THE FEATHERED BOOK

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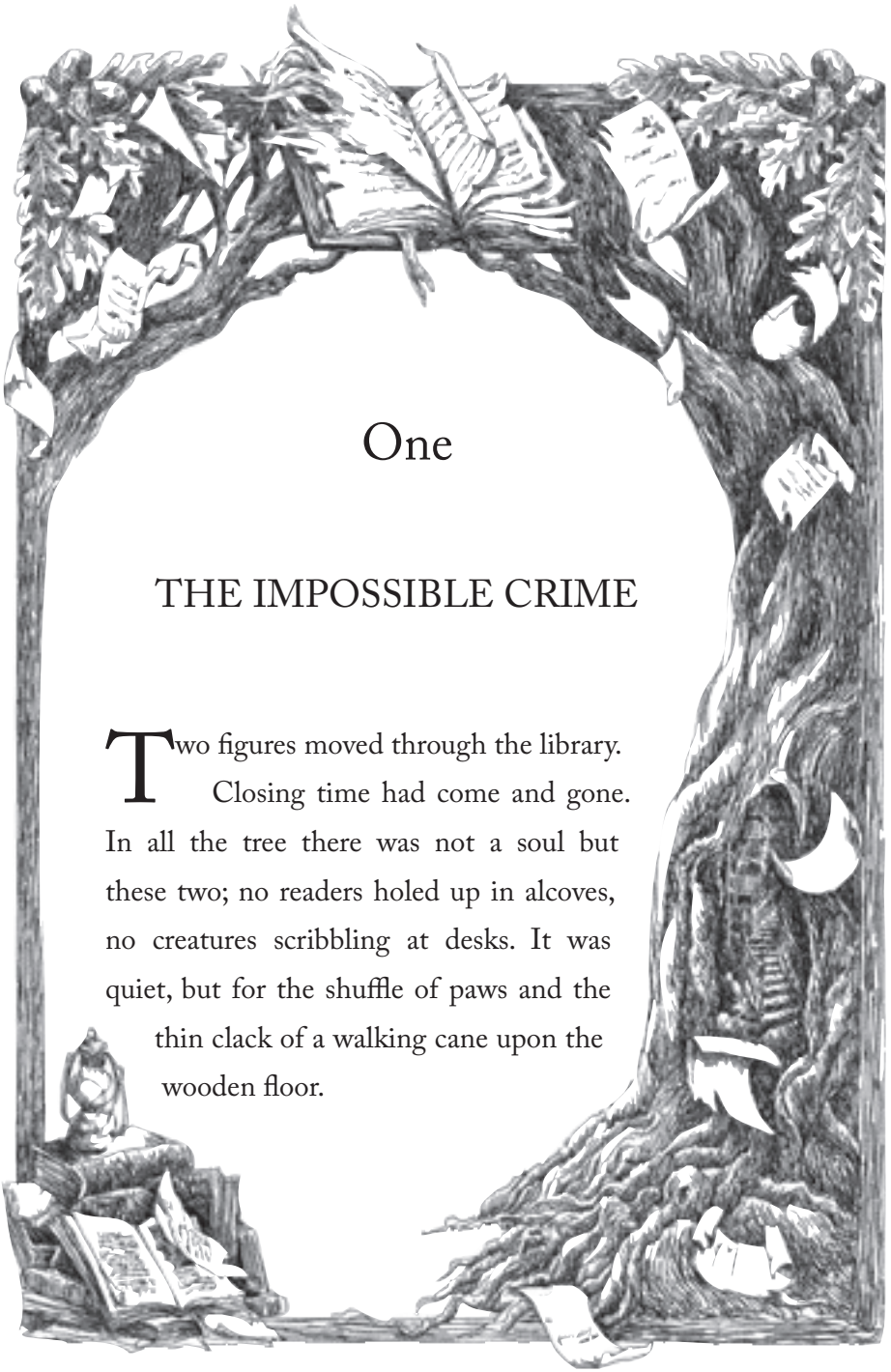
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Lesser Dundorbludgeon
The Dibbly Isles
The Lostlands


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One

THE IMPOSSIBLE CRIME

Two figures moved through the library. Closing time had come and gone. In all the tree there was not a soul but these two; no readers holed up in alcoves, no creatures scribbling at desks. It was quiet, but for the shuffle of paws and the thin clack of a walking cane upon the wooden floor.

The library, a gigantic, red-leafed oak, perched on the flat top of a small island, whose steep cliffs were white with chalk. A tower, wonky and wooden, poked from its crown. Around and below this, huge, crooked branches burst out in all directions, some stretching for the sky, others drooping to the grass. Thick roots, like the limbs of a great wooden octopus, crawled over the island's edge, down the white cliffs to the water below.

