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opening extract from

Mothstorm

written by

Philip Reeve

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Neither of us noticed the aether-ship that was sailing silently towards Larklight.

Chapter One



In Which Larklight Is Filled with the Spirit of Christmas, but Things Go Somewhat Awry in the Pantry.

'Dunderhead!'

'Clodpole!'

'Ninnyhammer!'

'Booby!'

'Nitwit!'

'Gumph!'

Yes, 'twas the season of Peace and Goodwill at Larklight,

and my sister Myrtle and I, snug in our fleece-lined, winter-weight space-suits, were out upon the front porch, decorating our Christmas Tree.

Christmas Trees are a German notion, and quite the latest thing, but I doubt whether Prince Albert, who is responsible for introducing this charming festive fad, has ever tried to erect such a tree outside a house like Larklight, which floats about in an eccentric orbit far beyond the Moon. Despite the new Trevithick Generator which Mother and Father had lately installed, gravity was still decidedly patchy in the outer reaches of the dear old place, and those baubles, bells and candles with which Myrtle and I were endeavouring to bedeck our tree kept coming undone and drifting off into the inky deeps of space*. It is little wonder that tempers were becoming frayed!

'Numbskull!'

* *Patchy?* I hear you ask. Surely not! Trevithick's make the finest generators that money may buy and have been providing top quality gravity aboard aether-ships and orbital establishments since 1809. Well, this is true. Unfortunately, ever since her adventures aboard that old Yankee warship *Liberty* in September, Myrtle had been gripped by a silly notion of becoming an Alchemist, and Mother had decided to humour her. They had set up a laboratory in one of the spare rooms in the spinward wing, and there, in smoked-glass goggles and a

'Jackanapes!'

'Knuckle-headed galoot!'

Dipping into the trunk which held the Christmas decorations, we both seized upon the same pretty chain of silver stars. 'It is mine!' I cried.

'Not so, you brute,' replied my sister. 'I saw it first!'

And thus a tug-of-war commenced, with each of us quite refusing to relinquish our end of the chain.

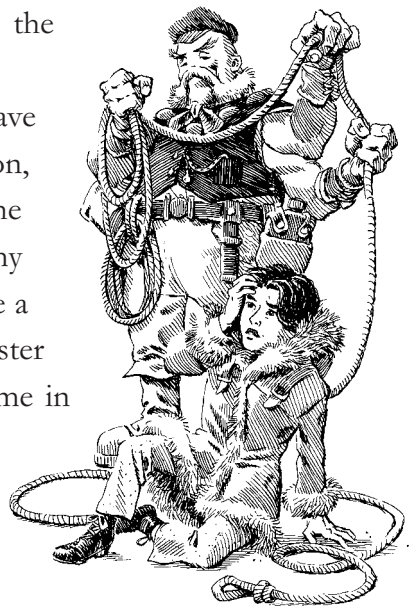
So angry were we, and each so intent upon gaining victory over the other, that neither of us noticed the aether-ship that was sailing silently towards Larklight on outspread wings, until the shadow of its space-barnacled hull fell across us. Only then did we look up.

'Why, it is Jack!' cried my sister, and let go her end of the chain in order to tidy her hair and pinch a little more colour into her cheeks. You would be amazed at how calm and

leather apron, Myrtle was learning how to perform the chemical wedding, that complicated alchemical reaction which can drive a ship through space far faster than the speed of tardy old light. Naturally, since Myrtle is a girl, and not an especially bright one, these experiments had resulted in a number of horrible smells, a deal of smoke, and a couple of rather spectacular explosions. One of the latter had affected our gravity generator, and it has never been quite the same since.

dignified she looked as the good ship *Sophronia* drew alongside, with our old friend Jack Havock beaming down at her from the star deck. He could never have guessed that a few moments before she had been bellowing at her innocent younger brother (e.g. me) in a manner that would have made a fish-wife blush!

Meanwhile I had been taken all aback at the sudden way Myrtle let go her end of the starry chain, and, still tugging upon my end, I went hurtling backwards off the balcony and seemed set to follow so many of our decorations out into the endless wastes of the interplanetary aether.



