Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Cat O' Nine Tails

Written by

Julia Golding

Published by

Egmont

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

EGMONT

We bring stories to life

First published 2007 by Egmont UK Ltd
239 Kensington High Street, London W8 6SA

Text copyright © 2007 Julia Golding
Cover illustration copyright © 2007 Tony Fleetwood
The moral rights of the author and cover illustrator have been asserted

ISBN 978 1 4052 3046 9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

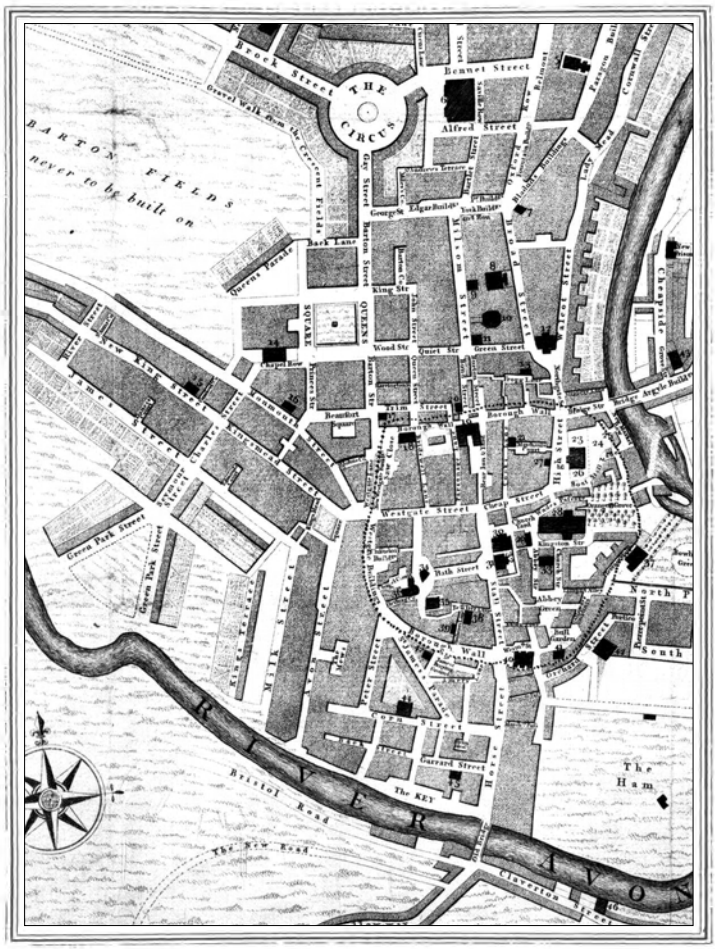
Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

www.egmont.co.uk
www.juliagolding.co.uk

Maps courtesy of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford:
C:17.70: A New and Accurate Plan of the City of Bath, 1793
F6 (225): New Jersey at the Time of the Ratification of the Constitution
F6 (225): Georgia at the Time of the Ratification of the Constitution
Map Res. 70, Map 28: The Continent and Islands of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

A NEW AND ACCURATE PLAN OF THE CITY OF BATH. 1793



Act I - In which Cat tries to remember that dangerous is Bad . . .

Act I

Scene 1 – Dancing with Billy

Frank, Pedro and I agreed that same day to despatch Joseph to Bristol to make enquiries about Syd. After carefully preparing the ground to get Mr Dixon used to the notion that a duke's son counted a boxing butcher as one of his closest friends, Frank took him into his confidence and asked for his advice. As Frank predicted, his cousin's response was immediate and generous: he promised that his own people in Bristol would help with the search. He advised us to start at the docks: if anyone went missing in that part of the world, this was the first place to look.

'Why is that, sir?' I asked. We were at dinner. I had been placed on Mr Dixon's right hand and was enjoying his respectful attention at the table. It made a pleasant change. Frank was rather too inclined to treat me like a fellow, neglecting to refill my glass or offer me delicacies out of my reach.

