



THE MARVELLOUS LAND OF SNERGS

E. A. WYKE-SMITH

Retold by Veronica Cossanteli

Illustrated by Melissa Castrillón

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From a concept by Chicken House Publishing Ltd and
based on E. A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*
originally published in Great Britain by Ernest Benn in 1927
To his memory and with thanks to the Wyke-Smith family

Illustrations © Melissa Castrillón 2020

First published in Great Britain in 2020
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Cover and interior illustrations by Melissa Castrillón
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

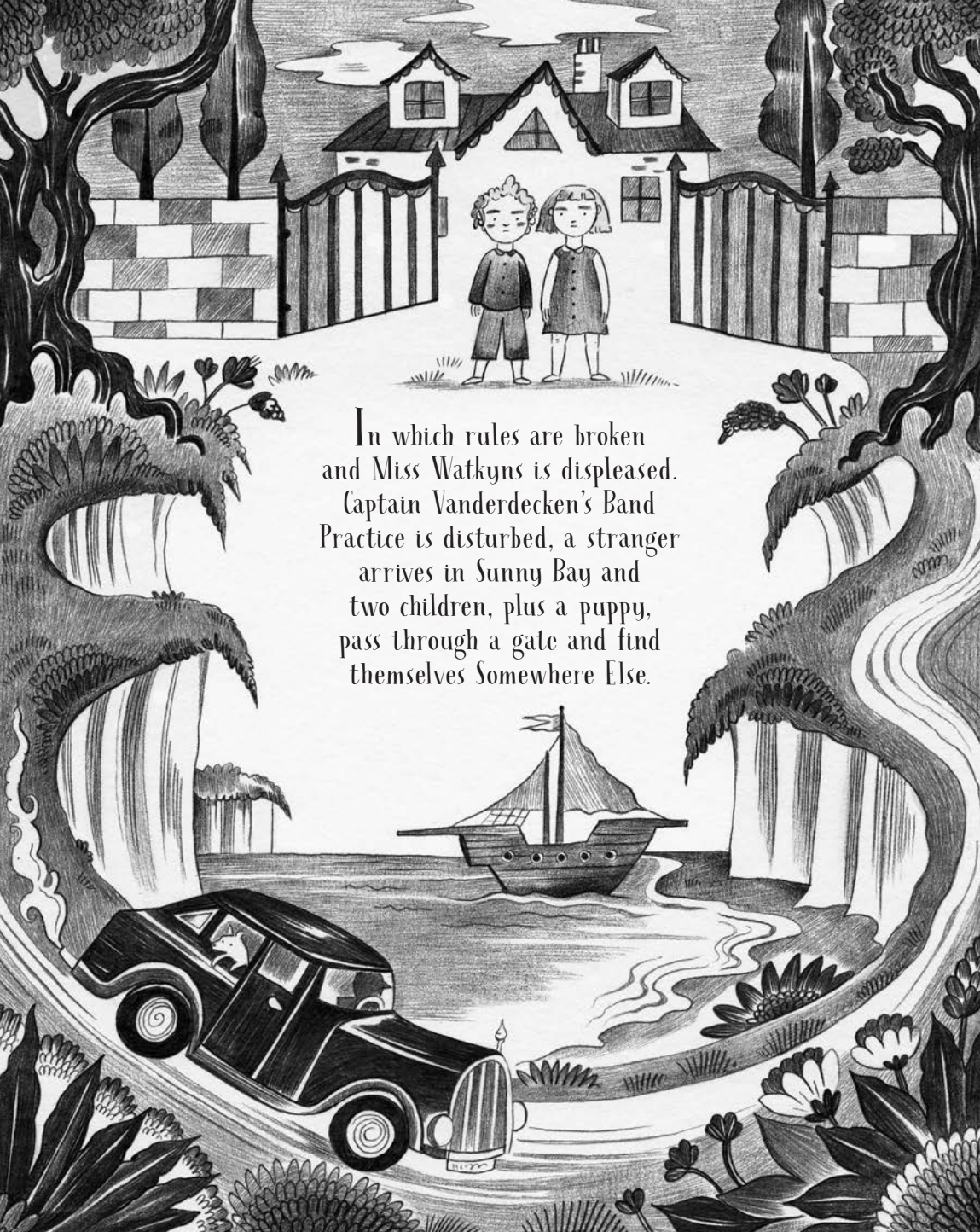
PB ISBN 978-1-911490-60-9
eISBN 978-1-913322-66-3

