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Opening extract from

Starcross

Written by

Philip Reeve

Decorated by

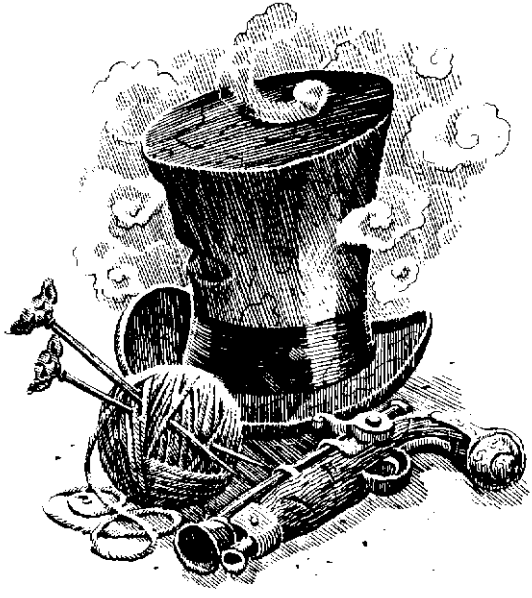
David Wyatt

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Prologue

The grand hotel at Starcross sleeps peacefully tonight beneath a sky dusty with stars. Starlight slants down upon the sandstone bluffs which rise behind it, and silvers its ornate roofs and myriad windows. Starlight glitters upon the sea which fills the broad bay before it, a velvet blackness flecked with scales of silver. And starlight falls upon the wary faces of the pair who suddenly fling wide the glass doors marked 'Reception' and come running down the steps on to the promenade. A handsome, bearded gentleman and a young lady of elfin beauty. We must forgive the gentleman if he lets the door slam behind him. And if his fair companion mutters something not *quite* ladylike beneath her breath as she descends, perhaps it may be excused. For they are Sir Richard and Mrs Ulla Burton, agents of Her Majesty's Secret Service, and they are running for their lives.

sea is gone. The rowing boat sits beached on the sands of a bone-dry desert which stretches away to a hard horizon, not ten miles distant. Beyond that, the sky is cluttered with small, lumpish, unwelcoming, stony worlds.

Behind him, Sir Richard hears the sand crunch. Sun-bleached canvas flaps softly in the night wind as something emerges from the shadow of the bathing machines. It is a red and white striped booth with an open flap in the top – an automated Punch & Judy show of the type that you may have seen upon the promenades of Bognor or Brighton. Inside the opening a fearsome, hook-nosed puppet suddenly rears up, seeming to focus on Ulla and Sir Richard with its painted eyes.

'*Hello, boys and girls!*' it squawks.

Sir Richard pulls out his service revolver and empties all six chambers through the front of the booth. Black holes spot the striped canvas like ink blots, and the impact of the bullets sends the whole contraption shuddering backwards. But as the echoes of the shots fade and the cloud of powder smoke thins, the booth begins to creep implacably towards him again.

'*That's the way to it!*' crows Mr Punch.

From within her clothes Ulla whips out a slender, sickle-

on to its crown, which is planted with ornamental clumps of Martian horsetails and tickler vines. A clump of ogleweed turns curiously to watch Sir Richard and his wife as they clamber on to the summit. Below them the first of the Punch & Judy booths extends steel arms and starts to drag itself up after them.

They stand, and turn, and find more enemies awaiting them. Six figures, not all of them human. The starlight spilling through the leaves lends an oily sheen to their tall, black silkhats and imparts a ghostly glow to their white gloves and starched white shirt fronts. In the shadows of their hat brims gleam the circular eye-pieces of hideous, wheezing, elephant-trunked masks: patent respirators of the



firmly. Sir Richard sneezes, engulfed for a moment in a cloud of silver particles which fades almost instantly. Swiftly the masked man turns and does the same to Ulla.

Sir Richard stares at the atomiser. 'What have you – done . . . ?'

Already his voice is growing slow and slurred. His eyes dull. His struggles cease. In the starlight, his skin is taking on a silvery look.

