

A FANTASTIC FAMILY WHIPPLE NOVEL



AN IMPRINT OF PENGUIN GROUP (USA)



A division of Penguin Young Readers Group
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 345 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.



USA / Canada / UK / Ireland / Australia / New Zealand / India / South Africa / China
Penguin.com
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ISBN: 978-1-59514-691-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ward, Matthew (Children's writer)

War of the world records : a Fantastic family Whipple novel / Matthew Ward.

pages cm

Summary: When the rivalry between the Whipples and the Goldwins escalates to an all-out war as the World Record World Championships draw near, recordless Arthur Whipple and his unlikely ally Ruby Goldwin unravel the mystery of the Lyon's Curse and the secrets of their fathers' shared past.

ISBN 978-1-59514-691-5 (hardback)

[1. Families--Fiction. 2. World records--Fiction. 3. Competition (Psychology)--Fiction. 4.

Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.W2153War 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2014028360

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*For Wendie and
Henry & Miles,
whom I'd be proud to have on my
side in a blood feud anytime.*



WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN

It was unclear how the human thigh bone came to be sticking out of the seventeenth turret on the World's Largest Sandcastle. It was, however, looking more and more likely that its builder would be disqualified.

The world-record certifier for the twelfth annual Castle Classic snapped his rulebook shut, then trudged off across the beach to determine just how the bone had entered the sand supply. After examining all the sand-removal sites in view, he followed the builder's wheelbarrow tracks to an opening in the cliffside and disappeared within.

The crowd of sandcastle spectators murmured. There was no doubt the builder, now distraught at the prospect of forfeiting his hard-won record, had scooped up the bone by accident in his frenzy to finish construction in the

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allotted time. But the bone's origin remained a mystery. The common consensus was that the femur had simply washed ashore after a routine raid on a bone smuggler's boat, as random bones had been known to do in the area.

This theory, however, was quickly proved wrong when the certifier burst from the cave screaming.

The police were promptly called to the scene.

"Coming through!" barked the beak-nosed man in the thick, black overcoat as he pushed past the crowd at the cave opening, hardly glancing at the multispired fortress of sand that towered twenty-five feet over his head between the surf and the cliffside. "Let me see him! Where is he?"

The man charged into the shallow cavern now bustling with police and made his way to the place where three officers crouched over the floor with brushes and small metal implements in their hands.

Embedded in the ground between them lay a human skeleton, completely intact, apart from its right femur bone. On its left index finger, it wore a heavy gold ring.

"Ah yes, Inspector Smudge," started a policeman with what looked to be a high-ranking hat. "I'm—"

As Inspector Smudge took in the scene, the hopeful smirk fell from his face like a man from a cliff. "What is the meaning of this?!" he cried. "These aren't the remains of our fugitive. These bones have clearly been here for years, and Mr. Smith only disappeared off the Whipples' boat last night!"

"Yes, Inspector," said the high-ranking-hatted officer.



"I'm afraid the call to you may have been a bit premature. The first officer to arrive thought this may have been your man—this Sammy 'the Spatula' character—seeing as how the Whipple shipwreck occurred less than a mile offshore from here. Apparently thought his body might've washed up overnight and provided a bit of a buffet for the local sea life."

"Ha!" sneered the inspector. "I've seen shore crabs do quite a number on seawater stiffs before, but never anything like this. Looks decades old, this one. Surely just some other would-be gangster who got what was coming to him. Cases usually go unsolved of course. But who am I to stand in the way if these hoodlums want to kill each other off? As much as I'd love to further my record for Most Solved Cases, I shall happily sacrifice if it means a few less criminals in this world."

A medium-built, spry-looking man in a gray trench coat stepped out from behind Inspector Smudge and pointed at the skeleton's left hand.

"What do you think about the ring, Inspector?" he said brightly. "Interesting markings there, aren't they?"