*For Xander, with thanks for so much laughter along the way
and for all those walks.*

*To everyone who knew and loved this book as it was, a word of apology.
I have done my best to keep to the spirit of the original but stories are
living things and this one proved more boisterous than most.
Let loose from its covers, it behaved much like Tiger the puppy,
hurtling off without warning in unexpected directions.
All I could do was follow. Forgive me.*

Also by Veronica Cossanteli

The Extincts
The Halloweeds



In which rules are broken
and Miss Watkyns is displeased.
Captain Vanderdecken's Band
Practice is disturbed, a stranger
arrives in Sunny Bay and
two children, plus a puppy,
pass through a gate and find
themselves Somewhere Else.



‘Children need rules,’ stated Miss Watkyns. ‘And rules must be obeyed.’

A lady made of angles and straight lines, neat and crisp all the way from her hairpins to the hem of her long black skirts, Miss Watkyns believed in good manners, fair play, plenty of fresh air for growing children – and rules.

She sat, straight and stiff, at a large desk where nothing was ever allowed to be out of place. Even the goldfish in its crystal bowl swam in orderly clockwise circles. Behind her, the open window let in sea-salty sunshine, the whoops and cries of children let loose to play and the mew of gulls.

Before her were the three rule-breakers: a girl, a boy and a small person who was not a child and should have known better.

Flora sat silent and still, half-hidden behind her cloud of fair hair. There was a faraway-ness about Flora, the look of someone who kept her thoughts and feelings to herself. Next to her, the thin boy with grazed knees was fidgeting, legs swinging, dark eyes bright and watchful. Pip had grown up wary: at the first sign of trouble, he was ready to duck and bolt.

The bench Pip and Flora were sitting on had a name at the Sunny Bay Home for Superfluous and Accidentally Parentless Children. It was known as the telling-off bench, its wood worn smooth by the shuffle of so many guilty behinds. Flora and Pip knew that bench well – but, for now, the telling-off was happening to somebody else.

‘The children at Sunny Bay do not *starve*, Mr Gorbo,’ Miss Watkyns informed the short, round person standing in front of her. Not much of him reached above the desktop, although he was as grown up as he’d ever be. ‘They are fed a carefully balanced diet, with extra custard on Sundays and

plenty of prunes. A well-regulated stomach leads to a well-regulated mind. So, can you explain why I find these two,' she glanced at Pip and Flora, 'in a place where they shouldn't be, at a time when they shouldn't be, covered in crumbs and jam?'

Gorbo's sigh was gusty. 'No harm in a few jam tarts, surely? One little midnight feast? "A slice of pie helps the night go by", as my mother used to say.'

'Rules were broken. There is always harm in *that*.' Miss Watkyns was firm. 'The children were caught in the linen cupboard, where they are not allowed, eating between meals, which is not allowed. Accepting food from strangers is not allowed . . .'

'Gorbo's not a stranger,' objected Pip. 'He's our friend.'

' . . . and being out of bed, after Lights Out,' continued Miss Watkyns, ignoring the interruption, 'is *strictly forbidden*. I cannot have children wandering about in the dark. Any number of unpleasant things could befall them, from splinters to untimely death.'

Gorbo hung his head in shame.

