find him. But he can find you.

Jamie and Laura always tell friends and relations visiting their

woods - "pack a bit more food than you think you need. You'll be surprised how it all goes."

That winter - in the year of Jamie and the tree troll - another strange thing happened. Because Jamie's house seemed warmer than usual on the inside - even though the weather on the outside was much colder than it had been the year before.

Was that the dragon helping to keep their stove warm by blowing heat from the distant dragon world - as a way of saying thank you?

Jamie liked to think so.

And he was probably right.

The end...

