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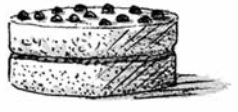
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I

Ermengarde's Birthday (Part One)



ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A CITY.

In the city there was a square.

In the square there was a house.

It belonged to two sisters, Miss Maria Minchin and Miss Amelia Minchin.

From the street the house looked very much like all the other houses in the square. Tall and narrow and respectable with servants in the basement, faces at the windows, and sparrows on the roof. If anything made it a little different from its neighbours it was the faces at the windows. There were so many of them, and they looked out so often, and they were all girls. There were

little girls, bouncing up to wave to anybody passing in the road below. There were big girls, telling secrets and using the windowpane reflections to admire their hair. (Mirrors were very rare in the Miss Minchins' house, and the few that existed had such thick cheap glass that even the prettiest, healthiest people looked like they had been recently drowned in green water.)

And as well as the little girls and the big girls there was Ermengarde, who was too shy to wave, and never told secrets or admired her reflection (having been brought up to believe she was plain). Ermengarde gazed out of the windows more than anyone, and her eyes were always wide and expectant, as if she was waiting for the answer to a question, or the end of a story. Sometimes she pressed so close to the glass that her nose turned into a flat white blob and her hands became two splayed pink stars. Mostly, however, she just sat, while the others talked around her. Sometimes she didn't even listen.

Eight-year-old Lottie always listened.

Lottie was officially a little one, but it was the school's older students who interested her most. Lavinia, for instance, an unpredictable girl with a sharp and lovely

face, and a way of glancing through half-closed eyes that even her best friend Jessica sometimes found slightly scary.

Lavinia was the most interesting girl in the school, decided Lottie. Jessica was the prettiest. Gertrude was the rudest. Ermengarde . . .

'Ermengarde is a nonentity,' said Lavinia.

'She *is* a plod,' agreed Jessica, and it was true that Ermengarde did not shine at anything, not lessons, nor games, nor jokes, nor stories round the fire. She had one skill however: she was very quick and deft at freeing insects that were trapped against the glass.

'Once there was a butterfly,' said Lottie. 'A big dark butterfly with yellow edges on its wings. But it is usually just bluebottles . . .'

'Disgusting things,' said Lavinia.

'. . . or wasps.'

'I'm sure you're supposed to *kill* wasps,' said Jessie.

Ermengarde never took any notice of these remarks. It was something she loved to do, to release the desperate buzzing into an airy silence. She would have released all the faces at the windows too, if she could, even including the stinging Lavinia.

Ermengarde did not think the Miss Minchins' house was a good place to be.

The house was a school, a boarding school for girls. It was full of whispers. The whispers were part of the pattern of the house, like the peculiar musty smell from the basement (part dinner, part dampness), the tick of the enormous grandfather clock in the hall, the nightlights that burned in their saucers of water, and the scratchings and squabblings of the sparrows on the roof.

Often the whispers came from behind the curtains, sometimes several voices, fluttering and chattering.

Diamond mines!

Her French is perfect!

I guessed that Becky was under the table!

Once (at a high window without curtains) it was just one voice, very quietly:

My papa is dead.

Ermengarde, staring intently into the bare branches of the plane trees outside, on the afternoon of her thirteenth birthday, whispered,

I thought we were best friends.

'What did you say, Ermie?' asked Jessica, overhearing.

'I was talking to myself.'

'That's a sign of madness,' said Jessica, cheerfully, 'isn't, it, Lavvie?'

'Not that I've heard,' said Lavinia, so coldly that Jessica backed away and joined Ermengarde at the window instead.

'Fancy crying on your birthday!'

'I am NOT crying,' snapped Ermengarde. 'Go AWAY and leave me ALONE.'

Jessica did not do either of these things. Instead she waved across the square at a passing cab, flicked her curls and asked, 'Are you actually completely thirteen yet? Do you know the time that you were born? I was born at five minutes to midnight on a beautiful starry warm night.'

'You can't possibly remember the *weather*!' said Ermengarde.

Jessica groaned.

'And I don't believe you could tell the time either,' continued Ermengarde. 'Not new born.'

Jessica said that of course she hadn't remembered the weather, or told the time, her mamma had done those things and recounted them to her as part of the story of

the miracle of Jessica's birth.

Ermengarde sniffed and looked more miserable than ever, and too late Jessica recalled that Ermengarde did not have a mamma. Before she could think of any tactful comment to make on this sad fact, she was interrupted by Miss Amelia, hurrying into the schoolroom to inform Ermengarde that the carrier had just arrived with a package.

'From your Aunt Eliza, dear,' she said, panting a little.

'Oh,' said Ermengarde.

'*Isn't* that nice?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Look *pleased*, Ermie!' said Jessica, as Ermengarde got up very slowly from the window seat and plodded after Miss Amelia towards the door. 'It's probably something special for tea! Wasn't it your Aunt Eliza who sent that great big . . . *OUCH! Lavvie!* That hurt!'