'Perhaps Mr Gorbo has not read the rules,' suggested

Miss Scadging, Sunny Bay's matron. A comfortable cushion of a lady with twinkly eyes, she had been an orphan at Sunny Bay herself once upon a time and had never left. She could remember all the way back to the dark days before Miss Watkyns took charge. 'Can you read, Mr Gorbo?'

'I can't *not* read, exactly.' Gorbo wrinkled his nose at the long list of rules and regulations hanging on Miss Watkyns's wall. 'It depends on what sort of writing and what sort of words, and whether the letters behave as they should. Some of them do squiggle about so. It works better if I do this.' Ducking his head he peered at the rules upside down, from between his legs. 'So, all the cleverness sloshes to my thinking bits . . .'

Pip giggled.

'No sniggering, please.' Miss Watkyns gave him a quelling stare. 'Unkindness is against the rules here at Sunny Bay.'

'I wasn't being unkind.' Pip returned the stare, unquelled. 'Who cares if Gorbo can't read?'

The truth was that Pip couldn't read either. He had begun life in the circus, the smallest member of the Fabulous

Flying Frangipani Family. All he needed to know was how to swing from a trapeze. Nobody had bothered to teach him anything else. When fate brought him to Sunny Bay, he was given a desk in the schoolroom with the other children but education seemed to bounce off him, like raindrops off a duck.

Miss Watkyns turned her attention back to Gorbo.

‘Cook is very upset,’ she informed him. ‘Those jam tarts were for Miss Scadging’s birthday tea.’

‘I am very fond of strawberry jam,’ admitted Miss Scadging.

‘I didn’t know.’ Gorbo unfolded himself, looking very guilty. ‘A very happy somethingty-somethingty-somethingth birthday, Miss Scratching, and a thousand happy returns.’

‘Not so many “somethings”, if you don’t mind,’ retorted Miss Scadging. ‘I’m forty-three.’

‘Hardly more than a child! And here am I, two-hundred and onety-two the last time anybody counted and will I *ever* grow up to behave like a sensible fellow?’ Striking his forehead with the flat of his hand, Gorbo sank to his knees.

‘O, rascally reprehensible ruffian of a Gorbo!’

‘Less of the dramatics, please.’ Miss Watkyns was frosty. ‘And do stand up, Mr Gorbo. We need to have a little talk. It is several weeks now since you came to Sunny Bay, looking for work. “Any odd jobs”, you said – you could turn your hand to anything, you *said*. I have been reviewing your achievements since then.’

‘Have you?’ asked Gorbo, uneasily.

Putting on her spectacles, Miss Watkyns consulted a list on her desk. ‘There was the leak in the attic roof . . .’

‘I fixed the hole,’ Gorbo assured her. ‘Filled it up tight. Not a drop of rain got through . . . until the sun came out and the toffee melted.’

‘You told me,’ continued Miss Watkyns, ‘that you could mend my clock.’

Everybody looked at the mahogany clock on the mantel above the fireplace. It was ticking merrily, but all three of its hands were going backwards.

‘Time moves forward, Mr Gorbo,’ stated Miss Watkyns. ‘That’s the way the world works.’ She considered her list. ‘I don’t intend to say much about the shelves you put up in

the boys' dormitory – except that it's a pity little Humphrey happened to be underneath when they fell down. It can't be helped; he stopped crying after an hour or two and I daresay the damage isn't permanent.'

'The bleeding has stopped,' confirmed Miss Scadging, 'and the bump is getting smaller.'

Gorbo sagged. 'I clipped your hedges, ma'am,' he offered, in a small voice.

'Yes,' agreed Miss Watkyns, grimly. 'So you did.'

Rising to her feet, she crossed to the window and looked out. Beyond the orphanage walls, the cliff dropped down to the bay where sunlight glittered on the sea and waves licked at the pale, biscuit-crumb sand. There was a fine view across the water to Puffin Island, but Miss Watkyns's gaze rested on her garden. Rowan trees grew to either side of the high iron gates. The children played between low hedges of rosemary and lavender. Here and there, these had been hacked into very peculiar shapes.

