

## *Into the Underworld*

A river of rain ran down the stained glass window. Another dreary Sunday. James hated Sundays: the endless prayer meetings; the tedious hymns; the obligatory Amens; and, the dead, goldfish eyes of the congregation. Today would be different. Today he would escape! Already he had reached the first level of the steeple. He had never been allowed here before. This was forbidden territory.

The great bell tower loomed above James like a signpost to the heavens. Panting heavily, he paused for breath, leaned against the wall and looked around. What a let-down! A few pieces of broken plaster from the ceiling speckled the floor and there was some evidence that pigeons had once used the tower as a home, but otherwise there seemed little of interest to reward the risks he had taken in going there. James let out a sigh of exasperation and turned for the stairs. He was about to go down when his eye caught something he hadn't seen at first. In the corner, half-hidden in shadow, was a chest.

What could be in it? James moved carefully across the room, anxious not to make too much noise on the squeaky floorboards. He knelt in front of the chest and examined it carefully. Two large leather straps crossed its domed top and were fastened in buckles at the front. The once shiny clasp on the front of the chest was encrusted with rust but as far as James could see there was no lock.

What could be in it? Perhaps it was a dead body! The chest was certainly big enough to hide one inside it easily. If it was a dead body it would be in the best possible place as it was only a short walk to the cemetery outside. If the chest did contain a body it must be a very old one as it was obvious from the dust that it hadn't been opened in years.

What could be in it? There was only one way to find out. James' fingers fumbled as he wrestled with the leather straps. Whoever had put these on hadn't meant them to be undone easily. He stood up and pushed against the chest with one foot in order to give himself extra leverage. Slowly he could feel the first strap loosen and then suddenly give way, catapulting him across the room.

Opening the chest caused a storm of dust to rage across the room, catching in the light like unknown galaxies floating in illuminated space. James cautiously returned to the chest. It was empty. Almost. Lying on the bottom of it was what appeared to be a large black blanket but, on closer inspection, it became clear that it was some sort of cloak. Hurriedly, James pulled it on and looked at his reflection spotted in the raindrops on the window.

*"Magic!"*