'Release them,' says the man in the silk hat.

The Punch & Judy booths back away. Ulla reaches out groggily to take Sir Richard's hand. Together they stumble off the path, trying to make their escape through the shrubs which cluster close in the flower bed there. After a few steps Sir Richard stops and stands still. He raises his arms.

'Richard!' cries Ulla weakly, clinging to him, but he cannot hear her. She, too, is changing, taking on that dazed, glazed silveryness. Their toes force a way out through the leather of their boots and curl down into the soil. Their fingers bud. Ulla lets out a last sigh, like the sighing of wind through leaves. She is a tree, wrapped about the trunk of the slightly larger tree that was her husband.

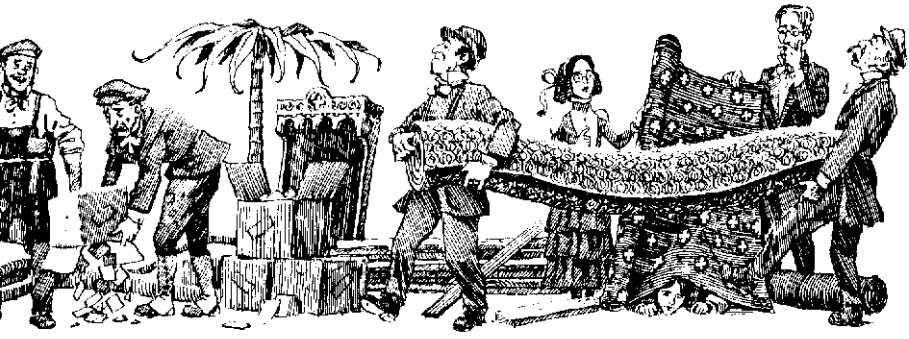
The men in silk hats carefully cut away the scraps of clothing which are snagged on the roots and branches of

Chapter One



In Which We Deplore the Din of Decorators, and Receive a Most Intriguing Invitation.

What a fuss! What storms of dust! What cannonades of hammering and what snarling of wood-saws! What quantities of sawdust and shavings heaping up upon the stairs and filling the very air, making the poor hoverbogs sneeze and cough! What endless, topsy-turvy rearrangements of the household furniture! What confusion!



Yet I do not think that even Mother, with all her other-worldly knowledge and vast experience, had quite reckoned on how much disruption would be involved: workmen in the parlour, sawdust in the tea, the thud of hammers and the growl of drills drowning out my sister Myrtle's piano practice . . . * And it had been going on for absolute ages. When Mother secured the services of Mr Chippy Spry, General Builder & Specialist in Orbital Property Maintenance, he had assured her that his work would be done by mid-July. But September came, and still there was no sign that his carpenters and paper-hangers would ever be done.

I well remember one morning in particular. We had all taken refuge in Mother's conservatory, and were gathered

* So, you see, it was not *all* bad.

Spry's siege. For some of Mother's flowers had picked up a popular music hall song from one of his carpenters, and kept singing it over and over in their ethereal little voices. It was called 'My Flat Cat', and it went:



Oh what a pity,
My poor Kitty,
Peg him on the washing line to dangle!
Pa's new auto-maid,
Our clumsy clockwork laundry-aid,
Put poor Kitty through the mangle!

It was rather a jolly song, and I tapped my foot in time to the refrain as I struggled with the knotty problem before me.