"Ahh, Greenley," said the inspector, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. "Interesting though it may be, the ring is a distraction. It'll no doubt aid in the identification of this unlucky individual, but as we have established this is not our man, that information is utterly irrelevant to us. Any other dazzling insights, Detective Sergeant?"

"No, sir," replied D.S. Greenley, less brightly.

"Well," the inspector sighed, "this has been a disappoint-

ment. I had hoped the tip we got this morning from the man in that coastal cookery shop claiming to see Mr. Smith alive was a mistake, but now it seems we must regard it as a legitimate sighting.” He returned his dark, broad-brimmed hat to his head. “All right, Greenley. Let’s leave it to the local police to sort out this mess, shall we? What we need to do is get ourselves back to Saltcliffe Station and wait for Mr. Smith to make his move. If he is indeed alive, that train will be his only way out of the area. We’ll catch him there as he attempts to flee, and he’ll be back in shackles before teatime.”

• • •

Arthur Whipple had the misfortune of being nearest the doorway when the knock came.

He had hardly been able to sleep that night and had crept from his bedroom just prior to sunrise, before anyone else in the house had risen. As he wandered past the entry hall on his way to the kitchen, he was nearly startled out of his slippers by a violent thumping at the front door.

Upon collecting his wits, he decided the knocking sounded far too urgent to wait for Wilhelm—the Whipples’ butler and World’s Strongest German—to answer it. So he walked to the door and opened it himself.

He immediately wished he hadn’t.

It did not seem possible that the man outside the door could look any angrier. But then the man recognized the mousy-haired twelve-year-old boy who had opened the door for him.

“Ah!” cried Inspector Smudge, throwing up his arms in exasperation. “I can’t stand to look at him, Greenley! Get him out of my sight!”

“Really sir?” said Greenley with a yawn. The typically wide-eyed detective looked as though he had not slept in some time.

“Out of my sight—now!” ordered Smudge.

“Yes, sir,” said Detective Sergeant Greenley.

Inspector Smudge whirled about and stormed off down the steps.

The sergeant turned to Arthur with an apologetic smile. “Pardon us, Arthur—nice to see you again, by the way—but would you mind fetching your parents? The inspector would like a word.”

“Of course, D.S. Greenley,” said Arthur. “I believe they’re still in bed, but . . .”

The sergeant sighed. “I’m afraid nothing short of the grave will stop the inspector this morning.”

“Right,” said Arthur.

He returned two minutes later with his mother and father, strategically positioning himself behind his parents as Smudge stamped back up to the doorway.

“Good morning, Inspector,” said Arthur’s father, Charles, with half-open eyelids. “A bit early for a friendly visit I’d say. What seems to be the trouble?”

“Oh nothing, Mr. Whipple,” Smudge grumbled. “Just thought I’d stop in to deliver the morning paper in case you’d missed it.” With that, he removed a bulging

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newspaper from his coat and hurled it at Arthur's father.

Mr. Whipple caught the paper with a grimace, then held it up to the light.

Spanning *The World Record's* front page was a photograph of Inspector Smudge and a dozen policemen holding spatulas next to a stack of barrels at a train station.

It looked to Arthur like any of the other record-breaking property-seizure photos that typically graced the pages of *The Record*—except for one small detail. Over Smudge's shoulder in the top left corner, a circular section of the background had been enlarged to show a dark figure suspended in midair, dangling from the handles of what appeared to be a rolling pin. The figure wore an all-black chef's uniform—complete with puffy, black chef's hat—like some sort of culinary cat burglar. The rolling pin in the figure's grasp straddled a taut stretch of rope, which the figure was using as a zip line to glide toward an open door on the side of a steaming freight train.

The headline above screamed: TREACHEROUS WHIPPLE CHEF ALIVE AND ON THE RUN!

"Sammy?" gasped Arthur's father.

"Oh, Charles," cried his mother.

A sudden, relieved smile formed on Arthur's face—but he quickly hid it behind his hand.