'It broke my pen too,' said Lavinia, inspecting the weapon with which she had jabbed her friend.

'I was only going to ask if it wasn't her Aunt Eliza who sent that great big hamper last term,' said Jessie.

'I know you were.'

'You've made a scratch on my arm! It's nearly

bleeding! I may get blood poisoning! *Look* at it, Lavvie!'

'Dear me,' said Lavinia, not looking.

'You might at least say sorry!'

'Shut up, Jess, and go and find me a new nib!'

Jessica went, only slightly outraged, partly because she usually did do as Lavinia ordered, partly in the hope of getting a glimpse of Ermengarde's parcel, but mostly because she was terribly bored. It was a very dull afternoon, in a very dull term, quite unlike the previous one when there had been excitements almost every day.

'Who would have thought,' she said to Ermengarde, who was in the hall picking at her parcel in a very gloomy kind of way, 'that after all that fuss we had before Christmas everything would just fizzle out! And be exactly the same as it was before.'

'Nothing is the same as it was before,' said Ermengarde.

The parcel was a birthday cake. It was so large that it was given a little table of its own in the dining room. It had pink and white sugar icing with a pink sugar rose in the centre, and green sugar writing curling around the edge:

Ermengarde Thirteen Years

Lottie looked at it with interest and asked, 'How do they make the letters green?'

'Snake juice,' said Lavinia.

'Lavinia!' said Miss Amelia. 'Ermengarde, please don't scowl like that! Lavinia was just making a little joke!'

'The pink is beetle juice,' said Lavinia calmly, 'and the green is snake. I hope.'

'Really, Lavinia!' scolded Miss Amelia. 'Ermengarde! Please be careful with that knife! Do stand *still*, Lottie! You are bumping people! Come, Ermengarde! Cut your cake, dear!'

'And you must make a wish as you cut, musn't she, Miss Amelia?' added Jessie.

'Well, if she would like to,' agreed Miss Amelia, smiling a little nervously, as she always did when forced to make a decision.

Ermengarde looked around the room, greenish walls, greenish gas light brackets and heavy greenish curtains. And then she looked at the faces at the table, some snuffly with colds, some pinched, some round, some bored, some eager.

No smiles.

'Hurry *up*, Ermie!' begged Lottie.

'She is thinking of her wish,' said Jessica.

'Perhaps she has no wish,' suggested Lavinia. 'Perhaps her life is perfectly perfect, like a little princess's.'

This unkind remark stung Ermengarde into speaking at last.

'My life is *not* perfect. It is not a *bit* perfect,' she snapped. 'And I *do* have a wish, so there, Lavinia!'

'Wish it!' ordered Lottie.

'I will,' said Ermengarde, and she gripped the knife and stabbed hard through the heart of the sugar rose and heavy and deep into the cake's plump, jammy centre, and she said, 'I wish . . . I WISH AND WISH . . . *I WISH AND WISH AND WISH* . . . that there was NO Miss Minchin's!'

'*Ermengarde!*' exclaimed Miss Amelia.

'Well, I do,' said Ermengarde, and burst into tears.

Later she was persuaded to eat a piece of birthday cake by Lottie, who brought a fat slice to where she was sitting being dismal by a black and rainy window.

'I expect it's only grass juice that makes the letters green,' said Lottie, as comfortingly as she could. 'Or cabbage. I'm afraid the pink really is beetle, though. Miss



Amelia said so. But it can't be a poisonous sort of beetle because we've all eaten it and we are still well.'

Ermengarde sniffed.

'Anyway,' said Lottie. 'I've brought you a birthday present.'

Lottie's parcel contained a green tin frog with a key in its back. It played a small tune when it was wound, and opened and closed its mouth to show a black painted fly.

'Thank you,' Ermengarde said, and added rather mournfully, 'It's my best present. Thank you.'

'What else did you have? What did Sara send?'

'A book. I don't know why. She knows I hate books. And my godmother sent mittens. She always sends mittens,' said Ermengarde ungratefully. 'Aunt Margaret sent a prayer in a picture and my papa sent a gold sovereign that he hopes I will use for something sensible. And Aunt Eliza sent the cake.'

'You've got my frog now though,' said Lottie, complacently. 'And your birthday wish. And one day it will come true.'

'How do you know?'

'Lavinia said.'

'*Lavinia?*'

'Lavinia said one day in about a million years all the planets and this whole world and England and London and Miss Minchin's will be swallowed up into the sun. Gulp! Bang! And that will be the end.'

Lottie appeared to find this idea very attractive. She hugged herself with pleasure, slid off the window seat and settled into a cheerful squabble with a fellow eight-year-old over the few remaining petals of the sugar rose.

Ermengarde nibbled her cake and wound up her frog and was a tiny bit consoled. It was nice to know that there was a definite end to Miss Minchin's in prospect, even if it was some time away.