Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Johnny Mackintosh and the Spirit of London

written by

Keith Mansfield

published by

Quercus

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

1 Kovac Finds a Signal

The twenty-third of April was a very special day in the life of Johnny Mackintosh – it was his thirteenth birthday, although he hadn't told anybody. The last thing he wanted was to be given the bumps by Spencer Mitchell and the rest. And Johnny was even happier than most boys would be on becoming a teenager, having just helped his football team to victory in the semifinals of the Essex Schools Cup. In fact, today was also another anniversary, but one that he'd forgotten – it was exactly eleven years to the day since he'd come to live at Halader House, a children's home located at 33 Barnard Way, Castle Dudbury New Town. But it was none of these things that made the twenty-third of April really special – that was because of the flashing green light leaking out from underneath the ill-fitting door to the computer room of Halader House.

As chance would have it, Johnny Mackintosh, carrying a red sports bag over his left shoulder, was walking along a windowless corridor towards this very room. He was covered head to toe in mud, from beneath his pale blond hair, around his dark green eyes (with striking silver flecks), across his once-white football shirt, spattering his black shorts and almost totally obscuring his white socks. Any bits of skin not concealed by mud, which were very few, were so pale they looked almost blue. Lolloping along beside him, leaving muddy paw prints on the beige carpet, was a particularly shaggy grey and white Old

English sheepdog with a long fringe completely masking his eyes.

Johnny walked past the door in question and continued on his way to the shower room. The sheepdog, however, stopped and began sniffing around its base. Then he lifted his head, turned towards Johnny and barked.

'Bentley – shhhhhh!' hissed Johnny. 'Come on – before someone sees you inside.'

The dog's only response was to turn his head and point his little black nose towards the gap at the foot of the door and bark again.

'Bents – we haven't got time for this.' Johnny shook his head in a manner that suggested he was used to Bentley disobeying his instructions. He stomped back up the corridor towards the dog, knelt down and lifted Bentley's fringe so he could stare straight into the dog's one brown and one blue eye. 'Listen, Bents. If you get caught inside again I'm for it.' Bentley didn't want to listen. Instead, he pulled his head away and barked at the door. Only then did Johnny notice the green glow coming from underneath it. He straightened up and tried turning the handle, but the door was locked. By the side of the handle was a reader for magnetic swipe cards. Johnny banged it with frustration and, to his surprise, there was a soft click. He tried the handle again and the door opened. Bentley scampered inside and Johnny followed.

The reason for the green glow was immediately apparent. On each of the eight computer screens positioned around a large central table were the same two words, displayed in blinking green text against a black background. They read:

SIGNAL DETECTED

Johnny sat down at one of the terminals and entered a sequence of numbers and letters. Bentley placed his front legs on the

table, covering the surface in muddy paw prints, and lifted his face up so he, too, could stare at the screen. The display changed. The text was replaced by two green wireframe globes, one of which had the outlines of the continents superimposed on top of it. 'It can't be,' Johnny muttered to himself as he stared open-mouthed at the image in front of him. 'Kovac,' he said, but before he could continue there was a sharp pain in his left ear as a thumb and forefinger closed around it and he was yanked upwards out of the chair.

'Gotcha!'

As a reflex action, Johnny hit the escape button on the keyboard, and the displays of all eight of the computers on the table transformed so that a drawing of a very large, bearded man, wearing a puffed-up white hat, began bouncing around like a rubber ball. To make matters worse, the cartoon face of an Old English sheepdog appeared right in the middle of each screen and opened its mouth. Instead of a bark, out popped a speech bubble with the words 'Mr Wilkins stinks.' At the time it had seemed a laugh to make this the default screensaver on each of the Halader House computers. Now Mr Wilkins, the bearded Halader House cook, was holding Johnny by his increasingly reddening earlobe, it didn't seem quite so funny. Johnny tried to wriggle free, but only succeeded in burying his face in the folds of the cook's flabby stomach. Mr Wilkins's tiny, beetle-like eyes were staring at the nearest screen from beneath his curly black hair and his round face was becoming redder and redder, as though about to explode.