Luckily, Smudge failed to notice. "Indeed," the inspector snarled, "it would seem your chef has cheated both death and justice yet again. First, he manages not to have his body wash up in a cave yesterday morning, and then last night he



stages a spatula-smuggling operation to divert law enforcement from a brazen train getaway!” Noticing the confused expressions on the Whipples’ faces, the inspector threw up his hand in a dismissive gesture. “I hope it makes you happy knowing you and your son have unleashed a dangerous criminal into the world. After his numerous attempts on your lives and now his blatant fleeing of the law, I trust you harbor no further delusions as to Mr. Smith’s innocence. But fear not, dear Whipples—however you may hinder her course, Justice shall prevail in the end!”

Arthur’s parents stood clutching the newspaper, unable to look away from the photograph.

“Come on, Greenley,” snapped the inspector. “We haven’t an hour of daylight to spare.”

“Yes, sir,” yawned the sergeant. He tipped his hat to Arthur and his parents and said, “Morning, Whipples,” then turned to follow the inspector, who had already stormed back down the front steps.

Mr. Whipple closed the door behind the detectives and put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “You see, Arthur?” he said, pressing the newspaper into the boy’s chest. “Chin up. Sammy may have betrayed us, but at least he’s not dead. We must count our blessings. Now go rouse your brothers and sisters. We’ve got to get on with our lives and get back to work.”

When his parents had left the room, Arthur unfolded the newspaper and stared once more at the grainy blown-up image of Sammy the Spatula. He smiled to himself and started flipping to the section where the story continued.

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His progress, however, was soon halted by a certain striking photograph on page 2.

There at the top of the page was a picture of a grinning skeleton, half-buried in sand. Below it was a small close-up of the skeleton's bony fingers, one of which wore a distinctive metal ring. The accompanying headline read:

BURIED TREASURER!

Grim curiosity getting the better of him, Arthur couldn't help but take a peek at the article below:

A human skeleton discovered in a coastal cave by a record certifier at the Castle Classic sandcastle-building competition on Saturday has been identified as the remains of Bartholomew Niven, former treasurer for the Ardmore Association Board of Directors.

Arthur squinted at the last words of the opening sentence. He had heard the Ardmore Association mentioned before, but he had never learned much about the organization beyond its name. He knew it was somehow involved with the publication of the *Amazing Ardmore Almanac of the Ridiculously Remarkable* and the certification of certain world records not listed in *Grazelby's Guide to World Records and Fantastic Feats*, the publication that sponsored his own family's record breaking. But since Mr. Whipple had prohibited any of his children from ever reading it, this knowledge was of little use. Arthur gnawed his lip and continued the article.



There was some preliminary speculation that the skeleton could be the crab-eaten remains of the Whipple family's former chef, escaped convict Sammy "the Spatula" Smith, after he jumped off the family's frigate just before it sank to the sea floor on Friday (in yet another apparent example of the so-called Lyon's Curse that has plagued that family in recent weeks).

Arthur shuddered. It was hard to believe it had been less than two days since the Current Champion had sunk. *They couldn't sink Sammy, though, could they?* he thought. *Guess that's what Inspector Smudge meant about Sammy's body not washing up in a cave. Seems the Lyon's Curse hasn't completely caught up to us after all then, doesn't it?* He tried to sound confident when he said this in his mind, but he only shuddered again when he thought about just how close the curse had come. He went back to reading.

Smith, however, was quickly ruled out when the coroner determined the man in question had been deceased for over twenty years. (Furthermore, Smith would be seen alive on more than one occasion that day. SEE FRONT PAGE.)

The ring on the skeleton's hand, which features the Ardmore treasurer's seal, ultimately led to the discovery of the man's identity.

Arthur re-examined the photograph of the skeleton's ring. At the center of its broad, rounded face the ring bore

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the emblem of a jeweled, five-pointed crown. Each of the crown's points, however, ended in a sharp, curving flame, so that the crown appeared to be made of fire.

Pretty, Arthur thought, *but certainly not the Most Practical Piece of Headgear Ever Invented*. He traced the symbol with his finger, then returned to the article.

