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opening extract from

Larklight

written by

Philip Reeve

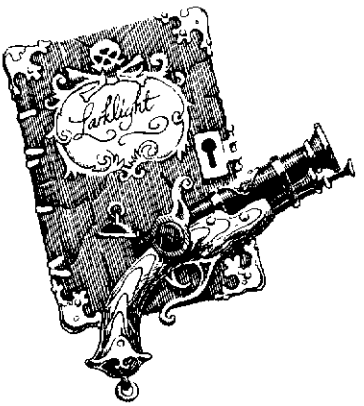
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CHAPTER ONE



IN WHICH WE RECEIVE NOTICE OF AN IMPENDING VISITOR.

Later, while I was facing the Potter Moth, or fleeing for my life from the First Ones, or helping man a cannon aboard Jack Havock's brig *Sophronia*, I would often think back to the way my life used to be, and to that last afternoon at Larklight, before all our misfortunes began.

It was a perfectly ordinary afternoon, filled with the

usual sounds of Larklight's grumbling air pipes and hissing gas mantles, and with the usual smells of dust and mildew and boiled cabbage – smells which were so familiar to us that we no longer even noticed them. Oh, and I was having an argument with my sister, Myrtle. That was perfectly ordinary too.

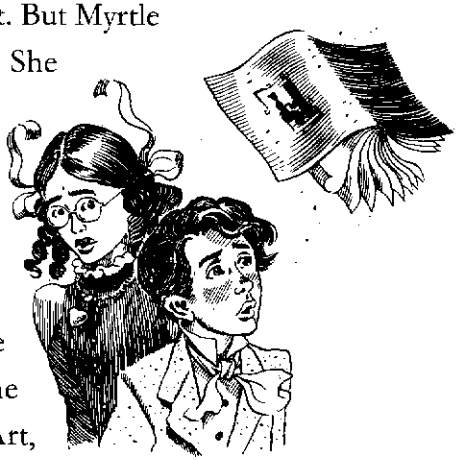
I wanted to go out on to the balcony to watch the delivery boat arrive, but Myrtle was too busy playing the piano. She had been trying to teach herself how, using a large, floppy, greyish book entitled *A Young Gentlewoman's Pianoforte Primer*, and she had been practising the same piece from it over and over again, for months. It was called *Birdsong at Eventide*, and it went, 'Ting *pling* ting pling *ting*, ting tong, ting tong, ting tonggg clonk, bother!' At least, that is how it went when Myrtle played it. Myrtle said that she was a young lady now and would need accomplishments if she were one day to shine in good society, but I didn't think the pianoforte would ever be one of them. I tried telling her so, but she just slammed shut the lid of the instrument and called me a little beast.

'Oh, do come, Myrtle,' I said. 'I thought you liked to watch the delivery arrive.'

She laughed her bitter, world-weary laugh, which she

had been practising of late in the bathtub. It was supposed to sound grown-up. 'There is little enough else to do here!' she said. 'I declare Larklight must be the dullest spot in all Creation! If only we lived in England, like a civilised family, there might be balls and levees to attend! I should go about in society, and young gentlemen would offer to dance with me. Even in Bombay or Calcutta or one of the American colonies there would be visiting and so forth. But stuck here in this bleak, outlandish place . . . Oh, *why* must we live at Larklight?'

I tried reminding her that Larklight was our mother's house, and had been in Mother's family for absolute ages. Mother had loved the old place, and after she died, Father had not had the heart to leave it. But Myrtle would not listen to reason. She flung aside *The Young Gentlewoman's Pianoforte Primer*, which floated slowly up to the ceiling and hung there, rustling a little, like a disappointed bat.



'Now look!' she cried. 'The gravity generator has gone wrong again! Find a servant, Art,

and send them down to the boiler room to mend it.'

In the end, she came with me to the balcony after all. I knew she would. She liked to see the delivery boat come in from Port George as much as I did, she had just grown too ladylike to admit it.