'That's the last straw, sonny,' said the cook, thrusting his curly beard right into Johnny's face so it tickled. 'We're going to see the Manager. This time she's got to see sense. Oh yes.' The huge man attempted to march Johnny out of the room, but Bentley took hold of the hem of Mr Wilkins's elasticated blue trousers with his teeth. The Old English sheepdog was dragged along the carpet

behind them towards the door. Mr Wilkins kicked out his leg, swinging Bentley's head to and fro as the dog growled and something ripped. Both Bentley and a piece of Mr Wilkins's trousers had become detached. Finally outside, Mr Wilkins began pushing Johnny down the corridor, keeping a very tight hold on his ear.

With Bentley barking right behind them, Mr Wilkins stopped, rolled up his trouser leg to reveal a chunky calf and said, 'Come on, you filthy horrible little dog.' Johnny knew exactly what the cook was trying to do. Mr Wilkins had been at Halader House for as long as Johnny could remember and, throughout that time, seemed set on a one-man mission to have Bentley permanently removed from the establishment – without, or preferably with, Johnny. The cook was always reminding Johnny that the special permission to let him keep the dog could be cancelled at any moment. And it was sure to be the moment Bentley sank his teeth into Mr Wilkins's exposed skin.

Luckily, Bentley seemed to sense Johnny's desperation and backed off. He followed, growling, as Mr Wilkins forced Johnny past the kitchens, up a flight of stairs and all the way along another corridor to a dark wooden door with a brass doorknob and matching brass plate, on which were written the words 'Manager's Office.'

The cook rapped excitedly on the door and a woman's voice shouted, 'Come in.' As Johnny opened the door, Mr Wilkins released his earlobe and pushed him inside, closing the door quickly behind them to keep Bentley on the other side. Johnny stumbled forward into the spotless office, showering some dried mud onto the wooden floor. Johnny hated this room. It was where you were sent if you were in trouble and with Johnny that was pretty much all the time. He couldn't help it – things always seemed to happen around him.

The room was large, lit by a window taking up the entire far

wall and which looked out across a grey tarmac carpark to Castle Dudbury railway station. Near the door stood a little round wood-effect table and four chairs. Around the walls were several framed black and white photographs of scruffy children playing barefoot in run-down terraced streets. In front of the window was a large wood-effect desk, either side of which stood floor-to-ceiling bookshelves jam-packed with large tomes in dusty thick black covers. And behind the desk sat a woman with pointy silver glasses and black and grey streaky hair. She wore an ancient tiger-striped dress, with a pearl necklace and matching earrings, and followed Johnny's progress into the room with round owl-like eyes.

'Mr Wilkins, to what do I owe the pleasure?' she asked in a clipped Scottish accent, hardly moving her narrow lips.

'Mrs Irvine, it's the boy,' said the cook, shifting his enormous bulk from foot to foot with excitement.

'So I see, Mr Wilkins. But why, as you put it, is "the boy" in my office? And so dirty . . .' Mrs Irvine looked Johnny up and down with a disapproving stare. He looked down at his socks and concentrated very hard on not spreading any more mud than he could help on the floor.

'Broke into the computer room, didn't he? I came back from the butcher's and followed his filthy mutt's paw prints all the way from main reception.' Johnny knew he shouldn't have let Bentley come inside with him. So that was how he'd been found so quickly. 'And then the dog bit me,' continued Mr Wilkins, holding up his tattered trouser leg.

'That's not true,' shouted Johnny. 'Bentley's never bitten anyone.'

Mrs Irvine turned her large round eyes back to Mr Wilkins. 'Is it true?' she asked.

'Well – he nearly bit me,' said the cook, his face turning red again. 'I'm telling you – that mutt's got to go. It's not hygienic.'

'Come, Mr Wilkins,' said the Manager. 'Surely, after all this time, we all have a soft spot for Bentley?'

Johnny let out a long deep breath – Bentley was going to be OK.

'Well the boy should be punished. Breaking in like that.'

Mrs Irvine leant forward, staring at Johnny, but then her gaze wandered to the mud on the floor. Johnny couldn't help thinking she seemed more bothered by the dirt than the computer room. After a few seconds, she turned to the cook and asked, 'What would you suggest?'

