Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

Opening extract from

Runemarks

Written by

Joanne Harris

Published by

Doubleday

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



1

Seven o'clock on a Monday morning, five hundred years after the End of the World, and goblins had been at the cellar again. Mrs Scattergood – the landlady at the Seven Sleepers Inn – swore it was rats, but Maddy Smith knew better. Only goblins could have burrowed into the brick-lined floor; and besides, as far as she knew, rats didn't drink ale.

But she also knew that in the village of Malbry – as in the whole of the Strond valley – certain things were never discussed, and that included anything curious, uncanny or *unnatural* in any way. To be *imaginative* was considered almost as bad as *giving oneself airs*, and even dreams were hated and feared, for it was through dreams (or so the Good Book said) that the Seer-folk had crossed over from Chaos; and it was in Dream that the power of the Faërie remained, awaiting its chance to re-enter the world.

And so the folk of Malbry made every effort never to dream. They slept on boards instead of mattresses; avoided heavy evening meals; and as for telling bedtime tales – well. The children of Malbry were far more likely to hear about the martyrdom of St Sepulchre or the latest Cleansings from World's End than tales of magic or of World Below. Which is not to say that magic didn't happen. In fact over the past fourteen years the village of Malbry had witnessed more magic in one way or another than any place in the Middle Worlds.

That was Maddy's fault, of course. Maddy Smith was a dreamer, a teller of tales, and worse; and as such, she was used to being blamed for anything irregular that happened in

Now Maddy considered the rust-coloured mark. It looked like a letter or sigil of some kind, and sometimes it shone faintly in the dark, or burned as if something hot had pressed there. It was burning now, she saw. It often did when the Good Folk were near; as if something inside her were restless, and itched to be set free.

That summer it had itched more often than ever, as the goblins swarmed in unheard-of numbers, and banishing them was one way of putting that itch to rest. Her other skills remained untried and, for the most part, unused; and though sometimes that was hard to bear – like having to pretend you're not hungry when your favourite meal is on the table – Maddy understood why it had to be so.

Cantrips and runecharms were bad enough. But glamours, true glamours, were perilous business, and if rumour of these were to reach World's End, where the servants of the Order worked day and night in study of the Word . . .

For Maddy's deepest secret – known only to her closest friend, the man folk knew as One-Eye – was that she *enjoyed* working magic, however shameful that might be. More than that, she thought she might be good at it too and, like anyone with a talent, longed to make use of it and to show it off to other people.

But that was impossible. At best it counted as *giving herself airs.*

And at worst? Folk had been Cleansed for less.

Maddy turned her attention to the cellar floor, and the wide-mouthed burrow that disfigured it. It was a goblin burrow, all right, bigger and rather messier than a foxhole and still bearing the marks of clawed, thick-soled feet where the spilled earth had been kicked over. Rubble and bricks had been piled in a corner, roughly concealed beneath a stack of

lins were only rats.

Suddenly there came a scrabbling sound from the far, dark corner of the cellar. Maddy turned and saw a movement in the shadows and a shape, rather larger than a common rat, bob away between two of the barrels.

Quickly she stood up, lifting her candle so that its flame lit up the whitewashed wall. No sound could be heard; nothing moved but the shadows that jerked and juddered.

Maddy stepped forward and shone the candle right into the corner. Still nothing moved. But every creature leaves a trail that only a few know how to see. There was *something* there; Maddy could feel it. She could even smell it now: a sour-sweet, wintry scent like roots and spices kept long underground.

A drunken party, she thought again. So drunken, perhaps, that one of the revellers, stupefied beyond all thought of caution by Mrs Scattergood's excellent ale, had curled up in some dark corner to sleep off the after-effects of a bellyful. And now it was trapped, whatever it was. Trapped behind a drift of stacked ale kegs, its burrow sealed, the cellar shut.

Maddy's heart began to beat a little faster. In all these years she had never had such a chance: to see one of the Faërie at such close quarters; to speak to it, and have it answer.

She tried to recall what little she knew of the Good Folk from under Red Horse Hill. They were curious creatures, more playful than bad; fond of strong drink and well-dressed meats. And wasn't there something else as well, something that lingered tantalizingly on the edges of memory? A tale of One-Eye's, perhaps? Or maybe some more practical trick, some cantrip to help her deal with the thing?

He might even have escaped – he was quick as a weasel – but Maddy had expected it, and with her fingers she cast *Isa*, the Icy One, and froze him to the spot.

The goblin struggled and squirmed, but his feet were stuck to the ground.

The goblin spat a gobbet of fool's fire from between his pointed teeth, but still Maddy would not let him go.

The goblin swore in many tongues, some animal, some Faërie, and finished off by saying some very nasty things about Maddy's family, which she had to admit were mostly true.

Finally he stopped struggling and sat down crossly on the floor.

'So what do you want?' he said.

'What about – three wishes?' suggested Maddy hopefully.

'Leave it out,' said the goblin with scorn. 'What kind of stories have you been listening to?'

Maddy was disappointed. Many of the tales she had collected over the past few years had involved someone receiving three wishes from the Faërie, and she felt rather aggrieved that in this case it had turned out to be nothing more than a tale. Still, there were other stories that she thought might contain more practical truths, and her eyes lit up as she finally remembered the thing that had been lurking at the back of her mind since she had first heard the suspicious sounds from behind the barrel.

'In yer own time,' said the goblin, picking his teeth.