Inside the vast hollow trunk, book-lined walls rose to a distant ceiling. Ladders led to rooms in towers and turrets. With midnight nearing, moonlight illuminated the empty chairs, the cobwebbed corners, the lonely nooks and crannies.

The two figures, dressed in brown hooded robes, descended the spiral staircase inside the trunk. Reaching the bottom, they continued down worn steps into an underground chamber. A vaulted ceiling of blue and gold hung high over a black-and-white checked floor. Along the sides, bookcases jutted from the walls, creating bays for tables and chairs. Above these, galleried landings held identical bookcases and bays.

By day, reading lamps dotted the room with pools of light. Now, though, the only light was the lantern held in the tiny paw of the first figure: a young dormouse

whose golden fur changed colour with every flicker of the flame. Her whiskers twitching nervously, she moved slowly, making sure to stay only a pace or two ahead of her companion – an ancient, bent-backed squirrel with a grey beard that draped nearly to his feet. Huffing impatiently, the squirrel leaned heavily on his cane as he hobbled between the rows of tables running down the room's central aisle.

At the far end of the hall, they came to a lift – a cage-like contraption, rusty and ramshackle. The dormouse, Ticklepenny, shunted aside a metal lattice shutter, which folded like a concertina. They stepped inside. Ticklepenny pulled a lever and the lift set off. Juddering, jolting, it sank down through the island, through the warren of tunnels dug into the earth and rock.

As they descended, Ticklepenny caught glimpses through gaps in the cage: of bookcases and passageways; of dark stairwells; of halls, once grand, littered with broken statues and crumbling plaster. This was the labyrinth: a mazy library beneath the mighty tree.

"The alarm – are you certain it rang?" wheezed the squirrel, Pecksniff, in a dusty croak.

"Yes, Librarian," the dormouse murmured, her voice barely audible above the clang and squeak of the lift.



"And it was from the Octagonal Hall?"

"Yes, Librarian," Ticklepenny replied earnestly. "The Octagonal Hall, Room E."

"Room E!" spat Pecksniff, thumping his cane on the floor. "But that's *The Feathered Book*!" A grimace of fear contorted his already crumpled face. "Why didn't you say so earlier? We are all in most terrible danger!"

"But why Librarian?"

"Why? Because of the curse, of course, you silly child!" snapped the squirrel. "The curse of *The Feathered Book*! We must hurry! If that book is stolen, there can be only one result!"

"What, Librarian?"

"Death, Ticklepenny!" rasped the squirrel. "Death!"

The lift clattered to a halt. They had taken it as far as it could go, almost to the very bottom of the island. Stepping out, Ticklepenny and Pecksniff entered the labyrinth.

The dormouse and the squirrel wended through the maze, with its never-ending turnings, its steep staircases, its identical passageways. Chambers and rooms appeared and disappeared through arches and doorways. In the darkness, the wavering lamp showed turning after turning,

shelf after shelf, room after room. And everywhere – absolutely everywhere – there were books: books in cabinets and books in cases; books packed on shelves and books stacked in towers; books in piles and mounds and heaps.

They passed through a series of six-sided rooms, each alike, each filled with the same golden-brown books; until, reaching a room with a staircase in the middle of the floor, they descended to a cramped tunnel, without turnings or doors. Pecksniff shuffled between the bookshelves to the end of the passage. It was, seemingly, a dead end, their way blocked by a bookcase.

The old squirrel, however, reached up and tilted back first one book; then pushed in another; before, finally, pulling out a third. There was a series of clicks and clanks, like locks unfastening, and, with a loud, lingering creak, the right side of the bookcase swung outwards half an inch.

It was a secret door.

The Octagonal Hall, buried deep beneath the earth, was deathly dark but for the light from Ticklepenny's flame. From this, they could see a domed and gilded ceiling, and a mosaicked floor whose colours had long since faded.

The room had eight walls, each with an archway. With the exception of the door through which they had entered, the archways fed short tunnels with single rooms at the end. Between the arches stood carved bookcases. These housed the jewels of the library: illuminated manuscripts and papyrus scrolls, ancient pamphlets of vellum and parchment, fragile tomes with gold lettering. Old or rare or precious, these books were hidden here, at the library's secret heart.

Pecksniff and Ticklepenny crossed the hall and passed into tunnel E. It was a narrow earthen passage, ancient and airless. When he came to the door at the end, Pecksniff fumbled with the bundle of keys he wore on a padlocked chain around his neck. The responsibility of the librarian, these were never removed. But to open the door, there were umpteen keys to find, umpteen locks to turn, umpteen bolts to pull, and the old squirrel's paws were rusted with age and shaking with impatience. At last, after several exasperating minutes, the door opened.