Johnny could picture himself peeling potatoes for the next month. Mr Wilkins stepped closer to the desk. 'No trip for him tomorrow. Let him stay here. My oven could do with a scrub down.'

Tomorrow was the annual Halader House outing. Everyone was going on the train to visit the Tower of London. Johnny had really been looking forward to it.

'Hmmm.' Mrs Irvine sat back in her chair and sucked her lips together, contemplating Johnny's fate. Then she looked at him and said, 'All right – I'm afraid there'll be no visit to the Tower. Jonathan – I expected better of you than using the computer room without permission.' Johnny felt about a foot tall. He hated being told off. 'But I can't have you staying here on your own. I had a journalist on the phone this morning sniffing around for another salacious story. Naturally, I got rid of him, but it's started me thinking. When did you last visit your mother?'

'What?' asked Johnny, caught off guard by the question.

'Your mother,' repeated Mrs Irvine. 'Your care plan says you should see her at least twice a year.'

'It's OK,' said Johnny. 'I can stay here. I don't mind cleaning the oven.' Although he couldn't go to the Tower, with the others away, at least he'd be able to spend some time in the computer

room undisturbed. He hadn't seen his mum for at least a year now – visiting her had become unbearable. Anything was better than another trip to St Catharine's Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where she was only kept alive by a collection of high-tech machines around her bedside.

'Good idea, Miss. Why don't I take him?' said Mr Wilkins, his bushy beard twitching with anticipation. 'Can't go on his own can he?' Mr Wilkins never missed an opportunity to inflict misery on the children, but Johnny was his special favourite.

There was a knock on the door and, before anyone could speak, in walked a young woman only a little taller than Johnny. She was slightly out of breath, with red hair cut into a bob and wearing jeans and a T-shirt. She stepped between Johnny and Mr Wilkins, walked right up to the desk and asked, in an American accent, 'Is everything OK, Mrs Irvine?'

'Miss Harutunian,' replied the Manager. 'I am aware that you're new to Ben Halader House and people behave differently where you come from. I, however, am accustomed to members of staff waiting outside my door until I invite them to enter. For your information, everything is fine.' Mrs Irvine was the only person Johnny knew who used the building's full title. She leaned forward towards Miss Harutunian, who didn't look the least bit embarrassed. 'Because Jonathan broke into the computer room earlier, he won't be coming with us to the Tower tomorrow. Instead, Mr Wilkins has kindly volunteered to take him to see his mother in hospital.'

'But that's awful,' said Miss Harutunian, turning to the cook. 'You were busy all afternoon making those packed lunches – you can't *not* go. I'll take Johnny instead.' Johnny could have sworn Miss Harutunian gave him a little wink. She'd only been at Halader House a couple of weeks but already she was his favourite social worker.

'I'm not sure that's such a good idea, missy. You don't know

what he's capable of. Like father like son – that's what I say.' As he spat the words out Mr Wilkins thrust his beard forward towards Johnny, who felt its bristles brush the top of his head.

Miss Harutunian folded her arms. 'Where I come from we judge children by their own actions – not those of their parents.'

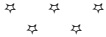
'His mum was in on it too – I say it's bad genes.'

'Mr Wilkins,' said Mrs Irvine, rising from her chair and walking around the desk. 'Miss Harutunian is quite right. And it makes perfect sense for her to accompany Jonathan tomorrow – far better to see for herself than simply read a case file.' The cook looked as though Christmas had just been cancelled. 'Now if you all don't mind I do have work to be getting on with.' She ushered all three of them out of the office, half closed the door, and then opened it again to add, 'Jonathan – if any more journalists start asking questions about your family, I want you to come and tell me at once. Is that clear?'

Johnny nodded. Bentley was waiting for him outside, wagging his tail. Mr Wilkins pulled Johnny close and whispered in his ear, 'I'm short of meat this month, sonny. I'd keep a close eye on that dog if I were you.' Then he pushed Johnny away and stomped off down the corridor.

Miss Harutunian was kneeling down, stroking the sheepdog. 'You get yourself cleaned up,' she said to Johnny, 'and I'll take Bentley outside before he gets into any more trouble.'

'OK,' said Johnny. 'And thanks.' He gave Bentley a pat on the head and ran off towards the shower room, his bag swinging behind him.