This was all right in Drury Lane, where it was every man (or woman) for themselves, but at Boxton Frank did not notice that his behaviour often left me high and dry, with an empty glass and plate. I knew enough of table manners to be aware that it would have been unladylike to shove him aside to help myself. But Mr Dixon was not Frank; he was very agreeably different.

Mr Dixon poured a splash of wine into my crystal goblet, then watered it down. 'It is because of the press gang, Miss Royal. When they have trouble filling up His Majesty's ships, they go looking for likely customers and persuade them to serve their country for a voyage or two.'

I shook my head. 'Not Syd Fletcher. He's got his life in London; he won't want to go sailing.'

Mr Dixon smiled grimly. 'I'm afraid it does not matter what he wants once the press gang get him. He'll be thrown on board and expected to do his duty, willing or no.'

'But that's . . . that's slavery.'

'Not quite. He'll get paid and a discharge at the end if he survives. Who knows, he might even take

to the life.' Mr Dixon must have noticed my shocked expression for he patted my hand. 'Do not worry, Miss Royal, your friend might not have fallen into the hands of the press gang. He might be quite at liberty, enjoying the life of a – what was it? – itinerant boxer.' He smiled at his cousin. 'My, Frank, you have got to know some interesting people while I've been away. I'm not sure I totally approve.' He quirked an eyebrow.

'I'm glad I've shocked you, Will,' Frank laughed. 'You never used to be so stuffy. My new friends will be good for you. They're all sterling fellows.'

'If they are anything like Miss Royal, then I'm sure I will be charmed,' said Mr Dixon, raising his glass to me.

There was nothing more we could do for Syd until there was some news, so I did not feel too guilty about enjoying the preparations for my first appearance in Bath. We had fixed on the dress ball the following Monday at the Upper Rooms and – guess what, Reader – I was to have a new gown!

Now, I expect my gentlemen readers to skip a page at this point, but, ladies, can you imagine it – me, a new dress! Not a hand-me-down from Lizzie's wardrobe. Not one chosen by someone else. But a completely new outfit made for me. You could have knocked me over with a feather when the duchess offered the services of her personal dressmaker.

'Don't mention it, my dear,' the duchess boomed when I had stammered my thanks to her. 'We'll look on it as your coming out.' Pausing for a moment, she tapped my cheek thoughtfully with her finger. 'You may be a trifle young for Society, but then you tell us you do not know your exact age. I think we can allow ourselves a little latitude. There have to be some advantages to being a duchess.' Returning to the game, she dealt me a card from the top of the pack, slapping it down on the table. 'And after all, you will be representing the Avon family: we can't have you disgracing us in a shoddy muslin, can we?'

Frank put down an eight of hearts. 'Sometimes, Cat, it's too easy to forget you're a girl just like any

other. But after hearing you today go all giddy over bolts of silk, I won't forget.'

'Is that the best you can do?' I asked a shade resentfully as I trumped his card with a ten.

'Forgive my cousin,' said Mr Dixon, laying a knave on the top of the pile and scooping up the lot. 'I'm sure you'll do us all credit, Miss Royal.'

I eyed Mr Dixon as he gathered the winnings to his side of the table, already imagining myself on his arm, cutting a dash in the ballroom as we danced a cotillion.

And the finished dress *was* simply wonderful: made from a glorious patterned white silk, it had embroidered roses round the hem and delicate lace at the neck. Not too fussy. Elegant was what I was aiming for – and that was what I think I achieved as I examined myself in the mirror before leaving. I felt a twinge of guilt as I studied the exquisite needlework. I knew that a poor girl somewhere had probably slaved for hours over this – for very little pay. A number of my friends in Drury Lane had been seamstresses and it is thankless, eye-wrecking

work, believe me. But, just for one night, I was going to pretend I was above such concerns. I was going to be a proper lady going to a real ball, just as I had so often done in my imagination. Who knows, perhaps I might even meet the man of my dreams and be swept off my feet? Why not? It happens in fairy tales and this evening it felt as if I was stepping into one.