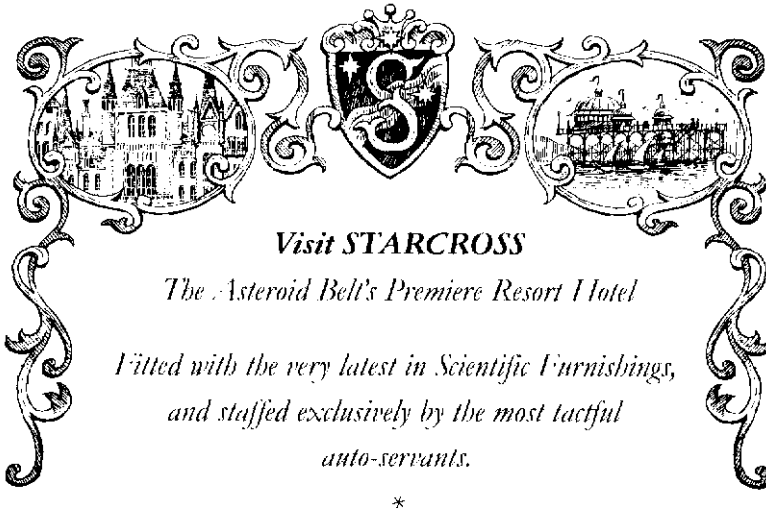
lately been appointed editor of the *Westminster Review*? But Myrtle insisted that a lady did not seek anything so common as Paid Employment, and continued playing her horrible piano, and embroidering improving samplers. However, she did agree to learn a little French, for, as she said, 'then I may write my diary in French, and if *A Certain Person* is ever tempted to steal bits of it again, he will be most aggrieved to find he cannot read it!'

repaired aether-ship, *Sophronia*, we heard no more of him. Myrtle had been writing poems ever since, and striking soulful poses on all the balconies in the manner popularised by Mariana in the Moated Grange. About once a week she sent Jack a long, heartfelt letter, to which he did not reply.

My own suspicion was that as soon as he was back upon the aether seas Jack had realised what an absolute blight she was and what a narrow escape he had had, and resolved to have nothing more to do with her. But Mother always tried to comfort Myrtle, reminding her that Jack now sailed under the orders of Her Majesty's Secret Service, and might e'en now be undercover in some far-off corner of the sky, where the mails are slow and unreliable. Even if he had received her letters, he might be much too busy to pen a reply.

'Their singing *is* somewhat distracting, isn't it?' she said gently, as hoverhogs scooted about, gobbling up the drifting petals, and Father delved behind the watering can for Myrtle's notebook. 'Perhaps you should ask Mr Spry's men to move your piano up here, so that you may teach the flowers some new songs.'

'Oh, please, no!' I groaned, imagining them all warbling



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*

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'Sea bathing?' I cried, in disbelief. In preparation for my future career as an explorer I make a keen study of the *Boy's Own Journal* and other organs of note, and I was almost certain that there was no sea to speak of in the asteroid belt.

'Let me see that,' said Myrtle, wrenching the paper from my grasp (and crumpling it rather badly in the process, as you can see).

take the liberty of writing to invite you to visit me at Starcross. It is a modest asteroid, which was a mining concern until it was abandoned in the reign of the late king. I have, however, made some improvements, and the hotel there offers the most genteel accommodation, and some of the finest sea bathing to be had anywhere in British Space. I should be honoured if you would consider using the place as a refuge or 'home-from-home' whilst the horny-handed sons of toil improve your own home.

Your Obedient Servant
Mortimer Titfer, Esq.

'What a sweetly kind offer!' said my mother.

'Yes, but who is this Titfer?' asked Father. 'I do not recognise the name.'

'He says he is a friend of Sir Waverley's,' Mother reminded him, 'and that is good enough for me. For though Sir Waverley is somewhat reclusive, he is a very sweet gentleman when one gets to know him. Take, for an instance, the way that he took it upon himself to help us strip out Larklight's old Shaper engine and cart it off to be melted down, without charging us for carriage or any other thing. I would imagine that this Titfer is a business

'Well,' said Mother, 'perhaps we *might* go, for just a week or two . . .'

'Go for a month,' said Father, folding his copy of the *Times* in a decided manner. 'And I shall join you as soon as my business in London is complete.'

And so it was agreed. Trunks were packed, straw hats and shrimping nets fetched down* from the attic, and Mother ordered new bathing costumes for us all. And a week later we found ourselves bidding Father a fond farewell at the Port George aether-dock and going aboard the packet-ship *Euphrosyne*, outbound for Modesty and the Minor Planets.

* Or was it up?