The evidence of the ring was quickly corroborated by aging dental records, confirming the skeleton to be none other than Bartholomew Niven, the lost Ardmore treasurer. Cause of death has yet to be determined.

Niven was last seen alive some twenty-five years ago, just before he and the rest of the Ardmore Board of Directors seemingly vanished without a trace. The disappearance of the entire board, which had been public at the time, proved something of a mystery. But it seemed to solve itself a month later, when the *Ardmore Almanac* appeared on newsstands across the globe just as it always had done before. The public assumed the board had simply gone underground to avoid the pressures of such a highly competitive field. The discovery of Niven, however, suggests there has been a new treasurer on the Ardmore board for some time.

Indeed, with the deep and active treasury the Ardmore Association clearly possesses (evidenced not least by its new, record-breaking contract with the Goldwins, who broke more records at last week's Unsafe Sports Show-down than any other family), a successor to Niven would

surely be required for the management of its finances. The identities of any such board members, however, remain a secret. Ardmore's chief legal representative, Malcolm Boyle, gave a brief statement regarding the organization's current governance by this unnamed shadow board: "The Association feels that separating its board of directors from its record-publishing pursuits pulls the spotlight from its leadership and places it on the amazing world-record breakers it sponsors, where the spotlight belongs."

And so, despite the discovery of Niven's remains, it seems the identity of the current treasurer may never be revealed.

Arthur gulped and looked at the photo of the skeleton again. He did not know what to make of what he'd just read, which involved events occurring long before he was born and an organization he knew next to nothing about. What Arthur did know was how very glad he was that the skeleton in the photo was not Sammy the Spatula's. His father had been right about counting his blessings.

Arthur closed the newspaper and glanced about him to make sure no one was watching. Then he reached into his pocket and slid out the secret message he'd received inside a birthday cake one day earlier. He unfolded the letter and began reading its closing lines for the tenth time that morning:

*Stay strong, mate. Your all the hope I've
got in this world.*

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Until we meet again . . .

Your Greatful Freind,
Sammy

Arthur stood staring at the words another moment, then—with a sharp breath—returned the letter to his pocket and went to fetch the others.



DINNER IS SEVERED

There are few scenarios quite so disheartening as being beaten by your rivals, deprived of your boat, and betrayed by your chef—all in the same week.

As the seven-day span that included the Unsafe Sports Showdown, the sinking of the *Current Champion*, and the disappearance of Sammy the Spatula drew to a close, a heavy fog settled over the Whipple estate and in the minds of those who lived there.

The Whipples' usual stream of record breaking slowed to a mere trickle. Cordelia could only muster the energy to complete the bottom half of her Eiffel Tower, which barely scraped out a world record for Largest Structure Constructed Entirely from Sugar Cubes, and though Simon finished the Longest Single Piece of Music Ever Composed

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for the Accordion, it was depressingly dirge-like and nearly unlistenable. The octuplets—Penelope, Edward, Charlotte, Lenora, Franklin, Abigail, Beatrice, and George—busied themselves with the record for Most Bubble Wrap Popped in Forty-Eight Hours. Meanwhile, two-year-old Ivy and her teddy bear, Mr. Growls, went the Longest Time for a Stuffed Toy and Its Owner to Wear a Single Set of Matching Outfits, which consisted solely of two plain gray ponchos. Henry, who had been the only member of his family to pull out a world record against the Goldwins at the Unsafe Sports Showdown, was in no better spirits than the rest of his siblings. After having the Ten-Eighty so tragically snatched out from under his nose, he endeavored to develop a new penny-farthing stunt he could be the first to execute—but all he could come up with was the Lemon Twist (a single airborne spin while balancing a lemon on his chin).

In short, Arthur's siblings scarcely knew what to do with themselves. Sammy's apparent betrayal had hit them all hard, and their recent Unsafe Sports trouncing by the Goldwin family had not helped matters. Having never suffered such a defeat before, they were staggered by the strange, aching feeling that accompanied it.