We climbed the long staircase to the balcony door, and paused there to put on our rubberised capes (to preserve us against the space damp) and slip on our lead-lined galoshes. The gravity was definitely a little patchy that afternoon, and wouldn't it have been a tragedy if one of us lost our footing and went whirling off into the boundless aether, never to be found (unless it were Myrtle, of course, in which case there would be great rejoicing and a half-holiday declared, et cetera, but ho hum.) When we were quite ready we unfastened the door and stepped outside. Space frost, which had formed thickly around the door seal, went drifting off in a bright, thinning cloud, and when it had cleared we could see the familiar view. The Moon filled the whole sky above us like a vast crescent lanthorn shining in the blackness of the high aether, and beyond it, a little off to one side, twinkled the small blue eye of the Earth.

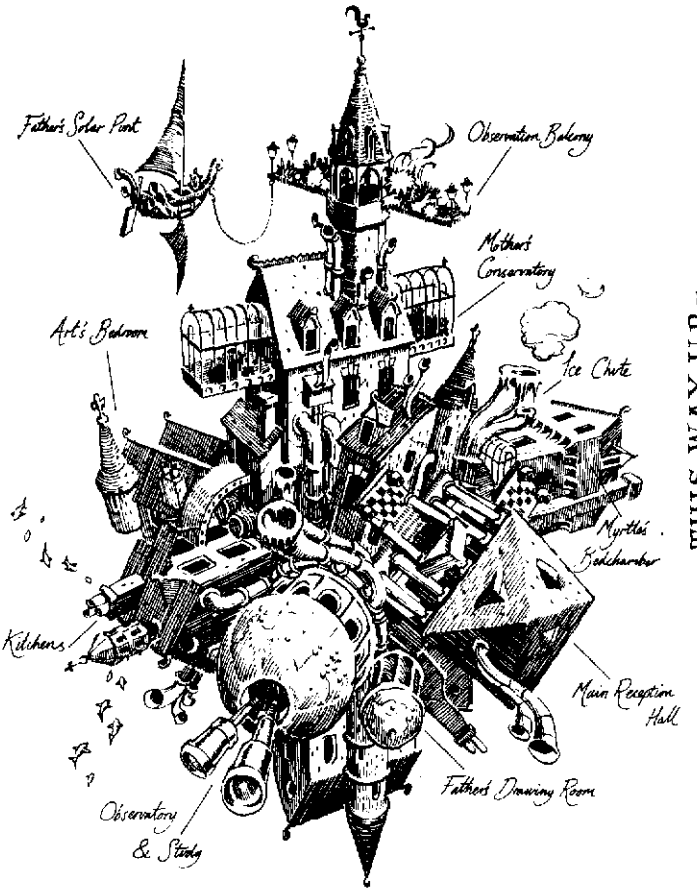


There is a picture of Larklight overleaf, with a few points of interest marked. As you will see, it is a very old house. Nobody seems to know who built it, nor which way up it is supposed to go, but Mother used to claim it had been constructed by an ancestor of hers during the early 1700s, just a few years after Sir Isaac Newton's great discoveries had made the Conquest of Space possible. Over the century and a half since then bits and pieces have been added to it, and another of Mother's forebears had tried to improve it somewhat during the last age by adding some porticoes and things in the Classical taste, but it remains a shapeless, ramshackle, drafty, lonely sort of house, and a terribly long way from anywhere, spinning along on its remote orbit out in the deeps beyond the Moon.



