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Opening extract from

The Midnight Folk

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The Midnight Folk

It had been an unhappy day for little Kay Harker. To begin with, at breakfast time the governess had received a letter from his guardian, Sir Theopompus, the chemical powder merchant, to say that he would be there for lunch, but would like lunch at 2 p.m., as the trains did not suit. This made the governess cross, or, as she called it, 'put out'. On giving the order to Jane, the cook, for a very good lunch at two o'clock, instead of one, Jane was put out, for it was her afternoon off and she did not like to be put upon. Ellen, the maid, was also put out, because if you have lunch so late, it is teatime before you have finished washing up. Jane and Ellen between them put the governess much further out, and then it was lesson time: Divinity, French, History and Latin.

Divinity was easy, as it was about Noah's Ark. French was fairly easy, as it was about the cats of the daughter of the gardener. History was not at all easy, as it was all about beastly Odo. He longed for Odo to come into the room, saying, 'I'm Odo,' so that he could jolly well shut him up with: 'Well, O, don't.' He got knapped on the knuckles

rather tartly over History; then came Latin. That morning it was all adjectives, especially a loathsome adjective called Acer, acris, acre, sharp or piercing. It was that that put *him* out.

It came right at the end of lessons; that was the worst of it. As he was longing to be out of doors, he was always looking out of the window, watching the pigeons. He had to repeat acer line by line, in a sort of catechism.

The Governess: What is sharp?

Kay: Acer.

The Governess: Feminine?

Kay: Acris.

The Governess: Neuter?

Kay: Acre.

The Governess: Now the nominative; all genders.

Kay: Acer, acris, acre.

The Governess: Meaning?

Kay: Sharp.

The Governess: Or? What else can it mean?

Kay: Piercing.

The Governess: Accusative?

Kay: Acrem . . . Acris, acre?

Here the governess scowled rather, and would not say if he were right. Instead, she said: 'Genitive?' But how was he to leap at the genitive when he could not tell if his taking-off point, the accusative, were sound? Besides, had

it a genitive? Could you say 'Of sharp?' What would be the genitive? Could it be acrae, acri, acri? That didn't sound right. What did sound right? Not quite acrorum, acrarum, acrorum.

'Well,' the governess said, 'what is the genitive?'

'Acrostic, acrostic, acrostic?'

'What?'

'Acrumpet, acrumpet, acrumpet.'

'You're a very idle, impertinent little boy,' the governess said. 'You will write it all out five times, and I shall tell your guardian, Sir Theopompus, when he comes. Now go and have your milk, but not your biscuit; you haven't deserved one; and mind you come to lunch with washed hands.'

The governess's Christian names were Sylvia and Daisy. Kay had read a poem about a Sylvia, and had decided that it was not swains who commended this one, but Mrs Tattle and Mrs Gossip. He loved daisies because the closer one looked at them the more beautiful they seemed: yet this daisy was liker a rhododendron. She was big, handsome and with something of a flaunting manner, which turned into a flounce when she was put out.

She left the schoolroom with something of a flounce after passing this sentence about the 'no biscuit with his milk.' He had had his biscuit stopped before, more than once. He had invented a dodge for making up for the loss

of biscuit. He used to go to the kitchen cupboard, where the raisins were kept, and get a handful of raisins instead. Ellen was his devoted friend, and Jane thought that raisins were very good for him.

But this morning, alas, things had gone badly in the house, and Ellen and Jane were cross. When he put his hand into the blue paper bag for the raisins, Jane stopped him.

'Now, Master Kay,' she said, 'you put down those raisins, or I shall tell your governess about you. You go taking those raisins and then it's put down to me. You've got plenty of good plain food without going stuffing yourself. That's how little boys get a stoppage. And I don't want you bothering about in my kitchen when I'm as busy as I am. I've put your milk in the dining-room long ago.'

There was nothing for it but to go.

In the dining-room another trouble showed. There, on the sideboard, with his head in the tumbler of milk, which was tilted so that he was lapping the last remnants of it, was Blackmalkin, one of the three cats. Kay shooed him away, but three-quarters of the milk had gone, and Kay would not drink what was left, because the cat had breathed in it, and Kay had heard that a cat's breath always gave you consumption.

He went into the garden without milk or biscuit. Before he could settle down to any game, he was called

indoors to wash his hands and then to put on a Sunday collar ready for Sir Theopompus. He loathed Sir Theopompus, a stout, red-faced man with eyes staring out of his head, as though he were at the point of choking. The worst of Sir Theopompus's coming was that there was always a lovely dinner, but 'no contentment therewith,' only the scowl of Sylvia Daisy if he did anything wrong.