This was nothing new for Arthur, of course. He had failed at every world record he'd ever attempted. But as much as he hated to see his siblings in such a state, he had never felt closer to them. For the first time in his life, he finally had something in common with his brothers and sisters—if only for a short while.

As Friday morning dawned, the fog began to lift.

The Whipples had been dreading their prearranged dinner with the Goldwins all week, but when the day actually arrived, it proved just the thing to pull them out of their gloom. Realizing the evening would yield fresh opportunities for competition, the Whipple children found themselves suddenly invigorated. Surely, the best way to regain their pride was to win it back from those who had stolen it from them in the first place.

Arthur also found himself strangely looking forward to the Goldwins' dinner party, but for decidedly different reasons. Despite several attempts to contact her, he had not seen Ruby Goldwin, his newly enlisted detective partner, since the night the *Current Champion* sank—and he could hardly wait to show her the message he'd received from Sammy. The sooner they resumed their investigation, he figured, the sooner they might clear Sammy's name.

And so, before the clock had struck seven, Arthur and his family took their places on the World's Largest Pedal-Powered Tricycle—which served as their leisurely mode of transportation—and promptly engaged the pedals located below each of their seats. A system of cranks, gears, and chains whirled into motion, and the whole contraption lurched forward down the drive.

• • •

As the Whipples pulled up to the front of the Goldwin residence, Arthur was reminded of his last visit to the grounds

of what had been known to him then as the Crosley estate. Though the house's exterior had been elegantly refinished and all the trees perfectly pruned, the renovations were not enough to hide its similarities to the nightmare realm he had entered not so long ago in search of a missing model rocket.

The oversized tricycle had hardly reached a complete stop, when the house's front doors swung open and out stepped Rex Goldwin, followed by the entire Goldwin family. The look of the Goldwins all standing there at the front of their house gave Arthur the sense that he had stepped into some sort of living, breathing advertisement. But exactly which product that advertisement was trying to sell, he couldn't quite pinpoint. Clothing? Real estate? Skin cream? Toothpaste? All of these seemed likely contenders. *Wow*, Arthur thought. *They're like an advertisement for a company that makes advertisements.*

He then noticed Ruby at the back of the group, and the idyllic image was shattered. There was something in the girl's green eyes and dark, tousled hair that now reminded him of recklessness and danger and uncertainty—in a surprisingly appealing way.

"Welcome, welcome, dear Whipples!" Rex exclaimed through a sparkling grin as Arthur's family alighted from their vehicle.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Goldwin," Mr. Whipple said with a sociable smile. Whatever his past grievances with Rex Goldwin, he seemed to be trying to make the best of the situation now.

"Ah, took the trike, did we?" said the chisel-cheeked host. "How delightful!"

"Gosh, Dad," said Roland, the eldest Goldwin child present. "It's been ages since we've taken out our fourteen-seat bicycle, hasn't it? I'd say it's time we dusted the old thing off."

"I'd say you're right, Son," said Rex. "Certainly beats walking when one is feeling sluggardly, does it not?"

Mr. Whipple's expression dropped ever so slightly, but he remained otherwise unfazed. "It does indeed, Mr. Goldwin."

"We're so glad you all could make it, Lizzie," said Rita Goldwin, beaming as she stepped forward to hug Mrs. Whipple.

"Of course, Mrs. Goldwin," Mrs. Whipple replied, doing her best to hide her discomfort with Rita's spontaneous hugs. "The invitation was most generous." She took a breath, then exhaled. "Especially after what happened the last time we invited you . . ."

Rex smiled. "Don't say another word about it, Mrs. Whipple. We're just happy you're safe now. You will not be bothered by any murderous chefs or their freakishly sized clown associates tonight." With that, he bowed down and gingerly kissed her hand.

Just then, a giant Great Dane bounded forward from the back of the group and licked Rex on the mouth with a tongue nearly the size of his head. Rita shrieked and pulled her children close to her.