I dare say I should have drifted halfway to the Moon, had not Mr Munkulus, the *Sophronia*'s mate, seen my predicament and thrown me a line. 'There now, young Master Art,' he cautioned, reeling me in through the *Sophronia*'s main hatch a minute later, 'this is no time for gymnastics and ballyhoo!'

And it would hardly have been gentlemanly of me to say, '"Tis all Myrtle's fault', would it?

The *Sophronia* was soon tied up at Larklight's mooring platform, and I greeted her crew as they made ready to disembark. I was pleased to see that they all bore heaps of brightly wrapped gifts, and that the Tentacle Twins were bearing between them a hamper from which the scents of cooked hams and game pies wafted. But better than anything was just to be there among them again, and to see the friendly way they smiled at me and clapped me on the back as they made their way ashore.

I had not seen any of them since our adventure with the Moobs at Starcross, and since then I had endured a long and dismal season spent cramming Latin, Geography and Arithmetic, for once the Christmas holiday was done I was to be making a start at Vermiform's Academy for the Sons of Space-Faring Gentlefolk, which is a minor public school on Callisto. To be quite honest, I was not much looking forward to leaving home and beginning my education, but the arrival of the *Sophronia* made me forget all my worries. School was next year; for now there would be parlour games, and sing-songs about the pianoforte, and toasted muffins, and Christmas presents, and tales of all the daring

things that Jack and his crew had been up to in the wildernesses of space!

I was so happy to see them, indeed, that I even managed to forgive Myrtle, and bestowed a cheerful smile upon her as we gathered outside Larklight's brand-new front door. The others were all busy wishing her a Merry Christmas, and teasing her and Jack about their romantic attachment, asking when the engagement was to be announced, etc., and drawing their attention to the large bunch of mistletoe which Nipper held up above their heads.

Myrtle looked somewhat put out at first, for she and Jack had had a squabble at Starcross; Jack had told her that she



was too much the lady to ever be a part of his roistering, adventuring life, and Myrtle had vowed to prove to him that she was every bit as good an aethernaut as he – which is how she came to be having lessons in Alchemy and causing stinks and explosions. But they did not have to look at each other long in the dappled shadow of that mistletoe before they seemed to forget their differences and warm to one another once again*. There was a hearty cheer when Jack kissed her, and then we all joined in a rousing chorus of 'O Come, All Ye Faithful', instead of pulling upon the bell-rope.

But when Father opened the door, he did not look pleased by our carolling. Indeed, he seemed distracted, and his spectacles sat awry, giving him a lop-sided appearance.

'Jack! Sophronias!' he exclaimed in a dreadful whisper. 'Thank Heaven you've arrived! A most vexing thing has happened! The Pudding has gone Rogue!'

Those of you who live in Earthly houses, and have no experience of life as it is lived on the further frontiers of

* What Jack Havock sees in my sister is one of the Mysteries of Known Space. She is an absolute horror and looks like a loony fish.

Britain's Empire, may never have had any difficulty with your Christmas puddings. To you, no doubt, it is a simple matter. Your cook makes you a pudding on 'stir-up Sunday'; it is left to mature upon a pantry shelf, and on Christmas Day it is delivered to your table piping hot, doused in blazing brandy, with a sprig of holly on the top and a sixpenny-bit in the middle.

Here in space, however, there is an added complication. For all manner of strange beasts haunt these heavenly oceans, and one of them is the dread Pudding Worm. The larva of this charmless insect looks almost exactly like a raisin, and so it oft goes unnoticed as it creeps into our kitchens and burrows its furtive way into a Christmas pud. Once inside, it starts to gorge itself, growing and growing in the heart of the pudding until there is no pudding left, only

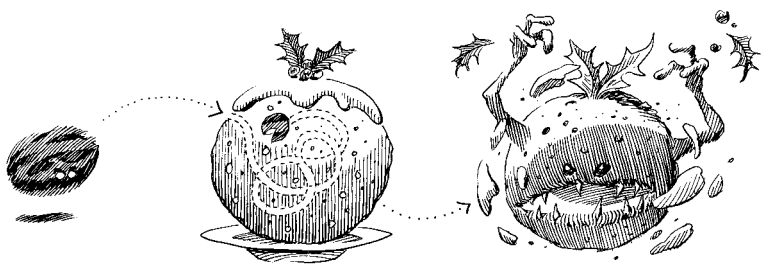


fig. 1 *fig. 2* *fig. 3*

LIFE-CYCLE OF THE PUDDING WORM

the worm, a noisesome thing in pudding shape. Its antennae look uncannily like a sprig of holly, its eyes glint like the edges of silver sixpennies and within its fat and unctuous body lurk a thousand more raisin-grubs, all itching to sneak out and ruin other puds!*