Presently Sir Theopompus arrived in his fluttery way, with his gold-rimmed spectacles, his umbrella with the gold band and his gold watch and chain. The governess presented her reports, but mercifully never said anything about the Latin adjective. Sir Theopompus didn't say much to Kay, happily, but from time to time would ask some question, such as 'Are you enjoying your history? Got as far as the first Reform Bill yet? And what is your opinion of Lord Palmerston as a statesman, hey?' Then, after some more talk and another helping of goose, he would switch on to geography. 'Know all about latitude and longitude, hey? What latitude are you in now, do you suppose?'

Towards the end of dinner, when he was shiny with his lunch, Sir Theopompus asked: 'And what are you going to be, my young man? Got any plans yet?'

'I was rather hoping that I could be a jockey,' Kay said timidly. A look of displeasure came upon Miss Sylvia Daisy's face.

'Not thinking of being a sailor, like your great-grandpapa?' Sir Theopompus said. 'Do you know about your great-grandpapa?'

'Yes, I know something,' Kay said.

'Oh! and what do you know?' said the governess very sweetly.

'He was a sea captain,' Kay said, 'and went a lot to the West Indies and Santa Barbara.'

'Yes,' Sir Theopompus broke in; 'and he took away the Santa Barbara treasure worth about a million pounds, as some think, and his crew mutinied, put him ashore and ran away with it. Pretty pickings for a crew of seamen. Of course, some say,' Sir Theopompus added as he rose from his chair, 'some say that your great-grandpapa brought that treasure home with him and hid it somewhere. Have you come upon any treasure in your grubbings?'

'No,' Kay said.

'Well, I'll tell you what I'll do,' Sir Theopompus said. 'If you'll find that treasure and tell me where it is, I'll go an honest halves with you.'

'But it wouldn't be an honest halves,' Kay said, 'because you'd have done none of the work and all the treasure belongs to the Santa Barbara priests.'

'Oh, so that's the line you're going on,' Sir Theopompus said. 'Now, you cut, for I've got to talk business here.'

Kay went out into the garden and amused himself until teatime, wondering what the two could find to talk about, though he supposed that it was mostly about himself. Tea was very early, although lunch had been so late, because Sir Theopompus had to catch the 4.30.

Tea, with Sir Theopompus there, was a dismal function in the drawing-room, with the tea-set known as the Lowestoft and the stiff rosewood chairs which Kay was to be sure not to scratch.

'Well, have you found the treasure, hey?' Sir Theopompus asked.

Kay said that he had not.

'It seems to me,' Sir Theopompus said, 'that you're making this young man something of a moony. When I was a young fellow, by George, the thought of treasure would have set me going, I know. Don't you want to find it, hey?'

'Everybody says that it was never here, sir,' Kay said.

'Oh no,' Sir Theopompus answered. 'But a good many say that it was here and is here somewhere. Those West India merchants were a pretty odd lot of fellows, if you ask me. A lot of piracy and slaving going on there. I dare say your great-grandpapa was no better than his time, and a million pounds is a big temptation in the path of a man who's been just a merchant skipper.'

'Sir, he was a very good man,' Kay said. 'His portrait is in the schoolroom.'

'Well, he was a very good man, was he?' Sir Theopompus said. 'He didn't bring back the treasure that he was trusted with. We know what to call men of that stamp in the City, by George!'

The day had been full of contrariety. Now something in the day and in Sir Theopompus combined to Kay's ruin.

'Well, I don't care,' he said. 'You oughtn't to condemn a man who isn't here to answer.'

'By George,' Sir Theopompus said, 'we shall have to put you into Parliament.'

He went rather turkey-cocky about the gills, snorted, and said that he had to catch his train. When the wheels of the fly had scrunched along the gravel out of the gate, the governess turned upon him.

'What a very impertinent little boy you are, Kay,' she said; 'not only to me this morning, but to your kind guardian, who has come here specially and solely to see how you are getting on. It would have done you good if he had boxed your ears soundly and sent you packing.'

'I don't care,' Kay said. 'He oughtn't to have said that about great-grandpapa Harker, because it isn't true.'

'You are a wicked little boy, Kay,' the governess said; 'You will go straight to bed this minute, without your bread and milk.'