"Hamlet, no!" cried Arthur's sister Abigail as she chased after her dog.

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The Great Dane sat back on his haunches and panted cheerfully.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Goldwin,” said Abigail when she had caught up to him. “We’ve been training round the clock for the upcoming dog-kissing semifinals, but I’m afraid he hasn’t mastered his kissing signals quite yet.”

Rex wiped his mouth on his sleeve and gave a jovial smile. “Perfectly understandable,” he said. “You can hardly expect a dog to behave like a gentleman, can you?”

When Rita saw the dog was under control, she slowly loosened her grip on her children. “I suppose not,” she said with a nervous chuckle. “How foolish of me to assume other people’s animals conduct themselves as ours do.”

“Now dear,” Rex assured his wife, “it’s only a dog. Don’t let its grubbiness disturb you too deeply.”

“Of course, dear,” Rita replied, exhaling. She straightened her skirt and turned to Arthur’s parents with an uneasy smile. “You’ll have to forgive us if we’re a bit put off by your canine. It’s just that, with the sort of breeds we keep, we’re used to seeing dogs employed more often as pet *feed* than as pets—but please, don’t imagine for a moment we think any less of you for the slightly filthy nature of your preferred animal companion.”

“We really are sorry about that,” said Mrs. Whipple. “I assure you, Mrs. Goldwin, it won’t happen again. Is there some place outside where our dog can wait for us during dinner?”

Abigail frowned. “But I’ve barely played with him all day,” she protested. “He’ll be lonely.”

“Abigail,” Mrs. Whipple said firmly, “I warned you if you couldn’t keep Hamlet under control, he would not be able to dine with us. Now do as you’re told.”

The little girl hung her head. “Yes, ma’am,” she sighed. “Let’s go, Hammie.”

Hamlet panted excitedly and crouched forward, allowing Abigail to climb onto her usual spot on his back.

“I know just the spot for him,” said Rita. “If you’ll simply follow me through the house, we can put him in the garden, close to where we keep the other animals.”

Her daughter Roxy—the recent rocket-stick champion—gave a sneaky smile. “But not *too* close, of course.”

• • •

Arthur was eager for formal greetings to come to an end so he might have a private word with Ruby about the urgent investigation that awaited them. But as soon as he stepped through the Goldwins’ doorway, he found himself rather distracted. It was as if, by crossing the threshold, he had stepped out of the past and into the future.

The walls, ceilings, and floors of the Goldwin house were all gleaming white, its furniture and artwork providing the only accents of color. The decor would not have looked out of place on a space station built by a race of Martians with an exceptionally clean design sense—or perhaps by Swedish people.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Rex grinned. “You just can’t beat the timeless elegance and graceful beauty of molded plastics.”

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“Is that what this is?” asked Arthur’s father.

“Of course,” said Rex. “With wood and plaster feeling so hopelessly old-fashioned these days, we opted for a more modern approach. After gutting the interior of the old Croasley house, we reconstructed it from scratch with 100 percent man-made materials. You’ll notice the floors are made of distinctive Umbrian vinyl Corlite; the carpets and upholstery of fine Luxurethane; the window fabrics of alluring Styron and Crylitate. In fact, apart from its antique facade, there isn’t a single natural material employed anywhere in the house’s construction—earning it the world record for Lowest Ratio of Natural to Man-Made Materials Used in the Construction of a Single Family Dwelling.”

“Makes it a breeze to clean as well,” Rita said with a pointed glance to the Whipples’ Great Dane, “in case of *foreign contaminants*. The self-cleaning mechanism is always just a button-press away. And this is only the front room, of course,” she added excitedly. “Wait till you see the rest of it.”

“That’s right,” said Rex. “Luckily, we’ve got a bit of time to kill before dinner is ready. Chef Bijou is quite the perfectionist, you see. He’s been working on this meal for three days now. It’ll do us well to work up our appetite. Let’s just pop out to take care of the animals, and then we’ll have the full tour.”

