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FRANCES
HARDINGE

ISLAND *of* WHISPERS

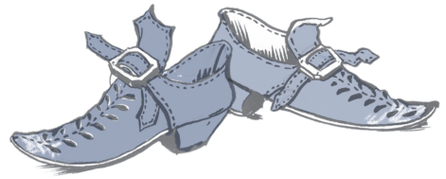


Illustrated by
Emily Gravett

TWO HOOTS



BLUE SHOES



The morning after the lord's young daughter died, his lady wife came to visit the Ferryman. She had powdered over her tear-stained cheeks, but her eyes were still red as she handed over her daughter's shoes.

'Look after her,' was all she said. The families often said things like that, and Milo's father always gave the same answer.

'I'll see her safely on her way.' Milo's father didn't say much, but people always sensed that they could trust him. He was just a grizzled old Ferryman, but he had a stillness, a stern calm in his eyes like a winter evening sky. The lady tried to smile, tried to speak, failed to do either and left.

The shoes were blue and slender, with brass buckles and scuffed toes.

Fourteen years old, thought Milo. *The same age as me*. He imagined the

girl's fingers tightening the longest strap, creasing the leather a little more each day. He imagined her slim feet taking eager, careless steps.

'Is she here?' he couldn't help asking.

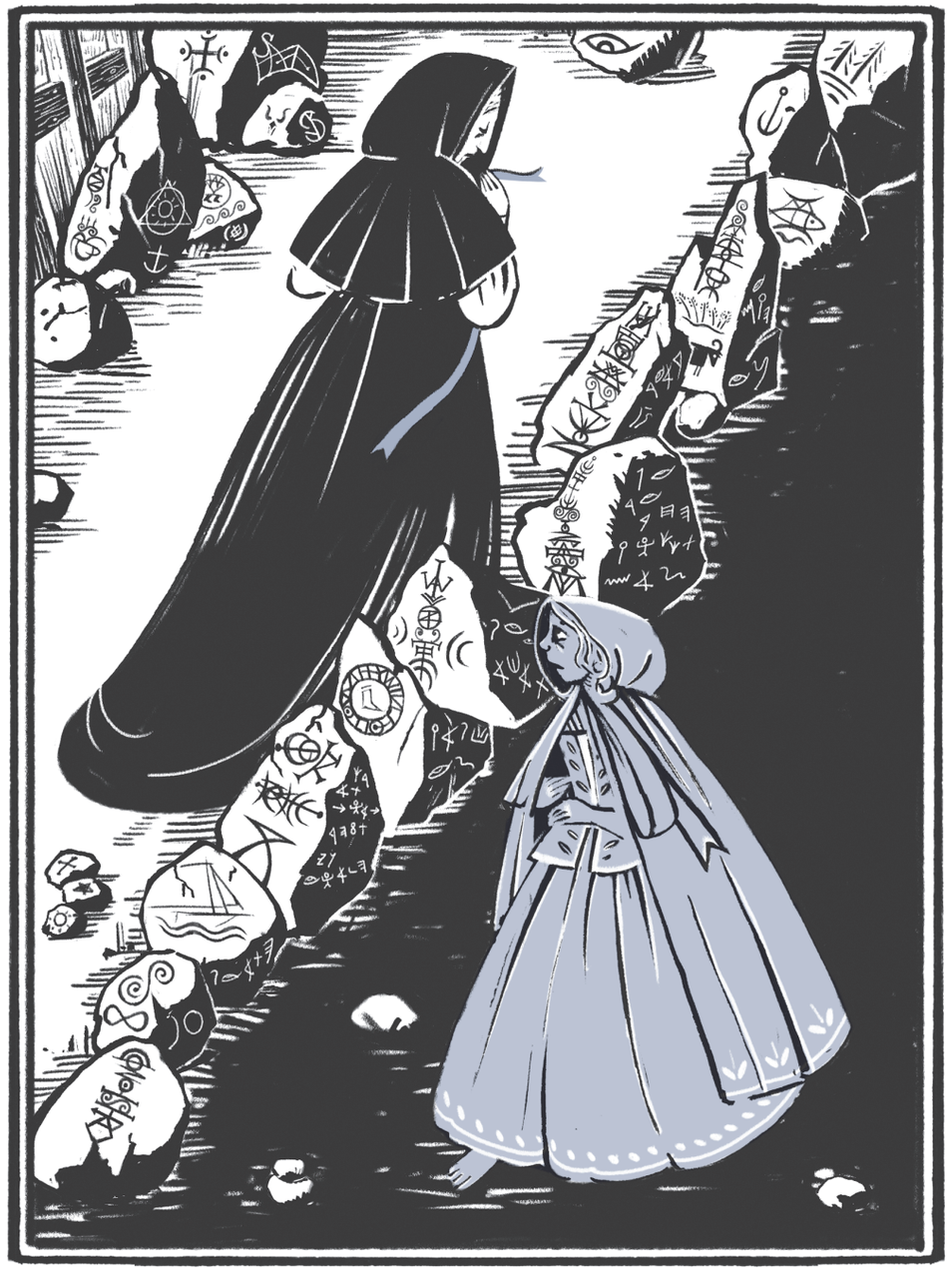
'Coming,' answered his father, gazing out through the window.