The little boy went upstairs to his room, in the old part of the house: there were oak beams in the ceiling; the floor was all oak plank. The bed was big and old, valanced to the floor, and topped by a canopy. Kay was very much afraid of it at going-to-bedtime because so many tigers could get underneath it, to wait till he was asleep; but tonight he did not mind, because it was still only sunset. He had two windows in his room. One looked out on a garden, where Nibbins, the black cat, was watching some birds; the other looked out over a field, where there was a sheep-trough. He did not like the look of the trough in the long grass, because it looked so like a puma, with its ears cocked. Beyond the field, he could see the stable, where Benjamin, the highwayman, had once lived.

Now in his room there were two doors, leading to different passages, which was terrible after dark, because of footsteps. On the wall were two coloured prints, The Meet and Full Cry, one on each side of the fireplace. Over the wash-hand-stand, as it was called, were two old pistols wired to nails. They were called 'Great-grandpapa Harker's Pistols,' and Kay was to be sure never to touch them, because they might go off. Then, on the other side of the room, there was the dressing-table, valanced to the floor, which made a very good secret room, where nobody ever looked for you. In the corner, near this, on a shelf on the wall, stood an old model of a ship, which Kay

was never to touch, because boys are so destructive. This was the model of 'great-grandpapa Harker's ship,' the *Plunderer*, which had disappeared with the missing treasure so long before.

A very terrible thing about the fireplace was the stone hearth, 'as big as three men could lift,' Jane said. Ellen said that a stone like that was a sure sign that somebody had been murdered and buried there, and that if Kay wasn't a good boy, he would come out and warn him. Cook said once, 'she had seen him come out' and 'he was all in black,' which was a sure sign; 'and he wanted to speak,' she said, 'only it wasn't his time.'

This night the rooks were very noisy at their going to roost; the peacocks were screaming, and the brook at the end of the garden could be heard. 'It is going to rain,' Kay thought. He lingered over his undressing because he hoped that Ellen or Jane would smuggle him some bread and milk when the governess went to supper; but it was Ellen's evening alone, when she always did her ironing, and Jane was out.

By and by the sun went down behind the wooded camp, known as King Arthur's Round Table, where King Arthur was supposed to ride at full moon. When the sun had gone, all the world glowed for a while; but it was not wise to wait till the glow had gone, because so soon the dusk began, when the owls would come, and the

footsteps would begin, and the tigers would stir under the bed and put out their paws, and the scratchings would scrape under the floor. He knew that he had not been good and that 'he' might 'come out and warn him.' He got into the bed with a leap, because then you dodged the paws. He got well under the clothes for a minute, to make sure that he was not pursued. Luckily none of the tigers had heard him. The worst of it was that tigers look out for wicked little boys. When Kay came from under the bedclothes he could not be sure that there was not a tiger lying in the canopy above him. It was sagged down, just as though a tiger were there. If it were to give way, the tiger would fall right on top of him. Or very likely it was not a tiger but a python, for that is what pythons do.

Now it became darker, so that he could see a few stars. Footsteps passed in the house, sometimes close to his door, so that gleams of candlelight crossed the ceiling. Very strange creakings sounded in the house; there were scutterings to and fro, and scraping scratchings. By and by he heard the governess, who had finished her supper, come to the room beneath him, the library, as she usually did in the evenings. He was cross with her for stopping his bread and milk, but glad that she was there. She opened the piano and began to play. Usually she played things without any tune, which she said he couldn't understand yet because they were classical. This night she played

something that had a sort of tune, and then began to sing to it in a very beautiful voice, so that he was rapt away at once into joy: there were not any more tigers, nor pythons; only a mouse gnawing in the wainscot; or was it someone playing on a guitar and humming some song about a treasure?

After a time, he did not think that it was a guitar, but a voice calling to him, 'Kay, Kay, wake up.' Waking up, he rubbed his eyes: it was broad daylight; but no one was there. Someone was scraping and calling inside the wainscot, just below where the pistols hung. There was something odd about the daylight; it was brighter than usual; all things looked more real than usual. 'Can't you open the door, Kay?' the voice asked. There never had been a door there; but now that Kay looked, there was a little door, all studded with knops of iron. Just as he got down to it, it opened towards him; there was Nibbins, the black cat.

'Come along, Kay,' Nibbins said, 'we can just do it while they're at the banquet; but don't make more noise than you must.'

Kay peeped through the door. It opened from a little narrow passage in the thickness of the wall.

'Where does it lead to?' he asked.

'Come and see,' Nibbins said.