He escorted the group back outside through a pair of towering doors at the rear of the room. The party emerged onto a terrace, which separated the Goldwin house from the large, well-groomed woodland behind it.

“Just down these steps is an area where we sometimes train our own animals. Rodney—you’ve got feeding privileges this week—why don’t you show Miss Whipple the stake she can chain her canine to for the time being? And double-check to make sure it’s clean. Might make the dog uncomfortable if it knew the chain’s usual purpose.”

“My pleasure,” said the blond-haired boy as he stepped forward.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Whipple, catching a glimpse of the heavy, but clean-looking chain at the bottom of the stairs. “Very well, Abigail. Go on and, er, chain Hamlet to the stake.”

“All right,” said Arthur’s sister from her seat on the dog’s back. “Come on, Hammie.”

The dog wagged his tail happily at the sound of his own name as his unhappy rider guided him down the steps with Rodney Goldwin.

When Hamlet’s collar had been attached to the chain and stake, he woofed a goodbye to Abigail, who began trudging back toward the others.

“Hey,” said Ruby’s four-year-old sister Rowena from the edge of the terrace, “I know what will cheer her up. Let’s show the Whipples *our* pets. Can we? Can we?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Goldwin, holding back a smile, “I suppose so. But no excessive frolicking with the animals. We haven’t got time for a deep-pore cleansing before dinner. For them or for you.”

Rita led the rest of the group down the terrace steps,

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through the trees, and into a large clearing, which was almost entirely occupied by a miniature, cartoonish version of the Goldwin house.

“Welcome,” Rita announced, “to the pride of the Goldwin estate!” Her face lit up as she spoke. “Some of the world’s most prized animals make their residence here, and we are honored to call ourselves their caretakers. Now please, allow me to introduce them.”

Rita grasped the handle on the trapezoidal front door and hinged it inward.

Arthur felt his pulse quicken slightly as he strained to see any trace of the creatures that reportedly ate dogs for dinner. He ventured a small step closer and—*whoosh!*—a scaly, sharp-toothed snout lunged at him from out of the shadows.

Arthur lurched back in terror and stumbled to the ground. He braced himself for the inevitable mauling—but just before the creature’s needle-filled mouth could reach him, it jerked to a halt with a loud *clink*. The Goldwins promptly burst into laughter.

It was then that Arthur noticed the tautly pulled chain at the back of the creature’s neck, keeping it from crossing the threshold.

“Now, now, Ransley,” Rita Goldwin chuckled as she addressed the lizard, “it seems some of our guests are a little on the jittery side. Remember what I’ve told you about first impressions.”

The lizard stared blankly forward, as if it didn’t actually

understand English. Rita Goldwin didn't seem to notice.

"Being the Fastest Lizard on Earth," she explained to her bewildered guests, "Ransley is our little greeter—aren't you, Ransley? Yes you are!" She bent down and pinched the lizard's cheeks—or whatever it is that lizards have on the sides of their faces—and gave them an affectionate jiggle.

Arthur then noticed another detail about the scaly-skinned creature: it was wearing a satin waistcoat. And a bow tie.

Rupert Goldwin, the black-haired boy who had alerted Smudge and the Execution Squad to Sammy's escape aboard the *Current Champion*, offered his hand to Arthur and pulled him to his feet. "Dry your eyes, Arthur," he said with a chuckle as Arthur dusted himself off. "Black spiny-tailed iguanas are almost exclusively plant-eaters, as everybody knows—so unless you've got a head of cabbage in your back pocket, you're completely safe from this one. Can't say the same for all of them, though."

"No you can't, Son," his father agreed. "Let's meet them, shall we?"

Rex turned to flip a switch on the side of the house, and a lurid neon sign fizzled into view over the front door. Beneath the image of a blinking blue martini glass tilting to the lips of a smiling lizard face, the words LIZARD LOUNGE buzzed in glowing green letters.

"Welcome," said Rex, gesturing to the miniaturized doorway, "to the Lizard Lounge."