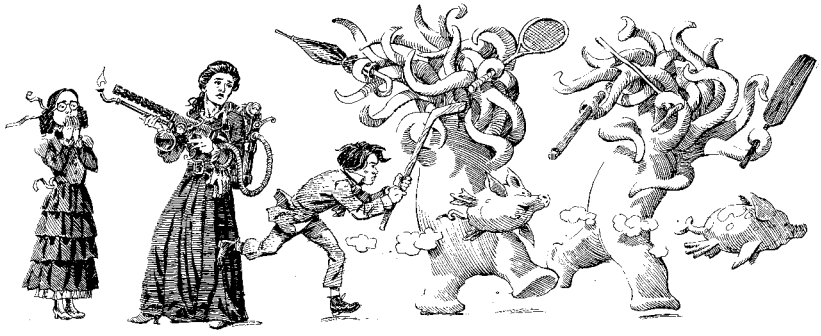
Such, sad to relate, was the fate that had befallen our pudding at Larklight that year! A few short months before, Myrtle and I had helped Mother to stir it up, laughing and chatting in a most carefree manner as we cast figs and dates and orange peel into the mixture, and never noticing that worm in raisin's clothing which must have inched its way up the leg of the kitchen table and secreted itself among the other ingredients. But while we were outside decorating the tree that afternoon, Mother had gone down to check once more that our larder was fully stocked in readiness for the arrival of our guests, and had happened to peek beneath the pudding cloth. Then, snarling horribly, the vile bug had leapt from its bowl, knocked her to the floor and made off into Larklight's labyrinth of air ducts!

* In seasons when no Christmas puddings are available, the Pudding Worm contents itself by eating up puddings of other sorts – plum duff, spotted dog, jam roly-poly; no pud is safe from this voracious pest. Not only that, but it will snack on cakes and preserves too, if the opportunity arises.

Mother met us in the entrance hall, carrying the patent flame-gun which Father had purchased a few years previously for clearing Nattering Space Moss from the gutterings. Because she is a Superior Being and four-and-a-half-thousand-million years old, she was not too much affected by her nasty encounter with the pudding, and she looked very grim and beautiful, with her long hair tied back and smudges of flour upon her face and clothes.

'O Sophronias,' she said. 'How pleased I am to see you! But I fear we cannot offer you much hospitality until this pudding is captured and destroyed. From the glimpse I had of it I should say that is almost ready to reproduce, and if that happens, then the hatchling maggots may infest all our mince pies and fruit cakes too . . .'

The Sophronias, like the devil-may-care space-dogs they



are, rose splendidly to the occasion. They at once set down their gifts and hamper, and armed themselves with walking sticks and umbrellas from the hall-stand, while Jack drew one of his revolving pistols. No one spoke, for we were all awaiting Mother's orders – but we did not need them, for in that silence we all plainly heard the pseudo-pudding go trundling above our heads through one of the air ducts which crosses the hall ceiling!

'The game's afoot!' cried Mother.

'It's making for the Chinese drawing room!' exclaimed Father, brandishing a golf club.*

We ran in a crowd along the hall, through a few panelled passageways and into the room he had spoken of, which has

* It was a mashie niblick, very useful for driving out of the rough and fending off monsters.



been very tastefully re-decorated and is a perfect sea of lacquered cabinets and willow-patterned wallpaper, in which the Emperor of China himself might feel at home. Alas, the Pudding Worm seemed at home there too; a large, pudding-shaped hole in the wire-mesh cover of a ventilator showed where it had burst out, seeking a place to cocoon itself and spawn its vile maggots!

'Oh, this would never have happened if we lived in Berkshire or Surrey,' said Myrtle in a complaining undertone.

