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Opening extract from

Fergus Crane

Written by

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Your homework for tonight, me hearties...erm...I mean, children,' said Mr Spicer, absentmindedly playing with the large gold hoop that dangled from his left ear, 'is to read chapter thirteen of Practical Pot-holing for Beginners.'

The class gave a low groan.

Outside, seagulls flapped noisily round the returning fishing boats, while the coal barges moored to the quayside bobbed up and down on the light swell. Inside, the classroom of the school ship Betty-Jeanne was hot and stuffy and full of slowly nodding heads.

Will another one come tonight? Fergus Crane was wondering sleepily. And if it does, will I be able to stay awake long enough to find out?

The gently swaying classroom became hotter and stuffier than ever. Fergus's eyelids grew heavy. His eyes closed and . . .

'Pffweeeeeep!'

The shrill sound of the bosun's whistle echoed down the corridors, announcing the end of school. Fergus's eyes snapped open. It was four o'clock. At last! He was out of his chair and away before the whistle had even faded.

He didn't hear Mr Spicer telling the class that there'd be a test tomorrow; nor his friends calling their goodbyes; nor even Bolivia, the headmaster's parrot, squawking something at him as he ran down the gangplank. All Fergus could think about was getting home and waiting at his bedroom window for midnight.

Fergus headed off along the canal. The heavy Practical Pot-holing for Beginners and his empty lunchbox bounced about inside the backpack on his shoulders; his shoes clattered on the cobblestones.

At the tall, pointing statue of General Montmorency, he turned left, and headed up into the labyrinth of narrow alleys. He hurried through square after familiar square, past fountains and sculptures, flower-stalls and candy-booths and small, candle-lit shops selling intricately carved wooden figures.

Turning right at Old Mother Bleeny's bagel-stand, Fergus emerged onto the bustling Boulevard Archduke Ferdinand, with its tall, slightly shabby buildings.

Wall-eyed Ned was in his usual spot in front of the Archduke Ferdinand theatre. Head down, he was marching back and forth, the sandwich-board strapped to his body advertising the new show in town. This month it was a musical farce entitled The Cycling Fish.

'Afternoon, Ned,' Fergus called.

'Afternoon, Fergus,' Ned replied without looking up.

Further along the road, the air swirled with mournful music. Fergus smiled at old Antonio the hurdy-gurdy man, with his chestful of medals and curling moustache. His monkey, Pepe – dressed in a suit of red and yellow satin – jumped down from the wheezing barrel-organ and scampered towards Fergus. It seized the tasselled fez from its head, held it out upside-down and let out a little screech.

Fergus pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, carefully unfolded it and presented an almond macaroon to the monkey.

'Bless you, my boy,' said Antonio and, for a moment, as Fergus continued, the slow mournful music speeded up.

He passed familiar shops. Madame Aimee's Wedding Gowns. H.H. Luscombe's Umbrellas. Le Café Rondel. Joshua Berwick: Bespoke Tailor . . . And as he hurried by, familiar faces appeared at the windows and waved or nodded. Everyone knew Fergus.

Hannibal Luscombe saluted him with one of his umbrellas. Katrina – the waitress in Le Café Rondel – blew him a kiss. And, as he passed Karpf, the jeweller's, old Miss Wittering held up a half-eaten walnut eclair and winked.

Yes, everyone knew Fergus – he was Lucia Crane's boy, who sometimes helped his mother at Beiderbecker's cake counter. When they saw his face, Fergus's neighbours thought of glass counters full of cream-horns, or chocolate macaroons, or strawberry-slices, or best of all,

Archduke Ferdinand's Classic Florentines . . . Little wonder they always smiled.

At last, Fergus came to Beiderbecker's Bakery itself. Boris Beiderbecker was a short, fat man with a large ginger moustache. He baked the bread – everything from plaited sourdough rye to malted wholemeal with a poppy-seed crust. Mrs Crane ran the cake counter.

Fergus pressed his nose against the window and peered through the displays of his mother's walnut eclairs and almond meringues at the counter. Sometimes she worked at the till in the afternoon. But not today. Apart from young Lucy, who was serving an old woman with a fat dachshund, the shop was empty.

Fergus turned away and headed for the doorway to the right of the shop. There was an arched plaque above the entrance bearing the words Archduke Ferdinand Apartments. Fergus thrust the larger of his two keys into the lock, put his shoulder to the heavy wooden door and shoved. The door opened with a creak and a sigh, and Fergus stepped inside.

The hallway was cool and fresh and, as the door shut behind him with a soft click, Fergus was struck by a heavy silence that seemed to press at his inner ear. It was like being under water. The next instant, he was struck by something else.

A smell. A delicious smell. The most wonderfully aromatic fragrance in the whole world!

'Florentines,' Fergus murmured.

Mrs Crane baked non-stop throughout the day. Croissants for the early-morning trade; cakes and pastries for lunchtime; scones, buns and multi-layered gateaux in the afternoon. But it was not croissants that Fergus could smell, nor warm spicy currant-buns . . . This was the unmistakable nutty, chocolatey, caramelly smell of the most delicious cakes ever created.

'Flo-ren-tines,' Fergus whispered slowly. Just the name in his mouth was enough to make his stomach gurgle with anticipation.

He closed his eyes.

He could see them floating before him – small roundels of toasted nuts, plump dried fruit, candy peel and glacé-cherries, all bound together with sweet, buttery toffee and set on a base of dark, velvety chocolate. He could almost taste them.

Fergus guessed that his mother must have been asked to stay late in the bakery kitchen to complete a special order.

He made his way across the marble hallway, past the row of metal letter boxes, their owners' names on the front of each little locked door. Gumm. Bigsby-Clutterbuck. Squeegie. Beecham. Mme Lavinia. Fassbinder. Crane . . .

Fergus stopped at the last letter box. A large parcel sat beside it, addressed to Mrs L. Crane. On one side was a sticky label with a picture of three penguins and the words,

The Fateful Voyage Trading Co. Fergus bent down and picked it up with a sigh. He wasn't the only one with homework. His mother was taking on more and more, just to make ends meet. Thank goodness the school ship Betty-Jeanne had offered him a free scholarship, Fergus thought, as he climbed the stairs.

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