Milo joined his father, and stared out into the grey morning light. Two paths led to the house. One was scattered with white sand, salt and sigil-carved rocks, so that the living could walk it without fear. The lady could still be seen hurrying away along this, her thick shawl shrouding her bowed head. The other path was grey stone and ash, sodden from the night's rain. At first Milo could see nobody walking the grey path, but he knew that his father was never wrong. Thirty-five years as the Ferryman had given him an instinct for the Dead.

Milo blinked, and when he opened his eyes again it seemed to him that he *had* seen something. Or perhaps imagined it. A slim, windswept figure wrapped in something dark and trailing, bare feet white against the grey path . . .

'Don't look,' said his father, closing the shutters.

'Shall I put 'em with the others?' asked Milo's older brother Leif,



picking up the shoes by their straps with a matter-of-factness that made Milo wince.

'Let me!' said Milo, surprising himself.

'No.' His father's tone had a quiet, heavy finality.

Milo knew what his father meant. They had talked about it often enough.

It's not just that Leif's older, Milo's father had once told him, in his curt, honest way. *You're not cut out to be a Ferryman, or even a Ferryman's helper. Leif can keep his head clear, and you can't. I can't trust you to keep your guard up.*

Milo felt his usual wave of frustration and inadequacy. His father was right, you had to keep your guard up when ferrying the Dead. You needed enough alertness to see when they were close, but it was dangerous to be too aware of them. If you let yourself wonder about them, or imagine how they might feel, that left you open. Your mind might start to pick up their voices, fill in the gaps and understand their words. Curiosity might drag your gaze to them for one fatal glance . . .

Milo knew all of this, but couldn't help himself. In the presence of the

Dead, his mind spiralled out of control, wondering, imagining and painting pictures.

Leif, on the other hand, was tall, strong and unimaginative. He had been born on a calm day under a spring-blue sky. Then again, perhaps for him all days were calm. He never seemed to lose his temper, even when he found himself in a fight. He would have made a good warhorse, Milo sometimes thought, mild and unshakeable even as cannons thundered on all sides.

As Leif left with the shoes, Milo stayed silent, and remained so for the next half-hour.

'Stop thinking about it,' Milo's father said.

But Milo couldn't stop thinking about the dead girl. He thought of her walking barefoot after Leif, unable to resist the pull of her shoes. He wondered if she still felt the cold.



It was the mist, everyone agreed, that stopped the Dead leaving the island of Merlank. In the rest of the world people sloughed off their bodies like butterflies leaving cocoons, and their spirits invisibly departed. In Merlank they lingered.



Even the living sometimes found it hard not to listen to the mists, and their barely perceptible orchestra of almost-sounds. But living ears had so many other things to listen to, such as the quiet sea of their own breathing, the warm drum of their own hearts, a thousand little clicks and river-rushes in their own softly alive bodies. The Dead did not have such distractions. They heard everything the mist said, perhaps, and they lingered too long, and missed the moment when they should have departed.

After a death, it was vital that the shoes of the Dead be delivered to the Ferryman as quickly as possible. If this was not done, then the shoes would soon disappear, claimed by their owner. Once the Dead had their shoes, there was nothing to stop them roaming the island.

They drifted across the island, sensed but seldom seen. They trod new paths through the crops, and gouged the mud in riverbanks. They squeezed through fences, knocking the posts askew. They could not find what they sought, so they walked and walked, forming obsessive routes that criss-crossed each other. Wherever they walked the grass slowly turned brown, the crops wilted, fruit withered, fish died.

Even the sight of them could kill. Anyone unlucky enough to meet the Dead face-to-face and look into their eyes sickened afterwards, or died immediately.

It was the task of the Ferryman to help the wandering Dead, and take them to the Island of the Broken Tower, the place from where they could move on. It was the only job of the Ferryman, but an essential one. And everyone knew, though nobody said, that Milo's father could not do it forever. He was shorter of breath these days, shorter of speech, and even shorter of stature, with a stoop Milo didn't remember from his younger days.

Everyone also knew that Leif would take over when the time came. Milo wasn't sure he would have wanted to be a Ferryman anyway, but he hated not being able to help with anything important. It made him feel useless, the only member of the family too weak to carry his share of the weight.

That evening, when sunset had dulled to a gammon-coloured stain, the lord himself came calling and demanded his daughter's shoes back. The bereaved sometimes did this, when they weren't ready to say goodbye. Usually it was a child, though, or a distraught teenage love, not the Lord of Merlank, in his robe, gold chains and sealskin gloves.

Milo watched through a window as his father and brother went out to meet the lord.

‘There’s been a mistake,’ the lord said, with a tight smile that must have made his face ache. ‘My wife made a mistake. My daughter isn’t dead, just very ill. I’ll need her shoes back – they’re her favourites.’

‘There’s no mistake,’ Milo’s father said levelly. He was not cruel, but always unflinching with the truth. ‘She came to us this morning, barefoot in the mist. She’s ready for her journey.’