It was peaceful up there on the balcony; the immense silence of the open aether seemed more silent still after a whole day spent listening to *Birdsong at Eventide.* In pots along the balustrade there still grew some of the delicate crystalline space flowers which our dear mother used to collect. I remembered how, when I was three or four, there used to be a pot of them upon my nursery window sill, and

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~THIS WAY UP~

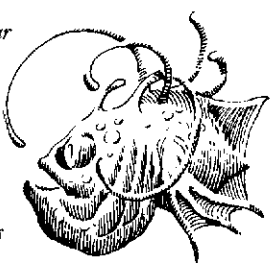
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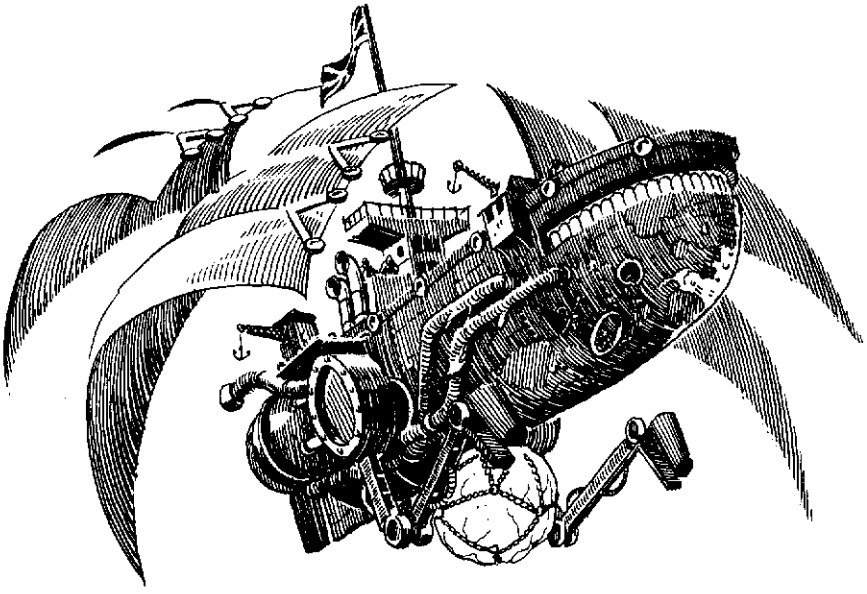
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how they would lull me to sleep each night with their strange, wordless songs. But Mother was dead, lost aboard the packet *Semele* back in 1848, while on her way to visit an aged relative in Cambridgeshire. Neither Father nor Myrtle nor I had her skill in growing and tending the singing flowers, and over the years, one by one, their voices had fallen silent.

To distract myself from such melancholy thoughts, I snatched up a long-handled net from the basket outside the door and started trying to catch one of the fish which kept flapping past*. I hoped I might land one that would turn

*Father says these space fish are not really fish, but rather Aetheric Icthyomorphs. But they do look awfully like fish, except that some of their fins have grown into wings. Father has spent years and years watching them, because he says that only by studying every detail of Creation can we truly begin to appreciate the Infinite Love and Wisdom of God. Father's name is Edward Mumby, and he is the author of a useful book called *Some Undescribed Icthyomorphs of the Trans-Lunar Aether*. We have several hundred copies of it stacked up neatly in the guest wing, should you be interested in reading one. Father has even had a fish named after him by one of his colleagues in the Royal Xenological Institute. It is called *Icthyomorphus mumbii*, and here is Mr Wyatt's drawing of it.

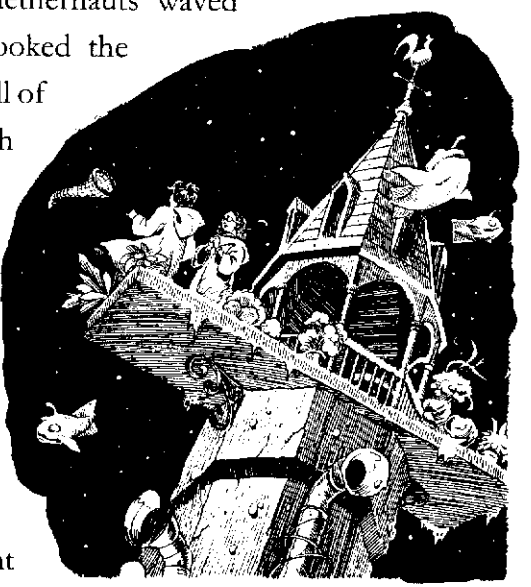




out to be of a Species Unknown to Science, and would interest Father. Alas, all I managed to net was a common or garden Red Whizzer (*Pseudomullus vulgaris*) as usual. Shoals of them often lurk about among Larklight's forest of chimney pots, seeking shelter there from prowling Grab-sharks. I wanted to keep mine for supper, but Myrtle made me throw it back.