Relatively clean, wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with a faded NASA logo, Johnny entered the common room. He walked straight over to the television, fixed to a bracket on the wall. A

music video was playing, while a few children and adults were scattered around, chatting on the various battered sofas different people had donated to the home. Making sure no one was looking, Johnny took a little box from out of his jeans pocket and quickly hid it behind the old satellite decoder underneath the television. He'd built the box himself – although the satellite subscription had long since lapsed, it caused the picture to change into the buildup for a big football match. At the same time, a blue spark leapt unexpectedly from the decoder and Johnny cried out. Quite a few people looked round and, seeing the football, stayed watching as Johnny moved away from the screen, rubbing his hand. The oldest boy in the room, wearing a hooded top and combat trousers, got up and joined Johnny near the TV. 'How'd you do that, Mackintosh?' he asked. 'Didn't think we could get the footie.'

'It's easy,' Johnny replied. 'They scramble the signal with fractal algorithms. I'll show you some time, Spencer.'

'Nice one,' said Spencer. 'You win today?'

'Yeah – three–one,' Johnny replied. 'It was one–all most of the game. Then Dave Spedding got a header from my free kick. We scored the last on the break at the end.'

'Nice one,' said Spencer again. He nodded at Johnny and went back to his gang on the settee.

England were playing tonight. And, best of all, Johnny saw Mr Wilkins was already sitting up, filling one of the sofas on his own and giving the buildup to the match his full attention.

'Over here, Mackintosh,' said Spencer, pushing a ripped leather sofa with lots of foam oozing from its insides, right in front of the television.

'In a minute,' said Johnny. 'Just got to get something.' Johnny hated the thought of missing the match – it was a really important game. But it wasn't as important as what he'd seen on the computer screen earlier. The television was getting its signal

from a satellite up in space; what Johnny had programmed the Halader House computers to do was also to search for signals from space – but much further out. They weren't looking for satellite signals – they were after messages from extraterrestrials. He'd hacked into a network of radio telescopes and was busy searching for messages in the background noise while the telescopes themselves scanned the heavens for other things. It seemed he'd found something and he could hardly wait to go and investigate.

All his life Johnny had loved the stars. On some nights when he lay gazing up at them it almost felt as if they were calling out to him, whispering his name across the vastness of space. He knew loads of their names and could easily point to Shedir, Procyon or Betelgeuse, or any of the constellations they helped make up – in their case Cassiopeia, Canis Minor and Orion. He knew how stars evolved, and how they sometimes died. One of the things he loved was that he, like everyone, was made of starstuff. The only place in the universe where heavy atoms could be made was at the centre of a star, and only when that star died and then exploded, going nova – sometimes supernova – could those atoms travel across space. Five billion years ago some of that starstuff had come together and formed the Earth. Five billion years later it had come together to form Johnny. And for as long as he could remember Johnny knew he wanted to return to the stars from where he came.

Johnny turned into the computer room corridor and saw someone was already waiting outside the door. It was Bentley. The dog got to his feet and barked the moment Johnny came round the corner. Johnny's legs were now really stiff after the semifinal earlier, but he quickened his stride until he reached his friend. 'How did you get back here?' he said to the dog, who barked again. Johnny put a finger to his lips and, this time, the dog fell silent. The card reader must be faulty – it had opened

before. Johnny placed his thumb and forefinger either side, but pulled them sharply away as he felt an electric shock. Still, at least the lock had clicked open. Gingerly, he turned the handle. Bentley shot straight inside and Johnny followed, closing the door quietly. He decided against turning on the lights, walked over to the master computer terminal and sat down.

What happened next would have amazed anyone from Halader House who regularly used the computer room. Instead of the terminal booting up in the normal way, Johnny deftly diverted it into a separate operating system he'd written for it himself that was much more efficient. And a lot more fun.

'Good evening, Johnny,' came a slightly flat mechanical voice from out of the computer's speakers.

'Kovac – volume minimal,' Johnny replied, as though a talking computer was the most normal thing in the world. Kovac was Johnny's special invention and stood for Keyboard Or Voice-Activated Computer, as well as sounding like a Russian footballer which Johnny thought was cool – especially because underneath his bed Johnny kept a box with a few bits and pieces that had belonged to his parents. One was his dad's journal about a trip he'd taken to somewhere in Russia. 'Kovac – signal detection reported. Show findings.'

