A Place of a Thousand Wishes

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1

A Glint of Hope

He could tell they were in big trouble. Pa was slumped against the ice cream cart as if the blistering heat had melted away his last scrap of hope.

Mason couldn't bear to look at his sad face and shuffled into the shade beneath the ice cream cart. He crouched there, clutching his knife. With the tip of the blade, he cut a fresh swirl into the wooden carving in his lap. It would be a beautiful dragon one day, with majestic wings to soar off on adventures and have all the fun Mason wished he could have. Storm the dragon. A name full of magic and power.

Pa sighed. 'The ice cream has melted. It's ruined. *Everything's* ruined.'

Mason glanced up into the dazzling sunshine. The tide of passing shoppers was a blur in the heat haze.

'Don't worry, Pa. We're going to be alright.' He pocketed his penknife and crawled from beneath the cart. He squinted. The sun pressed down as fierce as a furnace.

He opened the cart's wooden lid and leaned over. A few shards of ice glistened in the water. Soon they'd all be gone, but what coolness remained soothed his sunburnt arms and he sighed with pleasure. He opened one of the three silver pails and peeped in. The strawberry ice cream was a sloppy mess.

'I'll have to go to the ice warehouse.' Pa rummaged in his apron pocket and pulled out two grimy pennies. He stared at them in his palm, shoulders hunched. A carriage rumbled past, the clomping horse hooves drowning out the bustle of shoppers.

'Things will get better. We'll work harder.'

'*Harder*?' Pa laughed bitterly. 'Not possible, Mason.'

'We just need more customers.' Mason turned to watch the shoppers flow along the street in their long swishing skirts, their heads bobbing beneath lacy parasols and top hats.

'Maybe we could invent a new flavour.' He flashed Pa an excited smile. 'I had an idea the other day. Imagine cherry pie and custard flavour ice cream!'

'You've got your head in the clouds, Mason.' Pa swept the back of his hand over his sweaty forehead, knocking his straw boater askew. 'You'll have to manage on your own this afternoon. There's meant to be an ice shipment down by the docks today. I'll need your takings, too.'

Mason delved into his apron and handed over his four ha'pennies.

Pa counted the meagre takings and a lump moved in his throat.

'Right then. No daydreaming. You need to watch out for pilfering. Dingbury's a very different place to what we're used to. We can't afford any losses.' He pulled his shoulders back and stood tall, a towering six and a half feet, his head skimming the cart's beige canopy. He touched the side of Mason's arm and walked off.

A shadow slid over his face as a man halted in front of him. Mason perched his wooden dragon on the edge of the cart.

'Good morning to you, sir. How may I help?' He recited his usual cheery welcome before realising the man hadn't

actually stopped for ice cream. He was looking up at the sky with wide eyes.

A woman came to a stop and tipped back her parasol. Suddenly everyone came to a standstill. All faces lifted skywards, hands shielding eyes from the burning sun, mouths hanging open in amazement. Silence descended. For the first time, there was no rumble of passing omnibuses and handcarts. No footsteps pounding the cobbles. Everyone on the High Street stared up in silent awe.

Mason stepped out from beneath the canopy's shade into the crushing heat. He looked up into the dazzling sunshine. His breath faltered. A dozen huge gas balloons were floating over the town, their vibrant colours aglow against the bright blue sky. The balloons were every imaginable colour and shape – a dragon, a star and a phoenix amongst them. Each had a large basket hanging beneath carrying a top-hatted gentleman. The balloons were so high it sent his head spinning.

'It's the wish-maker! Darlington the Miraculous!' someone said, triggering a ripple of voices down the street. 'He's back!'

A tingle of excitement chased over Mason's skin. He

had heard of the famous wish-maker, Darlington the Miraculous.

'Back from where?' He looked to the nearest person, a woman with a wheelbarrow full of oranges, gawping up at the sky with her lips parted. Her hat had fallen to the ground behind her.

'Back from his travels, of course.' She didn't take her eyes off the sky.

'He's been all round the world making wishes come true.' Another voice came from somewhere behind Mason this time.

'And now he's back in his home time where he belongs.' The orange seller clasped her hands together, her eyes sparkling with delight.

Mason glanced down the street at the dozens of people standing like statues, their faces upturned. He could feel the pulse of excitement, like the air was alive with hope. He looked up again and gazed from balloon to balloon, hoping to glimpse the great man himself. One of the balloons had a gold sceptre motif painted on the side. He had heard there was a magical icestone on the end of the real sceptre Darlington used. The tall pilot was wearing the grandest of top hats. Was this Darlington the Miraculous?