'Look!' cried Myrtle, all of a sudden, and there was the delivery boat, far closer to Larklight than I had expected. It was a dark green boat, and from a distance it looked rather like a fish itself, except that it had a large bulge at the stern where the alchemical engines were housed. It edged up to

our jetty with a few beats of its wings and quick, nervous twitches of its steering fins, moving much as the fish do. The crew were Ionians – we could not see much of them, wrapped up as they were inside tarpaulin aether-suits and tinted goggles, but you can always tell an Ionian; they are stocky little fellows with four arms. I said it would be fun to ask them in and hear what yarns they had to tell of life upon the aether, but Myrtle said primly, 'Certainly not, Arthur; they look terribly common. Why, they are not even human, let alone English.' So I contented myself with waving, and the aethernauts waved back as they unhooked the great blue-white ball of comet ice which hung in their ship's cargo-claws and manoeuvred it into the mouth of the ice chute. We could feel the vibrations all the way up on the balcony as it went



rumbling down into the ice house at the heart of Larklight.

Because the aether is not rich enough for us to breathe for very long, those of us who make our homes in the Heavens have come to rely on regular deliveries of ice, which our servants feed into special machines that extract the oxygen and pump it about inside our houses and our ships. (It also provides us with fresh water and cold stores, where meat and vegetables may be kept.) Our delivery boat brings us ice about once every three months, along with hampers of dried meat and fruit, tinned goods, preserves, and the flour and eggs and suchlike which our automatic cook uses to bake our bread and biscuits. Usually there are letters and journals aboard too.

As the boat pulled away that afternoon I raced Myrtle down the stairways to the jetty, and I won – huzzah! I opened one of the food hampers and burrowed within. Myrtle chided me for being greedy, but changed her tone quickly enough when I uncovered a jar of dried apricots. We each ate a few, and then, together, we tore open the brown paper parcel which the Ionians had left there for us, in which was bundled up all the mail forwarded to us from the Central Lunar Post Office at Port George.

There was not very much. A seed cake from our great-

aunt Euphemia in Devonshire, a letter for Father, some recent editions of the London *Times* and a month-old *Illustrated London News*. The latter Myrtle snatched from me before I could catch any more than a glimpse of the engraving on the front cover, which appeared to show a giant greenhouse.

'Oh, what pretty dresses!' my sister mewed, leafing through, and stopping now and then to go all soppy over a portrait of Lady Somebody-or-other of Whatsit in a new ball gown. 'Oh, how I wish I could see London, even if it were only for one day! Look, Art! The Queen and Prince Albert are arranging a Grand Exhibition where produce from all over the Empire is to be displayed. It sounds highly illuminating. "There are to be exhibits from all over Britain, as well as from the American colonies and Her Majesty's Extraterrestrial Possessions, Mars, Jupiter and the Moon . . ."'

'Pish,' I told her. 'We do not rule Jupiter, only a handful of its satellites.'

Myrtle did not appear to have heard me. She was too busy imagining herself in a frilly frock, curtseying to the Queen. '"The Exhibition is to be held in a Crystal Palace,"' she read. '"This vast structure has been engineered by Sir

Waverley Rain* himself, and was built in his manufactories on the moons of Mars. It consists of an iron frame within which are set thousands of gigantic panes of glass crystal, specially grown in Rain & Co.'s crystal fields at the Martian North Pole." Oh, Art, how I would love to go!'