'Data incomplete – partial location vector available,' said Kovac, projecting some complex graphics onto the screen with a stylized Earth at the centre.

'Partial? No!' Johnny banged the table in frustration. If there was a signal, maybe even a message, he couldn't pinpoint it properly without more data. He looked at the screen for a little while, thinking. Where could he try?

'Kovac – activate Very Large Array, New Mexico.'

'Unable to comply,' was the computer's response.

'What?' Johnny exclaimed. 'Kovac – define "unable to comply".'

'Security codes overridden,' said Kovac.

That had never happened before. Johnny tried again. 'Kovac – activate Very Large Array, New Mexico. Full security override.'

'Unable to comply,' said Kovac again.

'Why not?' Johnny said, becoming impatient.

'Warning . . . warning.' Kovac's screen had switched to a two-dimensional map of the Earth that had a fine red line growing out of New Mexico and heading east across the United States. 'Backwards trace initiated,' said the computer.

'Kovac – run trace decoy program,' said Johnny quickly, glad he'd coded such a thing without ever expecting to use it. The red line on the computer screen turned north towards Canada and stopped somewhere near Montreal.

He decided not to try again straight away. Someone was apparently onto him and Johnny suspected Mrs Irvine would be far from happy if a member of the CIA came knocking on the door of Halader House in deepest Essex.

'Kovac – display signal detection results,' he said and the screen returned to the earlier visual. Johnny looked at it, studying the criss-crossing lines radiating from points representing telescopes on Earth and cross-checking it with data scrolling down the side of the display. This was certainly odd, and not at all what he expected. In fact this was much better. Since Johnny had programmed Kovac to check for signals from space there had been a few interesting results – things that Johnny couldn't explain. But all of them were pretty much as he'd expected in that they were from a long way away – a spike or two in the background signal from the direction of the galactic centre, or out on a spiral arm somewhere. Why Kovac hadn't been able to get a fix in this case was that it was all so near to home. The signal had moved across the sky so quickly it had to be somewhere within the Earth–Moon orbit, or travelling faster than light, and Johnny

knew enough about physics to know that wasn't possible.

Bentley licked Johnny's ear. It broke Johnny's concentration but alerted him to footsteps coming along the corridor. He whispered, 'Kovac – camouflage mode,' and instantly the screen went blank. Whoever it was had stopped right outside the computer room door. Johnny grabbed hold of Bentley's collar and dragged the dog across the floor to just beside the door. He only just got there in time as it was flung open, but he managed to grab the handle to stop it swinging back behind whoever had come in. The lights flickered on and heavy footsteps walked over to the computer table.

'I've got him this time,' somebody muttered – it was Mr Wilkins. It sounded as though he'd pulled the chairs away and crawled underneath the table, which was weird, but Johnny didn't dare put his head round the door to check. Instead, he just held the door handle as tightly as his breath and prayed Bentley wouldn't make any noise. The Old English sheepdog seemed to understand how important it was. The sound of Johnny's heart pounding away in his chest, which was almost deafening, became his next worry. Luckily, Mr Wilkins was really clunking around and wheezing loudly. 'That should do it,' said the cook to himself. 'Now we'll know exactly what you're up to, sonny.' There was the sound of chairs being pushed back under the table and footsteps coming towards the door. Johnny let go of the handle as he felt Mr Wilkins take hold of it from the other side. The lights went out and the door clunked shut.

Johnny slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor next to Bentley, who slathered a long wet tongue over Johnny's face. Tiredness was really beginning to set in now. Johnny crawled along the floor and under the table to see if he could discover what Mr Wilkins had been up to. It was hard finding anything in the dark. He took a handheld games console from

out of his pocket and switched it on so the blue screen lit up the underside of the table. He saw it almost at once – a shiny new keylogger was plugged into the back of the master machine. Johnny was almost impressed – every keystroke he typed at the terminal would be recorded on this. It was just a shame for Mr Wilkins that Johnny was using a voice-activated interface.