I descended the stairs with the duchess to where the gentlemen were waiting. Her grace was robed in scarlet with a black feather nodding over her head, not unlike the costume of the Mogul prince Pedro had once worn at Drury Lane. Pedro caught my eye and grinned, knowing we were both thinking the same thing. Mr Dixon, dressed in a coat of dark blue – a colour that became him very well – stepped forward to take my hand.

'As I predicted, Miss Royal, you do us all credit.'

Frank, for once also smartly turned out, cast a strange look at me, making me wonder if I had got something wrong.

'What's the matter?' I asked, glancing anxiously at my feet. Two white slippers peeped

from beneath the roses. I couldn't spot anything amiss.

'No, Cat, you look . . . you look very well.' Frank's face flushed as if he'd said something embarrassing. He then moved away from me and climbed into the carriage without waiting. Mr Dixon hurriedly covered for his cousin's ill manners by handing me into the coach as the duke escorted his wife. Frank was looking at his nails as I took my seat beside him.

'What's going on?' I whispered, completely baffled.

Seeing we were unobserved as his father made a fuss of settling the duchess's fur cape around her, Frank took my hand in its white kid glove and gave it a squeeze. 'It's just . . . you have to understand, Cat, I've seen you dressed as a boy, covered in bruises, as a ballerina, a Quaker, and all the time you looked like you. But tonight, you don't. You're someone else. It's . . . it's just a lot to get used to. I'm sorry.'

Suddenly I began to have doubts about the evening. Did I want to be this new person – this

lady – that had shocked Frank more than any of my other guises?

But then the thought of my new finery bolstered my resolve. It wouldn't be like me to waste all this on a quiet night at home, now would it?

Mr Dixon climbed in and took his place on the other side. Pedro remained on the front steps to wave us off.

'Aren't you coming?' I called.

'Heavens, no, Cat,' he replied with a laugh.

'He's worried someone will ask him to dance,' said Frank, returning to his old self.

'No, I'm worried someone would shove a tray of drinks in my hand and expect me to play waiter all evening. The Assembly Rooms are no place for me.'

'But Pedro –' I began. The shine on my brilliant evening was already beginning to tarnish.

'It's nothing. You can't go shooting; I can't go to the ball. Fair's fair. You can tell me all about it tomorrow.'

Mr Dixon nodded his approval. 'The young

man is right,' he said. 'Sadly, he would only be despised for trying to move in circles above his station.'

The carriage moved off. I was silent, my thoughts employed cursing the world that constantly threw up so many barriers in the way of Pedro and me. Why couldn't we just be allowed to be ourselves – not a black boy or a poor lower class girl? It was almost as if we had labels round our necks proclaiming our inadequacy. Fittingly, it was at that moment that the duchess handed me a folded card on a ribbon.

'What's this?' I asked, turning it over.

'It's your price tag,' said Frank, fastening it to my wrist for me. 'All the single ladies carry them. Two thousand a year in bonds. Only child of ailing banker. Fifty pounds a year.'

'Frank, don't tease Miss Royal,' scolded the duke, frowning.

'It's your dance card,' explained Mr Dixon. 'And I've no doubt, dressed as you are, it will be full by the end of the evening and you will have worn out those slippers of yours.'

I was grateful to him for taking pity on my ignorance, but I also noted that neither he nor Frank rushed to be the first to be marked down on my card. Such depressing thoughts were pushed aside, however, as the carriage was beginning its steep descent of Lansdown Hill, giving me my first glimpse of Bath. Night had fallen but in many ways that only made it more exciting as the lights in the windows glimmered like a swarm of fireflies in the valley, allowing my imagination to fill in the details of the handsome houses and parades of shops I had heard so much about. The townsfolk had gone to a lot of trouble to build Bath to the heights of modern elegance, putting other cities to shame with their hotch-potch of styles. Where I come from in London, there has been only fitful planning as the city expands, leaving many streets with the more decrepit buildings slumped against recent additions. In Bath, the citizens have not been so sentimental, clearing the way for construction on a scale never seen before. The grand houses either side of the carriage bore witness to this: honey-coloured terraces clustered together

to impress, somewhat like the chorus line in the ballet, all standing in identical costumes, following the same steps of the dance. Each house on its own would have not raised an eyebrow, but put them together and the effect was breathtaking.