I left her daydreaming and ran off up the winding stairways to take Father his letter. Servants were clattering about in the dining-room and the kitchen, preparing dinner, and the smoke from their funnels made me sneeze as I hurried past them. Father had never been able to find human servants who were prepared to come all the way out to Larklight to look after us, so we made do with a batch of mechanical ones which we had ordered from Rain & Co. They were quite a good model, but they were getting rather

*Sir Waverley Rain is our greatest industrialist, and one of the wealthiest men in the Solar System. He started out as a humble cog-buffer in the spaceship yards of Liverpool, but his natural genius soon asserted itself and he made his first fortune by devising Rain's Patent Auto-Urchin, a mechanical boy who could be sent up chimneys too tall or poisonous for real orphans to sweep. He now owns vast manufactories upon the Martian moons, producing automatic servants and labourers of every type, and also engages in many other engineering ventures. He is terribly reclusive, and seldom leaves his secluded house, The Beeches, Mars.



old, and some of them smoked terribly when their furnaces had just been stoked. (Their hands overheated too. Myrtle was forever complaining of scorch marks on the household linen.)

I found Father in his observatory, almost hidden by the masses of tubes and tanks and ducts and telescopes and the teetering stacks of books. In the big vivarium at the centre of the room a few rare Icthyomorphs were drifting about

with their mouths open, inhaling particles of space moss. A fearsome Grab-shark was spread open on the dissection table like a book while Father made a careful drawing of its innards. Behind him, through the observatory's big, round windows, I could see one white horn of the Moon.

'Ah, Art,' he said, looking up from his work and blinking at me in his vague, bewildered way, as if he had forgotten that I existed. Poor Father; he had never quite emerged from that cloud of sadness which enveloped us all when we heard of Mother's death. I was still sad sometimes, when I remembered her and thought about how I never was to see her again. But I was often happy too, especially when I was clambering about the roofs of Larklight or creating adventures for my lead soldiers and model aether-ships. As for Myrtle, she was concentrating too hard upon becoming a young lady to be sad all the time. But Father had given way to a sort of settled melancholy. He sought comfort in his studies, and paid little attention to anything else. Why, I believe he might have forgotten to eat if Myrtle had not sent me out on to the landing to beat the dinner-gong each evening and rouse him from his contemplation of the lesser Icthyomorphs.

He blinked again, as if he were struggling to remember

how one went about being a father. Then it came to him: he smiled his old, kind, twinkly-eyed smile at me, and set down his pencils, reaching out to tousle my hair. 'Well, what news from the great world beyond this little planetoid of ours?' he asked.

I told him about the seed cake, ('How kind of your great-aunt Euphemia,' he said.) Then I gave him the letter. He tore open the envelope, frowning slightly as he studied the enclosure. 'How intriguing. A Mr Webster, who is travelling in this quarter of the Heavens, wishes to call upon us. He will be arriving on the morning of the sixteenth. I take it that he is a scientific gentleman, like myself. See, he writes on the notepaper of the Royal Xenological Institute . . .'

Now the Royal Xenological Institute are a parcel of very learned coves whose job it is to study all the different flora and fauna of our solar realm. They have premises in Russell Square, London, where the fellows and professors work, but they are in constant correspondence with amateur botanists and natural philosophers throughout the aether. Father quite often received letters from them asking his opinion on rare aspects of Icthyomorphous Biology, or informing him of a new discovery, and very dry, dusty,

dismal old gentlemen they sounded. Father, however, was quite delighted at the news of Mr Webster's intentions.

'I do not recognise the name,' he said, holding the letter up to the light and reading it again, as if he hoped that might tell him more about its author. 'I wonder if he has an interest in the lesser Icthyomorphs?'

I couldn't think of any other reason why anyone should want to visit Larklight, but I did not say so, for I had no wish to hurt Father's feelings. Instead, I ran off to find Myrtle and tell her the news. For although Father seemed unaware of it, I knew that the sixteenth was tomorrow.