Kay slipped on his slippers and followed Nibbins into the little passage: Nibbins closed the door behind him and bolted it.

'I'll lead the way,' he said. 'Mind the stairs: they're a bit worn; for the smugglers used to use these passages. But there's lots of light. Take my paw, as we go up.'

They went up some stairs in the thickness of the wall; then a panel slid up in front of them and they came out on to the top landing. Nibbins closed the panel behind them. It was dark night there on the landing, except for a little moonlight. The house was very still, but looking down over the banisters into the hall, Kay thought that he saw a shadow, wearing a ruff and a long sword, standing in the moonlight. The cuckoo-clock in the nursery struck twelve.

'All the house is sound asleep,' Nibbins said. 'Jane and Ellen are in there in those two rooms. They little know what goes on among us midnight folk. Give us a hand with this ringbolt, will you?'

In the oak planks of the floor there was a trapdoor, which Kay had never seen before. Together they pulled it up: beneath was a ladder leading down into a passage brightly lit like the other.

'Close the trap after you,' Nibbins said, as he went down.

They went along a passage into a little room, all hung with swords and banners.

'This is the guard-room,' Nibbins said. 'Some of the swords are still here. The guards went away a long time ago. Least said, soonest mended; it's not for me to blame anybody. There are their names cut on the wall.' Kay read some of the names:

Robin Pointnose.	Dogg.	Petter Horse.	
Eduardo da Vinci.	P. Dogg.	Tom.	Ernest.
Salado da Vinci.	Jack.	John.	Jemima.
Bruno Bree.	Peterkin.	Lenda.	Maria.
Snowball.	James.	Peter Gillian.	Susan.
G.L. Brown Bear.	Squirrel.	Wm. Brown.	Peter.

Alas, Kay knew those names only too well: they were the names of his beloved companions of old, before there had been any governess or Sir Theopompus. They had been his toys, of bears, dogs, rabbits, cats, horses and boys. They had all been packed away long ago, when the governess came, because, as he had heard her tell Ellen, 'they will only remind him of the past.' They were locked up somewhere, he thought; yet he often feared that they had been given away to other children, who would not know them or be kind to them.

'Why do you call them the guards, Nibs?' he asked.

'Why, because they were the guards,' Nibbins said. 'I told them they ought not to go, but Edward said

that he had got a clue and had to follow it up.'

'What had he got a clue to?' Kay asked.

'The Harker treasure,' he said. 'I begged him to leave half the guards, but he said, 'No; I'll only be away a week or two.' So away they went, with the horse and cart, the big tent that takes to pieces, and all the hammocks and guns. Edward had his sword, the cocked hat, the coat with the piping, and his striped trousers, so you can see that he thought it important. But as to his being away only a week, he has been away a year or more; and not a word has come from any of them.'

'I'm afraid they are all dead,' Kay said. 'I wish they weren't.'

'Things have gone to wrack and ruin without them,' Nibbins said. 'What with witchcraft and that. Of course I'm only a cat, but I've got eyes, and a cat can look at a king. Still, least said, soonest mended. Now, come along, this way, down these steps. Now, do you see these eye-holes? They are cut in the portraits on the walls of one of the rooms. You can look down, if you like.'

Kay looked down through the eye-holes of Grandmamma Harker's portrait into the drawing-room, which was shuttered dark, except for some moonlight coming from the upper panes. This moonlight fell upon the table, where the red and white ivory chessmen were playing chess by themselves. They had come out of the

box and ranged themselves. The kings called out the moves, but generally they asked the queens first. The pieces and pawns which had been taken stood beside the board, giving cheers for their own sides, and uttering little cries of warning.

'Well played, Red.'

'Now, White Knight, why don't you take him?'

'Oh, your Majesty, look out for the Bishop.'

'Oh well played, Your Grace; well played indeed.'

'That'll be Mate in three moves, if you do that, Red.'

'Will it really? Yes, my dear, I suppose it will. I'd better not do it then. What would you suggest?' etc.

While Kay was watching, Nibbins put a paw on his arm. 'Don't speak,' he said, 'Mrs Pouncer is going to sing. Come along quietly, you'll enjoy this.'

He led Kay along a narrow corridor to another passage, where there were more eyelet holes. Kay looked through the eyes of Great-grandmamma Siskin's portrait into the dining-room; but what did he see?