'Hush!' warned Mr Grindle, the *Sophronia*'s goblin-like master gunner, and by means of pantomime conveyed to us that the pudding was lurking behind a charming screen in the farthest corner of the room. Gripping one of Father's walking sticks like a broadsword, he crept over to the screen and kicked it aside with his space boot. At once the pudding rolled out, flailing its holly at Grindle's shins. He struck



at it with the stick, but managed only a glancing blow as the foul pud came trundling across the carpet towards the rest of us, who were ranged between it and the door.

We went down like so many skittles as it crashed into us, and by the time we had picked ourselves up it was clear out of the door and down the passage. A moment later we all heard the bomp-bomp-bomp of its fat body rolling down the back stairs.

'Quickly!' urged Mother. 'It is trying to find its way to the kitchens again!'

'Returning to its ancestral breeding ground to spawn, eh?' cried Father.

Myrtle fainted. (Whether it was because of the emergency or because Father had just used the word 'spawn' in mixed company, I could not tell.) Jack hung back to tend to her. The rest of us hared off after the puddingey foe, and I am pleased to say that I had the presence of mind to snatch a decanter of Father's best brandy from the drinks cabinet as I passed, for I knew that it was quite the best weapon against a foe of that sort.

Down the stairs and into the kitchen we went thundering. There we found a trail of crumbs and shattered dishes and a gaggle of startled auto-servants, all bearing

mute testimony to the pudding's passage.

The larder door stood ajar. Cautiously, Mother approached it. I went with her, and the others spread out behind us, determined that our quarry should not escape a second time.

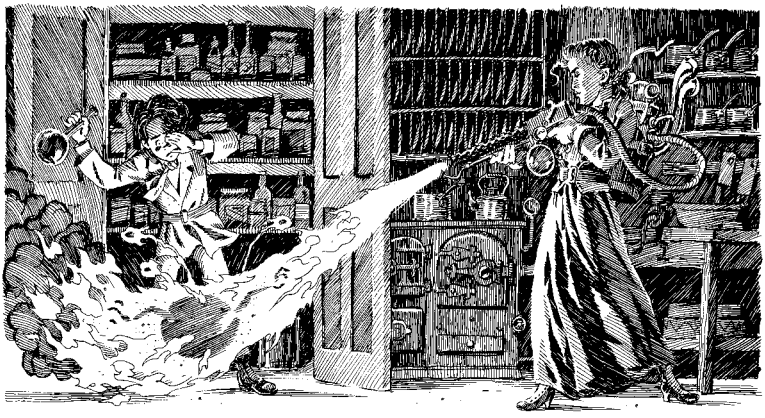
'The door, Art, if you please,' Mother breathed.

I slipped in front of her and threw the door wide open. From inside the larder came a horrid shriek. There the pudding crouched at bay. Yellowish blood oozing from the wound that Grindle had inflicted dribbled down its sides like custard. Its holly rattled, and upon its flanks seethed whole legions of raisin-maggots!

'Brandy!' cried Mother.

I took her meaning and dashed the contents of the decanter over the brute, leaping back just in time as she depressed the triggers of the flame-gun.

A sheet of blue fire enveloped the evil pudding. It hissed and screeched as its holly blackened and its raisins popped like roasting chestnuts. It lunged towards the door, and for a moment I feared that it would roll past us again and set the whole kitchen ablaze. But in a second more the fire had done its work, and only a heap of black and stinking ashes lay a-smouldering upon the flagstones.



'Jolly well done, Art!' said Mother, and the others gathered around us to look into the smoke-filled larder and add their own words of congratulation. Of course, it felt very fine to have their praise, but even so, I did not feel as bucked as you might think. After all, destroying the pseudo-pudding had not brought our own pudding back to us, and what sort of Christmas could we look forward to without a Christmas pud?

I think the others felt just as subdued as we set the auto-servants to clear up the mess and climbed together back up the stairs, where Jack and Myrtle were awaiting us. But Mother, wiping the soot from her face, said, 'A nice cup of tea is what we all need', and since she is old enough and wise

enough to know almost everything, I decided that she was probably right.

No sooner had we disposed ourselves on the chairs and sofas of the green drawing room and begun to exchange the words of welcome and festive good cheer that the Pudding Worm had so rudely delayed, than another surprise interrupted us. Our auto-butler, Raleigh, came stumping in to announce, 'Sir, Madam, there is a large warship approaching from the direction of the Moon, and her captain is signalling for permission to dock. Shall I tell him that we are not at home?'