Nearing the Assembly Rooms, the traffic began to build. We got stuck in a line of carriages, none of us going anywhere; but this did not prevent some trying, leading to much inventive cursing from the coachmen as the more audacious drivers tried to force their way in front. Two of them started up a fist fight. Imagine it: fighting over something as stupid as bad manners on the road! I thought Bath would be more civilized, but apparently human nature does not change even if the architecture does. I stuck my head out the window to enjoy the show until the duchess pulled me into my seat by the back of my gown and gave me a reproving look.

I'm sorry, Reader, but sometimes my roots can't help getting the better of me.

Some sensible people had resorted to going on foot and were following the flambeaux of link boys

as they led the way to the Rooms. I itched to get out and go the last few hundred yards in similar fashion, but no one seconded my suggestion. It appeared that ducal pride would be dented if we did so, which meant we had to sit for an unnecessary quarter of an hour waiting for the blockage to clear.

Finally, it was our turn at the door. Leaving hats and cloaks with the footmen, we entered a packed corridor leading to the rooms beyond. Our names were announced, starting in clarion tones with 'His Grace, the Duke of Avon; Her Grace, the Duchess of Avon; His Lordship, the Earl of Arden; until finally the footman tailed off with 'Mr Dixon, and, um, Miss Royal.' Earl of Arden!? I'd never heard Frank introduced formally before. He'd kept very quiet about his impressive title.

An excited whisper rustled through the people gathered at the sides of the corridor, fans fluttered, spectacles pinched to noses to take a better look. The duke and duchess swept through with gracious nods to acquaintances. Frank offered me his arm with a quizzical smile. I

accepted it and we did our best to glide along in their wake, but I would keep tripping on the hem of the duchess's gown.

We were lured onward by the sounds of an orchestra and the clink of glasses. My heart was beating fast with excitement as I took in the beautiful dresses, the glittering mirrors and thousands of candles. Only as I entered the Octagonal Room adjacent to the ballroom did I remember the card on my wrist. It was as blank as when it had first been given to me. Indeed, the flimsy thing hung between us like a manacle, accusing Frank of neglect. He glanced at it once then fixed his eyes on something in the distance. I couldn't remember seeing him look so awkward before. And I sensed it too. It felt as though our friendship was about to move into a whole new territory which neither of us was ready to explore. A step beyond this room and we'd find ourselves in the middle of a dance.

Frank cleared his throat.

'Ah, Arden, you've finally decided to grace us with your presence!' A young man descended on

him, a gaggle of ladies in tow. Somehow, with sharp elbows and simpering smiles, they managed to shoulder their way in between us. 'I don't believe you've met my sisters?'

No sooner had these young ladies been introduced than a queue of other female contenders started to form. Matrons thrust me aside as their daughters fought to get to the front. It reminded me of a market crowd getting wind of a bargain, Frank – or should I say the Earl of Arden – being the item on sale. My feet were trodden on and my finery was in grave danger of being ripped in the scrum.

Frank gave me a rueful grin as he was buried under the bevy of giggling girls all wanting to curtsey to the duke's son. I raised my eyebrow in sympathy and turned to seek refuge with the rest of our party. It took a moment to locate them as there were so many people. The room was built for easy passage from refreshment room to ballroom, designed with mingling in mind. Ladies and gentlemen were coming and going the whole time, swirling in their finery around

those who had chosen to stand still for a moment. The duke was in earnest conversation with some elderly gentlemen by one of the fireplaces. The duchess had seated herself among four matrons who were all inspecting the finery on display with a critical eye. Mr Dixon was closest. He was greeting a naval officer and a gentleman in a fine purple jacket standing with his back to me. I moved towards them, uncomfortable among all these people who seemed to know each other already.

