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THE WUMPY CHOO

Outside in the playground a few boys were already kicking a football about. Bill Simpson was just about to charge in and join them when he remembered what he was wearing. He'd look a bit daft if he took a tumble, he decided. Maybe just for once he'd try to think of something else to do during playtime.

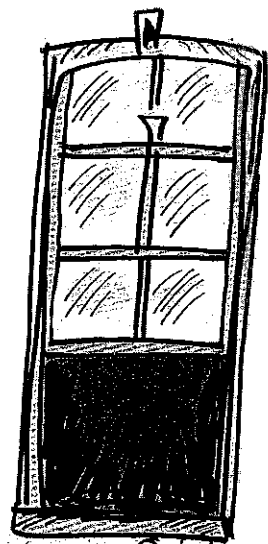
Each boy who ran out of the school joined the football game on one side or another. What did the girls do? He looked around.

Some perched along the nursery wall, chatting to one another. Others stood in the cloakroom porch, sharing secrets and giggling. There were a few more huddled in each corner of the playground. Each time the football came their way, one of them would give it a hefty boot back into the game. There were two girls trying to mark out a hopscotch frame; but every time the footballers ran over the lines they were drawing, they scuffed the chalk so badly that you couldn't see the squares any longer.

But it was rather chilly just standing about. The dress might be very pretty, but it was thin, and Bill's legs were bare. He decided to join the girls in the porch. At least they were out of the wind.

As he came up to them, Leila was saying:

'Martin bets no one dares kick a football straight through the cloakroom window!'



The girls all looked at the cloakroom window. So did Bill. As usual, the caretaker had pushed up the lower half of the window as far as it would go. It made quite a large square hole.

'Anyone could kick a football through there,' scoffed Kirsty.



'I could,' said Astrid.

'Easy,' agreed Leila.

'What do you get if you do it?' Bill asked them.

'A wumpy choo.'

'A wumpy choo?'

Bill Simpson was mystified.

'Yes,' Leila told him. 'A wumpy choo.'

Bill glanced round the little group of girls. Nobody else looked in the least bit baffled. Presumably they all knew about wumpy choos – whatever they were.

'I didn't know you could get wumpy choos round here,' said Flora.

So they were rare, were they? Like giant pandas.

'I'd love a wumpy choo,' said Sarah. 'But I'm not allowed because I'm allergic.'



Definitely an animal, then. A furry one. Bill's next-door neighbour was allergic to furry animals, too.

'What colour is it?' asked Astrid. 'Is it a pink one?'

If it was still pink, thought Bill, it was probably a baby and hadn't grown a lot of fur.

'No,' Linda told them. 'I know exactly what colour it is because it's Martin's very last one, and it's brown-y-yellow.'

Perhaps Martin hadn't been feeding it properly, thought Bill. Perhaps that was the reason its nice pink skin and fur had gone all brown-y-yellow.

Obviously it needed to be rescued – and fast!

He'd better take the bet.

'I'll do it,' he announced. 'I'll kick the football through the cloakroom window, and get the wumpy choo.'

Talilah gave him a bit of a look.

'You'd better be careful of your dress,' she warned. 'That football is filthy.'

'I'll manage,' said Bill Simpson. 'I know what I'm doing.'

The news, he noticed, spread like wildfire all along the line of girls perched on the nursery wall, and into the little huddles in the corners of the playground. All the girls turned to watch someone have a go at kicking a football straight through the cloakroom window.

'What's the bet?' they asked one another.

'A wumpy choo.'

Right then, thought Bill. No reason to hang about. It was a simple enough shot. All he needed was a football.

He walked towards the footballers in order to borrow theirs for a moment. Just as he did so, the game happened to swing his way and several boys charged past – knocking Bill flat on his back on the tarmac.

'Get out of the way!'

'We're playing here!'

Bill picked himself up. He was astonished. Usually if anyone walked into the football game, the players just thought they'd decided to join in. 'Come in on *our* side!' they'd yell.

'Be our goalie! Take over!'

This time it was as if they weren't so much

playing football around him as *through* him.

'Get off the pitch!'

'Stop getting in our way! Go *round*!'

It was the frock again! He knew it!

'I want the ball,' yelled Bill to all the other players. 'I just want to borrow it for a minute – for a bet!'

Games always stopped for bets. It was a rule. But they all acted as if they hadn't even heard him.

'Out of our *way*!'

'You're spoiling the *game*!'

The ball happened to bounce Bill's way again, so he leaped up and caught it in his hands.

'I *need* it,' he explained. 'Just for a moment.'

The footballers gathered in a circle round him. They didn't look at all pleased at this

interruption of the game. In fact, they looked rather menacing, all standing there with narrowed eyes, scowling. If this was the sort of reception the girls had come to expect, no wonder they didn't stray far from the railings. No wonder they didn't ask to play.

'Give the ball back.' Rohan was really glowering now.

'Yes,' Martin agreed. 'Why can't you stay in your own bit of the playground?'



Mystified, Bill asked Martin, 'What bit?'

'The girls' bit, of course.'

Bill looked around. Girls were still perched along the nursery wall. Girls were still huddled in the porch. Girls still stood in tight little groups in each corner. No girl was more than a few feet into the playground itself. Even the pair who had been trying to mark out the hopscotch game had given up and gone away.



'Where's that, then?' asked Bill. 'Where's the girls' bit? Where *are* the girls supposed to play?'

'I don't know,' Martin answered irritably. '*Anywhere*. Just somewhere we're not already playing football.'

'But you're playing football all over *every single bit* of the playground!'

Martin glanced up at the clock on the church tower next door to the school. There were only two minutes left before the bell rang, and his team was down by one tiny goal.

He spread his hands in desperation.

'Please give the ball back,' he pleaded.

'What's it worth?'

For the life of him Bill Simpson couldn't understand why, if Martin wanted the ball

back so badly, he couldn't just step forward and try to prise it away from his chest. Then he realised that Martin simply didn't dare. The two of them might end up in a bit of a shoving match, and then a real fight – and *no one* fights someone in a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons.

So he said cunningly:

'I'll tell you what it's worth. It's worth your very last wumpy choo!'

To his astonishment, Martin looked delighted.

'Done!' he said at once, and began digging deep in his trouser pocket.

He handed a tiny, wrapped rectangle over to Bill.





'There you are,' he said. 'Here it is. Now give me the football and get off the pitch!'

Bill Simpson looked down.

'What's this?' he asked.

'It's what you wanted,' Martin said. 'My very last 1p chew.'

In silence, Bill Simpson handed over the football. Where he'd been clutching it tightly against his chest, there was now an enormous brown smudge.

In silence, Bill Simpson turned and walked away. If all the girls had not been standing around the edges of the playground watching him, he would have cried.