The lantern lit a cave of a room: windowless, with rounded walls and ceiling. It was empty except for a wooden display table in the centre. Beneath the glass top of this table was a book, its cover coated with raven

feathers. At first these seemed a midnight black. But when Ticklepenny took a step forward, the light from the lantern played over the vanes, revealing purple and turquoise, copper and gold.

"*The Feathered Book*," sighed Pecksniff with relief. "It's safe!"

Pecksniff unlocked the case and opened the glass. Gently, lost in thought, he lifted the book's feathery cover with a pale claw. Inside, the pages were yellow, mottled with age.

Ticklepenny peered round the squirrel's shoulder, her eyes gleaming as they flicked over the book. An odd, unfamiliar alphabet spilled across the tea-coloured paper. As Pecksniff slowly turned the pages, he revealed images, in faded purples and greens, of arcane symbols, strange flowers, sinister equipment. Other illustrations were so bizarre, so disturbing they made Ticklepenny shudder: foetal mice curled into balls; owls sporting solitary, ginormous eyes; tentacled rats with membranous wings and tooth-filled mouths in their bellies.

Ticklepenny was forbidden to enter the rooms off the Octagonal Hall. She had, therefore, only glimpsed *The Feathered Book* once before, on a tour Pecksniff had given her when she joined the library. And she had never seen

inside the book before. Awed, the dormouse could not prevent a gasp escaping.

The sound tore Pecksniff from his reverie. He closed the book.

"Well, Ticklepenny? Where are these thieves of yours?" he said severely. "The book is in perfect condition, is it not? This has been a fool's errand! Explain yourself!"

"I don't know, Librarian," stuttered the dormouse. "I can't explain it! The thief must have—"

"There was no thief, child!" the squirrel insisted crankily. "You were daydreaming, no doubt, and let your imagination run away from you."

"But, Librarian, the alarm—"

"Enough, Ticklepenny!" barked the librarian, closing and locking the case. "I heard no alarm! Really! Dragging me here in the dead of night!" He pulled a pocket watch from the recesses of his gown. It was one minute past midnight. "Tales of break-ins and alarms! Most unsatisfactory." He shook his head. "Most unsatisfactory indeed."

Turning with a flurry of his bushy tail, he stomped out the door. The dormouse scurried after him. But, flustered, she let the lantern slip through her paws. It landed with a clonk and rolled leisurely down the tunnel.

"Tsk!" tutted Pecksniff. "You really are worse than useless, Ticklepenny! Worse than useless!"

Wincing with embarrassment, the dormouse bent to scoop up the lantern, while the librarian underwent the drawn-out ritual of locking the door.

Then the pair began the march back down the passageway.

But they didn't get far.

For, after they had taken no more than a dozen paces, there came the sharp crack of an explosion.

Pecksniff and Ticklepenny froze.

The sound had come from behind them, from the direction of the room. It wasn't loud; but in the tomb-like quiet of the passageway, the violence of the noise was shocking. They turned; plumes of greenish-black smoke billowed down the tunnel towards them.

"The book!" Pecksniff coughed, smoke enveloping him. "*The Feathered Book*!"

Panic clutched his heart; he felt his chest tighten, his vision swim. Aghast, he tried to fight through the fumes, back to the room. But, thick and acrid, the smoke stung his eyes and forced dry, racking coughs. With every wheezing, painful breath he grew woozier and woozier; the tunnel

started to sway and bend – and then the ceiling spun down, and the floor whooshed up, and the old squirrel crashed nose first into the ground.

"Librarian?" a voice squealed. "Librarian? Are you OK?"

Pecksniff prised open his eyes. Ticklepenny's anxious face stared down at him. The smoke had gone.

With the dormouse's help, the squirrel sat up. "How … long … unconscious?"

"Only a minute or two," Ticklepenny replied.

The squirrel dug out his watch. It was seven past midnight. Ticklepenny was right: he had been unconscious for a couple of minutes at most.

"Well, help me up! Hurry, hurry!" he sputtered. "We must save the book!"

They retraced their steps. Then, with maddening slowness, Pecksniff attempted to unlock the door. But his hands, already unsteady, trembled violently from shock. The key tapped and scraped around the keyhole. Eventually, Ticklepenny tentatively suggested that she be allowed to try. Red with frustration and shame, the librarian removed the keys from around his neck and surrendered them to the dormouse.

She unlocked the door.

Inside, they found an empty room exactly as it had been before – the same rounded ceiling, the same bare walls.

There was only one difference: the blank space inside the display case.

The Feathered Book had vanished.