'Shh,' said Maddy. 'I'm thinking.'

The goblin yawned. He was beginning to look quite cocky now, and his bright gold eyes shone with mischief. 'Doesn't know what to do with me, kennet?' he said. 'Knows

The goblin wriggled, but was held fast. 'What's it to you, anyroad?' he demanded. 'And how come you know so bloody much about it?'

'Just tell me,' said Maddy.

'You'd never be able to say it,' he said.

'Tell me anyway.'

'I won't! Lemme go!'

'I will,' said Maddy, 'as soon as you tell me. Otherwise I'll open up the cellar doors and let the sun do its worst.'

The goblin blenched at that, for sunlight is lethal to the Good Folk. 'You wouldn't do that, lady, would yer?' he whined.

'Watch me,' said Maddy, and, standing up, she began to make her way to the trapdoor – now closed – through which the ale kegs were delivered.

'You wouldn't!' squeaked the goblin.

'Your name,' she said, with one hand on the latch.

The goblin struggled more fiercely than ever, but Maddy's runes still held him fast. 'He'll get yer!' he squeaked. 'The Captain'll get yer, and then you'll be sorry!'

'Last chance,' said Maddy, drawing the bolt. A tiny wand of sunlight fell onto the cellar floor only inches from the goblin's foot.

'Shut it, shut it!' shrieked the goblin.

Maddy just waited patiently.

'All right then! All right! It's . . .' The goblin rattled off something in his own language, fast as pebbles in a gourd. 'Now shut it, shut it now!' he cried, and wriggled as far as he could away from the spike of sunlight.

Maddy shut the trapdoor, and the goblin gave a sigh of relief. 'That was just *narsty*,' he said. 'Nice young girl like you shouldn't be messin' with nastiness like that.' He looked at

speaking he was halfway into the cellar wall, burrowing as if his life depended on it.

If Maddy had paused to think at this point, she would simply have ordered the goblin to stop. If she had spoken the name correctly, then he would have been forced to obey her, and she could have questioned him at leisure. But Maddy didn't pause to think. She saw the goblin's feet vanishing into the ground and shouted something – not even a cantrip – while at the same time casting *Thuris*, Thor's rune, as hard as she could at the mouth of the burrow.

It felt like throwing a firework. It snapped against the brick-lined floor, throwing up a shower of sparks and a small but pungent cloud of smoke.

For a second or two nothing happened. Then there came a low rumble from under Maddy's feet, and from the burrow came a swearing and a kicking and a scuffle of earth, as if something inside had come up against a sudden obstacle.

Maddy knelt down and reached inside the hole. She could hear the goblin cursing, too far away for her to reach, and now there was another sound, a kind of sliding, squealing, *pattering* noise that Maddy almost recognized . . .

The goblin's voice was muffled, but urgent. '*Now* look what you've gone and done. Gog and Magog, let me *out*!' There came another desperate scuffling of earth, and the creature reversed out of the hole at speed, falling over its feet and coming to a halt against a stack of empty barrels, which fell over with a clatter loud enough (Maddy thought) to wake the Seven Sleepers from their beds.

'What happened?' she said.

But before the goblin could make his reply, something shot out of the hole in the wall. Several somethings, in fact;

again, you can tell him from me to shove off!'

Maddy's heart leaped into her mouth. *That one-eyed scally good-for nowt* – that must mean her old friend was back, after more than twelve months of wandering, and no amount of rats and cockroaches – or even goblins – was going to keep her from seeing him. 'He was here?' she said, taking the cellar steps at a run. 'One-Eye was here?' She emerged breathless into the kitchen.

'Aye.' Mrs Scattergood handed her a tea-towel. 'Though I dunno what there is in *that* to look so pleased about. I'd have thought that *you*, of all people—'

She stopped and cocked her head to listen. 'What's that noise?' she said sharply.

Maddy closed the cellar door. 'It's nothing, Mrs Scattergood.'

The landlady gave her a suspicious look. 'What about them rats?' she said. 'Did you fix it right this time?'

'I need to see him,' Maddy said.

'Who? The one-eyed scallyman?'

'Please,' she said. 'I won't be long.'

Mrs Scattergood pursed her lips. 'Not on my penny, you won't,' she said. 'I'm not paying you good money to go gallivanting around with thieves and beggars—'

'One-Eye isn't a thief,' said Maddy.

'Don't you start giving yourself airs, madam,' said Mrs Scattergood. 'Laws knows you can't help the way you're made, but you might at least make an effort. For your father's sake, you might, and for the memory of your sainted mother.' She paused for breath for less than a second. '*And* you can take that look off your face. Anyone would think you were proud to be a—'

And then she stopped, open-mouthed, as a sound came

shrill as a rat's. '*Adam!*' she shrieked. 'Get in here right *now*!'

Adam was Mrs Scattergood's son. He and Maddy had always hated each other, and it was the thought of his sneering, gleeful face – and that of her long-absent friend, known in some circles as *the one-eyed scallyman* – that finally made up her mind.

'You're sure it was One-Eye?' she said at last.

'Of course it was! Now open this—'

'All right,' said Maddy, and reversed the rune. 'But if I were you, I'd give it an hour.'

And at that she turned and fled, and was already on the road to Red Horse Hill by the time the shrill, distant screaming began, emerging like smoke from the Seven Sleepers kitchen and rising above slumbering Malbry village to vanish into the morning air.