'You're quite an artist, Mr Gorbo.'

She didn't mean it, of course, but Gorbo's face brightened. He gave a little skip and went to stand by her side.

‘That’s my Aunt Flumper, with her best hat on,’ he explained, waving a hand at a bush that had been mangled into something like a large toadstool. ‘That’s a teapot. And *that* one,’ he added, with a little bow towards Miss Watkyns, ‘was supposed to be *you*. You didn’t come out quite right, I’m afraid. It turned into more of a witch . . .’

‘A wicked witch?’ asked Pip, from the bench.

‘Wicked as anything,’ agreed Gorbo. ‘You can tell by her pointy nose. Like the one out there in—’

‘In the stories,’ said Miss Watkyns. ‘Witches belong in stories. *Only* in stories. I think we all know that.’

Gorbo gave her a doubtful look, fingering the lucky acorn he wore on a string around his neck. ‘You might as well say there aren’t any goblins or wobsters or squeezels or snotril worms or . . .’

‘What’s a wobster?’ demanded Pip. Even Flora had stirred, behind her hair.

‘There’s no such thing,’ snapped Miss Watkyns. ‘Mr Gorbo, kindly refrain from filling the children’s heads with the sort of nonsense that will give them nightmares.’

‘I’m not scared of any old witch.’ Pip was scornful.

Beside him, the sunlight shone on Flora. Sitting so still and quiet, her blue eyes giving nothing away, she looked like a child who had never done or thought anything bad in her whole life.

If I met a witch I'd make her teach me how to turn people into frogs, like in the fairy stories. That, thought Flora, *would serve some people right . . .*

It was three years since Flora had said anything at all out loud. Her thoughts flitted like butterflies, trapped inside her head.

Miss Watkyns had run out of patience. 'I can excuse the roof and the clock and the shelves and poor Humphrey's head,' she told Gorbo. 'And my garden will grow back, in time. But you encouraged these children to break the rules, and that I cannot allow. I'm sorry, Mr Gorbo, but it is time to say goodbye. You are no longer welcome at Sunny Bay.'

There was an unpleasant silence, broken only by the shriek of the gulls and the children playing. Gorbo drooped. Pip frowned. Flora bit her lip. *Not fair.*

'That's not fair.' Pip said it for her. 'Gorbo only took the tarts because we asked him to. He was just being kind.'

‘I’m pleased to see that you are ready to take the blame, Pip,’ said Miss Watkyns, ‘but it doesn’t change anything. Mr Gorbo made an unwise decision; now he must face the consequences. I’m sure that he understands that.’

‘I should do by now,’ sighed Gorbo. ‘You sound exactly like my Aunt Flumper.’

Opening a drawer, Miss Watkyns took out a little cloth bag and pushed it across the desk. ‘Your wages, Mr Gorbo.’

Gorbo looked surprised. He loosened the drawstring and tipped out the contents. Coins rolled across the desktop. He held one up, to catch the sunlight.

‘They’re very shiny,’ he said politely. ‘Who’s the beardy fellow?’

Miss Scadging looked shocked. ‘That is His Majesty, the King!’

‘I’ll take just one of him,’ Gorbo decided, ‘to stick on my wall.’ Pulling off his little saucer-shaped cap he bowed first to Miss Scadging and then again, the top of his head almost touching the floor, to Miss Watkyns.

Turning to the children, he dug in his pocket and pulled out some odds and ends of string. ‘Goodbye, young half-

Noodles,’ he said, handing them each a piece. ‘Tie a knot in it, to remember me by. It is how we say goodbye where I come from. May your pie crust always be golden, may your string never fray. Pay attention to Miss Watkyns, for she knows what’s what and what’s not, and you will grow up sagacious and sensible – not like poor old Gorbo, the very worst of Snergs!’