He clambered out from under the table and went over to the door. Pressing one ear against it, he heard nothing from outside. Silently, he turned the handle and slipped out into the corridor with Bentley. They walked along, up a flight of stairs and turned left down another corridor, then round another corner until they came to a narrow spiral staircase leading up to the white ceiling, where there was a trapdoor with a red 'no entry' sign screwed onto it. Johnny climbed the staircase a little more easily than Bentley, pulled down the door and carried on through into a small room built into the roof space, every square centimetre of its sloping walls covered with posters of space scenes. There was a huge picture of Saturn, one of the International Space Station and another showing all the planets in the solar system together. Once Bentley was inside Johnny pulled on a rope and the door closed shut behind them.

This was Johnny's room. Opposite the trapdoor was a large square window built out of the roof to form a box shape. In front of the window was an old-fashioned chunky radiator. Right in front of the radiator was Johnny's bed, with a box and his red sports bag underneath. Bentley made a beeline for under the bed and curled up in the warmth of the radiator. Against the wall on the left-hand side of the room was a battered chest of drawers with some dirty clothes piled on top.

Johnny heard footsteps on the staircase outside, there was a knock on the trapdoor, it opened and up came Miss Harutunian carrying a steaming mug of hot chocolate. 'Hi Johnny – why weren't you watching the soccer game? Everyone else was there.'

'I'm dead tired,' Johnny replied, yawning for extra effect. 'We had a big match this afternoon.'

'OK. Well I just wanted to tell you we're going into London with the others tomorrow so it's half-seven for breakfast in the dining room. Oh, and I thought I'd bring you this – help you sleep.' Miss Harutunian handed over the hot chocolate. Johnny took the mug and had a sip. 'And please stay out of the basement from now on, Johnny. We don't want you getting into any more trouble.' Johnny nodded. His social worker must have recognized the 'no entry' sign Johnny had unscrewed from a locked door in the bowels of Halader House for a dare. Miss Harutunian fixed Johnny with a firm stare before leaving the room. At least it didn't seem she'd spotted Bentley underneath the bed. The Old English sheepdog was meant to sleep in a little kennel in the yard behind Halader House, but he hardly ever ended up doing that.

Johnny changed into his pyjamas and sat down on the bed, sipping his hot chocolate. He always left the curtains open so he could lie on his bed and look out. There was a streetlight down below outside, but it had stopped working a couple of days after he'd moved into this room, so he could gaze at the stars all he wanted. Cassiopeia was clearly visible, dominating the heavens. Johnny smiled. Unusually for a boy of his age, particularly such a fair one, he didn't have any freckles to speak of except on his left arm, just below his elbow, where five little brown dots mirrored the wonky 'W' he was now looking at. He always liked looking at Cassiopeia. He yawned – this time it was for real. He was really tired and hated the thought of getting up so early on a Saturday morning. Even so, he tried to think about the signal and what it might mean. Would he ever find it again and, if he did, how could he get a proper fix next time? He pictured himself in New York being presented with a medal by the Secretary General of the United Nations – the first person on

Earth to find clear evidence of extraterrestrial life.

The thoughts eventually switched to his mum and the trip to St Catharine's tomorrow. He didn't know what he'd say to her, but as she never reacted it probably didn't matter. Bentley barked and Johnny came to with a start, nearly spilling the drink which was now cold. The Old English sheepdog had climbed onto the bed and was staring out of the window into the blackness. Johnny put his face to the cold glass and peered outside. And then he saw it – or did he? An insect's head bigger than his own, staring back at him. Before he could really be sure, the window had fogged up with his hot breath on the glass. Frantically he wiped it dry with the sleeve of his pyjama top, but when he looked again there was nothing there.

Johnny looked at the alarm clock by his bed – it was much later than he'd thought. Just then the Moon emerged from behind a cloud, before another obscured it a few seconds later, the eerie silhouette backlit by a silvery glow. That must have been it. He'd been half asleep and had seen a strangely shaped cloud outside the window. It was a trick of the light – his mind had put two and two together and made lots. He got into bed properly, with Bentley's heavy frame on top of the duvet. Johnny put his head onto the pillow and closed his eyes, but it was a very long time before he went off to sleep.