‘I’ll decide when she’s ready,’ said the lord. ‘I have doctors . . . men of enlightened arts . . . people who can help her.’

‘Magicians?’ For the first time Milo’s father frowned. ‘You’d trust your daughter’s soul to the promises of dark practitioners?’

Without any fuss, Leif moved forward to stand protectively beside his father. Milo hesitated, wondering if he should go outside and join them as a show of strength. Though the lord himself was not young or strong, four large, liveried men stood behind him, with swords at their belts.

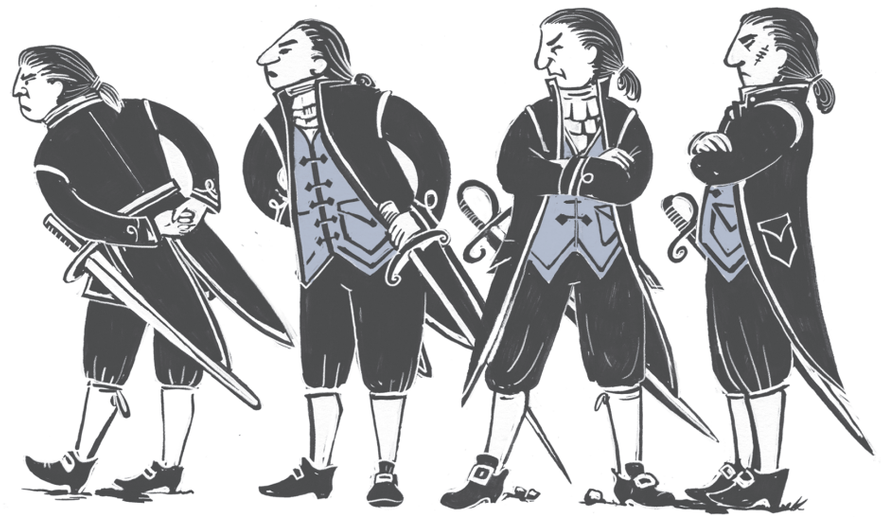


‘You’ll give us the shoes,’ said the lord, ‘and we’ll try what can be done. If it doesn’t work you can have them back in a few days.’

‘No,’ said the Ferryman. ‘I sail tonight. The moon’s right, and the sea’s calm, and there are five ghosts waiting. It might be the last chance before winter.’

‘I can’t allow that,’ said the lord, with a pained light in his eyes.

Milo stared as the swords were drawn free of their sheaths. As the lord’s men advanced on Leif and the Ferryman, Milo looked around



the kitchen in desperation. What could he use as a weapon? As he snatched up a broom, he heard a yell from outside.

Through the window he saw Leif pinned to the ground by three of the men. The fourth was standing over the prone, motionless figure of the Ferryman.

'I barely touched him!' protested the fourth man. 'He swung at *me*! And he missed, and fell, and . . .'

'Pull yourselves together!' said the lord urgently. 'Search the house and find my daughter's shoes! The Ferryman had another son, didn't he? We need to capture that boy too!'

The Ferryman had another son.

Had.

With that one word, Milo understood. His father wasn't unconscious. He was dead. The broom felt heavy and useless in Milo's hands, the wood beneath his palms slippery with sweat.

'Leave my brother be!' croaked Leif, from under his attackers. 'He's just a boy, he doesn't know anything! I'll take you to the shoes!'

The lord's men pulled Leif to his feet and tied his hands behind him.

You can't! thought Milo, wanting to yell to his brother to stop. But something in Leif's still, dogged face silenced him. *You won't*, Milo realized with sudden certainty. *You'd never give up those shoes.*

Sure enough, Leif began leading the lord and his men away in the wrong direction. Milo could guess why the visitors were so eager to leave. For all they knew, a new and vengeful spirit might be rising from the Ferryman at that very moment.

Only when the group vanished into the early evening mist did Milo venture out, laying a blanket carefully over the old man lying on the ground. He tried to think, but his mind felt cold and unsteady.

Milo's neck and spine prickled. Without looking around, he could sense something standing behind him. It spoke. He was almost certain it spoke. His ears did not catch any sound, but the unheard words left an uneasy smear across his mind, like the mood of a dream after waking.

He wanted to run from it, but if he did, what then? What would happen to it, and all the other Dead needing to be taken on their last journey?

There's no Ferryman any more, and Leif's a prisoner. There is only me.

The lord would not be fooled for long. Once the path petered out at the dead-end beach he would realize that Leif was lying, and would come back to the house. With unsteady hands, Milo began to unfasten his father's boots. He had never realized before quite how worn they were, or how many times they'd been cobbled.

People were like shoes. Sometimes their seams split and their soles came away, and you didn't see it coming.



GREY MARE



A shuttered lantern in hand, Milo hurried through the evening mist, his father's boots in the pack on his back. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve whenever his vision blurred.

Behind him the undergrowth crackled suddenly, but Milo didn't look back. He knew who would be following him and the boots that he carried.

I should have done something, Milo thought as he ran. *I should have run out to help when Leif did*. But he knew that he could have done nothing, armed only with a broom and bravado against swords and superior numbers.