'Miss Royal, I wondered where you had got to!' Mr Dixon held out his arm and brought me forward. 'May I introduce some acquaintances of mine? Lieutenant Belsize of His Majesty's ship, *Courageous*.' I curtseyed to the young man with ginger hair, resplendent in his dark blue uniform, white breeches and buckled shoes. 'And this gentleman is –'

'Shepherd, Mr William Shepherd – and there is no need for an introduction: Miss Royal and I are old friends.' The man in the purple jacket turned and gave me a grin.

My poise momentarily left me. 'Billy! What the blazes are you doing *here*?'

Mr Dixon and Lieutenant Belsize looked scandalized – as well they might. You don't normally hear language like this from a lady in a ballroom. But perhaps you will forgive me when you understand that Billy and I go all the way back to Covent Garden, beginning our acquaintance – if you can call it that – on the streets. If you have read my earlier adventures, you will know that he has tried to cut my throat twice, but rather spoilt his record by once saving my life.[1] Clawing his way up the social ladder through thieving, threats and thuggery, he now controls one of the most dangerous parts of London and has expanded his interests into legitimate business, no doubt attempting to buy himself respectability. But Bath?

'Language, my dear! Remember where we are,' laughed Billy, taking me by the elbow. I was

[1] For throat-cutting attempts, please see *The Diamond of Drury Lane* and *Den of Thieves*; for life-saving, I refer you to *Cat among the Pigeons*, all published by that nice Mr Egmont.

surprised to hear that he had managed to lose much of his street accent, only detectable in his over-aspirated haitches. 'Gentlemen, please excuse us: Miss Royal and I have a lot of catching up to do.'

Still half in shock, I let Billy lead me into the refreshment room. He thrust a glass of punch into my hand.

'At least try and look as though you're enjoying yourself,' he said with a wry smile as he raised his glass.

'Billy, why Bath?' I finally croaked.

'Mr Shepherd to you, my dear.' Billy stroked his magnificent embroidered waistcoat and gazed around the room with satisfaction. 'I'm taking the waters and enjoying the innocent diversions of the place.'

A horrible thought struck me. 'Did you follow me down here?'

'Don't flatter yourself, Cat. That is all at an end.' From the glint in his eye, I could tell we were both thinking back to our last meeting when he had almost killed me for refusing to stay with him

as part of his household fixtures and fittings. 'Did you know I'm engaged to be married?'

I spurted a mouthful of punch over him, unable to stop my laughter. 'Who's the victim?' I choked.

He gave me a humourless smile as he wiped himself down with a white silk handkerchief. 'Miss Abingdon, heiress to the Abingdon Brewery fortune.'

'That follows: she'd have to be drunk to marry you.'

'You won't mind, Cat, if I don't introduce you.' Billy's gaze was now roving the company as if looking for someone. 'She's rather a cut above you.'

'Above me? What about you, you lying, thieving, murderous bully! What stone did she find you under?'

He turned back to me, his eyes travelling over my new attire. 'You forget your place, Cat. The dress becomes you well enough, but it doesn't change who you are. One word with the Master of Ceremonies and he'd have you out on the street where you belong, with a flea in your ear for polluting the company. There are few mothers who

like their girls mixing with a bastard daughter of some common streetwalker.'

I flushed with rage. He was always trying to drag me down to his level. 'And what if I was to mention to the Master of Ceremonies your little criminal empire?' I spat.

Billy shrugged. 'He'd probably appreciate proof of the depth of my purse. Half the young bloods in Bath are in debt to me.'

'That's not fair.'

'Tell me, Cat: when was your world *ever* fair?' He lifted my chin with his index finger, forcing me to meet his gaze. 'When you got thrown out of the theatre company for being no use to anyone?' His grey-green eyes gleamed maliciously.

You have to hand it to Billy: he certainly knows how to pour salt on a wound.

I had had enough. Rapping his finger away with my fan, I freed myself. 'Well, *Mr* Shepherd, it's been a joy and delight as always to pass the time in your company but I'm afraid I have obligations that tear me from your side.'