There were seven old witches in tall black hats and long scarlet cloaks sitting round the table at a very good supper: the cold goose and chine which had been hot at middle-day dinner, and the plum cake which had been new for tea. They were very piggy in their eating (picking the bones with their fingers, etc.) and they had almost finished the Marsala. The old witch who sat at the head of the table tapped with her

crooked headed stick and removed her tall, pointed hat. She had a hooky nose and chin, and very bright eyes.

'Dear Pouncer is going to sing to us,' another witch said.

'Hear, hear,' the other witches said. 'Dear Pouncer, sing.'

'But you must join in the chorus, sisters. Shall it be the old song, Dear Nightshade?'

'Yes, yes; the old song.'

Mrs Pouncer cleared her throat and began:

'When the midnight strikes in the belfry dark
And the white goose quakes at the fox's bark,
We saddle the horse that is hayless, oatless,
Hoofless and pranceless, kickless and coatless,
We canter off for a midnight prowl . . .

Chorus, dear sisters . . .'

'Whoo-hoo-hoo, says the hook-cared owl.'

All the witches put back their heads to sing the chorus:

'Whoo-hoo-hoo, says the hook-eared owl.'

It seemed to Kay that they were looking straight at him. Nibbins's eyes gleamed with joy.

'I can't resist this song,' he said, 'I never could. It was

this song, really, that got me into this way of life.'

'But I don't know what it means. What is the horse that is hayless?'

'Aha,' Nibbins said. 'Well, we've time while they're at this song: it has nine times nine verses; but you ought to stay for some more Whoo-hoos. Doesn't it give you the feel of the moon in the treetops: "Whoo-hoo-hoo, says the hook-eared owl?" Come along quietly.'

Nibbins led the way up some more stairs, till he came to an open door, through which Kay saw the stars. 'Why, this is the roof,' he said. He saw how strange the roof was, close to, like this, with the twisted brick chimneys standing guard, with their cowls still spinning. He seemed very far from the ground.

'This is what they mean,' Nibbins said. 'Just open that middle chimney, will you?'

'But it is a chimney: it won't open.'

'No, it isn't. There's a bobbin on it; pull that; it's their stable.'

Kay scrambled up to the middle chimney of the three nearest to him. Sure enough, there was a bobbin on it. He pulled it, the latch came up, the chimney opened like a door; there inside was a cupboard in which stood one besom, one stable broom, one straw broom, one broom broom, and three kitchen brooms, each with a red headstall marked with magic.

'Take the besom and the broom broom,' Nibbins said, 'and pitch the others over the gutter.'

Kay pitched the five over the gutter; they whinnied as they fell on to the garden path, but nobody seemed to notice.

'Now let us mount and ride,' Nibbins said. 'But first, we'll shut the door.'

He was going to shut the door into the house, when the noise of the song suddenly became much louder. Somebody at the banquet said 'Hush' suddenly; the singing stopped; the witches were holding their door open, listening.

'They've heard us,' Nibbins said. 'Mount, Kay, and ride. Mount, catch him by the bridle, say "Sessa," and point him where you want to go. Watch me.'

Nibbins mounted the besom, Kay the broom broom. Just as he was mounted, he heard the sharp voice of Mrs Pouncer calling from the foot of the stairs.

'Night-glider, tell . . .
Are ill things well?'

Kay saw the besom toss up its head; it began to say:

'Save, mistress, save
From white thief and black knave.'

but before he could finish, both Nibbins and Kay said 'Sessa' and pointed their horses towards the wood. Kay heard the witches clattering up the stairs on their high-heeled shoes. Looking back, he saw them all clustered on the roof shaking their fists and sticks, but already they were far away, for the two broom horses were rushing through the air so fast, that soon the house was out of sight. As they went over the elm boughs, they came so close to the top twigs, that some young rooks woke in the rookery and cried 'Kaa' at them.

It was merry to be so high in the air. Kay could see the village, with hardly a light in it, and the flashing of the brook where it went over the fall. Near the ponds, many little lights were twinkling. Kay wondered what they could be. A couple of white owls drifted up alongside Kay like moths; he could see their burning yellow eyes.

'We'll race you to the upper wood,' they said.

'All right,' Kay said. 'Come up, horse.' The brooms were much faster than the owls: soon they were well ahead.

'You keep clear of Wicked Hill,' the owls cried. They said something more, but the brooms were too far in front for the riders to hear.

'We'll land here, if you don't mind,' Nibbins said. 'I'd like to speak with a friend, if he's anywhere about. Point his head down to the quarry there.'

When they had landed in the quarry, they tied the