

Chapter 2: The mysterious light

Before Gavin could gather his wits, hands grabbed his case.

'I'm Aunt Elspeth,' said a voice.

Standing in front of him was a pleasant-looking lady of about his mother's age. She was wearing a tweed skirt and jacket and had a little green hat on her head.

'You must be Gavin,' she said. 'You're very welcome. Give me your case and rucksack and we'll put them in the car.'

She led the way out of the station into a yard. In one corner was an estate car. Aunt Elspeth opened the back doors and heaved Gavin's luggage inside.

'Hop in the front,' she said. Gavin carefully opened the door on his side and made himself comfortable.

Soon they were driving through the streets of the town, skipping past lorries and vans. Once a flock of sheep blocked the road, and they had to wait until the shepherd and two boys herded them past. In another street, Gavin saw lorries with horses and cattle in the back.

'It's market day,' said Aunt Elspeth. 'All the farmers come into Stirling to sell their sheep and pigs. Their wives come too and shop. So, it's very busy today. But don't worry, it's quiet where we live.'

Soon they left the houses behind. The road narrowed and began twisting uphill. Gavin liked the way Aunt Elspeth drove, swinging the car deftly round the bends.

As they drove along, Gavin gazed eagerly from side to side. On each side of the road were large woods of fir and spruce, dark green and black. Behind them he could see the tops of hills, grey and scattered with boulders.

Suddenly Aunt Elspeth turned the car sharply off the road and through a gate bounded on either side by two huge stone pillars.

‘This is our drive,’ she said. ‘It runs through the woods for about half a mile to the house. There’s nobody here but us. There’s a farm over the hill which can be reached by a path through the woods.’

‘Nobody at all?’ said Gavin. Surely somebody must live nearby, he thought.

Aunt Elspeth glanced at him.

‘Oh, you won’t be lonely,’ she said. ‘There are some children on the farm and a bus passes the end of the drive twice a day. You can go into Stirling any time you want.’ She gave him a kindly glance. ‘Whenever you feel like a jaunt, let me know. We have a home-help and she helps with the meals, so I’ll be able to come with you sometimes. Have you any special plans?’

‘Yes,’ said Gavin. ‘I want to explore the hills.’

‘The hills? Well, you’ll have a splendid time. But don’t go out of sight of the house, will you, until you know the area. People have been lost there. We don’t want to spoil your holiday by calling out a search party for you.’

Gavin reached over the seat and put his hand in his rucksack pocket. He produced the compass.

Aunt Elspeth laughed. 'I see you've come prepared. Can you use it?'

Gavin nodded. He had practised using a compass and map in a park at home.

'Well, it's early to bed tonight,' said Aunt Elspeth.

'Tomorrow I'll make you some sandwiches and a flask of tea and you can explore as much as you like.'

The car stopped in front of a large stone house. Gavin eyed it with interest. It had two storeys and a high roof. At one end was a square tower, with real battlements. Ivy covered most of the tower. It had one window near the top. Aunt Elspeth saw him looking.

'That's your window,' she said. 'And if you feel like climbing down the ivy – don't! It's not very strong. I don't want to write to your mother telling her you've had an accident.'

For the second time that day, Gavin promised to be careful.

A pebble-covered drive ran right round the house, with large flower-beds in front. The woods pressed round on all sides. They looked deep and peaceful. Gavin listened in delight. There was no sound, but a soft whispering from the trees and the deep crooning of wood pigeons in the distance.



The rest of the day passed in a sleepy haze. Gavin was tired out by his journey.

Aunt Elspeth led the way to his room. It was small, with thick walls, papered in bright colours. His bed was against one wall.

'These are the Ochils,' said Aunt Elspeth, pointing out of the window.

Gavin peered out. Beyond the trees and dwarfing the house lay a range of hills. They were like a huge, frozen green wave, he thought.

He studied their steep flanks, seamed with little cliffs and covered with clumps of gorse and boulders. Half hidden by a clump of tall pine trees, he could make out a rocky pointed peak at the end of the range.

'What's that?' he asked Aunt Elspeth.

She came over to the window.

'Oh, that's Dumyat,' she said. 'Long ago there was a tribe of Picts called the Maeatae. They built a fort on top of that hill. It overlooks the Forth valley and then northward to the Grampian mountains.'

'A Pictish fort is called a dun,' she continued. 'That's how the hill got its name. The *dun of the Maeatae* or *Dunmyat*. Since then, the name has become slurred into *Dumyat* – pronounced *Dum-eye-at*.'

'Aunt Elspeth,' asked Gavin. 'How do you know all this?'

'Oh, I used to roam these hills too when I was a girl,' she said. 'I love the hills. So do you, I think. It must be your mother's blood in you. She loved the hills as well.'

Aunt Elspeth laughed. 'Some of your relations didn't. When they came to stay here, they couldn't sleep. They thought the hills were going to fall on them!'

Gavin chuckled. Yet he could understand their feelings. The hills did appear to lean over the house.

They 'frowned', he thought.

'You'll meet Uncle Fergus in the morning,' said Aunt Elspeth.

'Now get some sleep. I'll call you early and show you over the house. You'll have plenty of time to explore.'

Gavin lay in his narrow bed and gazed at the hills. Now that it was dark, they were just a blue-black mass against the sky. A few stars twinkled palely. Dark night clouds drifted slowly across the sky.

It was then that his adventure began. For halfway up the hill – the peak Aunt Elspeth had called Dumyat – he suddenly saw a light. It winked for a moment and then disappeared.

Gavin lay still. It must have been a shooting star. Or his imagination. Then the light appeared again. It flashed twice and then disappeared. He jumped out of bed, opened the window quietly and leaned out. All was still. From a farm, a dog barked twice. The pines sighed softly. From the woods a tawny owl hooted.

Gavin studied the hills again. They remained black and silent. Then the light flashed again. He saw it clearly.

But who would have a light up there? No one lived there. Aunt Elspeth had said so. Could it be poachers? Or smugglers? It didn't matter, no one burned a light late at night in those lonely hills without good reason.

Then an idea struck him. Tomorrow he would climb Dumyat and see if he could find out what the mysterious light was. He could try out his new equipment.

He wouldn't say anything to Aunt Elspeth. He would enjoy the mystery himself. Once he found out, he could tell her.

As sleep overcame him, one thought was uppermost in his mind. How to find the light? He struggled out of bed again. Reaching for his anorak, he searched through the pocket. Out came a pencil.

Peering up Dumyat, he scribbled a tiny arrow on the wallpaper at the side of the window. It pointed to where he had last seen the light.

It was a funny sort of light, thought Gavin as he drifted off to sleep. It was almost as if someone had opened the door of a lit room and then shut it again ... quickly!