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opening extract from

Magical Mischief

written by

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published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

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Chapter One

A Whiff of Magic

'My shop stinks!' said Mr Hardbattle.

He had first noticed The Smell a few months before, but had been too busy to do anything about it. Running a bookshop single-handedly meant that his time was at a premium. Finding the source of a strange new smell had been put on the bottom of his list of 'things to do' along with dusting and tidying up.

It would not have been a problem if The Smell had been a nice one. If it had smelt of candyfloss or eau de cologne it would have been delightful, but Mr Hardbattle's smell was of the noxious variety. The Smell had been mild to start off with, but over the months it had grown more powerful until Mr Hardbattle had felt compelled to express his disgust out loud.

To Mr Hardbattle's nose, The Smell resembled the stench of dung – the sort that you might find in a big heap in a farmyard – and it baffled him how such a smell could get inside his shop, which was miles from the

country, in the middle of a town. Equally as puzzling was the fact that none of his customers seemed to be able to detect it. They could, however, smell other unpleasant odours of which he was unaware.

'Pooh! Hyacinths!' exclaimed one customer.

'It reeks of vinegar in 'ere,' said another. 'I'd lay odds that somebody 'ad fish and chips for their supper last night.'

'Might I suggest,' said a well-spoken lady, pink-cheeked with embarrassment, 'that you get someone in to look at your drains?'

Conscious of the need to please his customers, Mr Hardbattle tried to find the source of all the offensive smells. He looked in vain for horse manure; he poured a newly purchased bottle of vinegar down the sink; he examined all his pot plants, but failed to find a hyacinth; he even called out a plumber to inspect his drains, but none of these actions had any effect at all. Thinking that the smells must be seeping into his shop from outside, Mr Hardbattle closed all his windows.

Over the ensuing months, The Smell grew even stronger, forcing Mr Hardbattle to wear a clothes peg on his nose. Realising that bad smells were not good for business he introduced other odours into the shop to smother the nasty pongs. He bought a gallon of lavender water and sprayed it in every corner, and when it failed

to make any difference he tried perfumed candles and potpourri. However, despite his best efforts, The Smell remained.

Customers wrinkled their noses and frowned the instant that they came through the front door and the stream of people, who had always frequented Mr Hardbattle's shop, dwindled to a rivulet.

After The Smell came the hallucinations. They started on a small scale and progressed to the spectacular.

At first, Mr Hardbattle thought he had had too much sherry when he saw one of the black cat bookends, which sat on a shelf above his desk, twitch its whiskers and yawn, and he rubbed his eyes in astonishment at the sight of a glass marble chasing a spider across *The Times* newspaper that he had left open on his desk. When his wastepaper basket uncoiled itself and went for a slither around the floor, Mr Hardbattle made an urgent appointment with an optometrist. The optometrist did lots of tests and shone a bright light into his eyes. She could not put her finger on the problem, but advised him that it might be worth replacing his old spectacles. Mr Hardbattle chose a new pair with horn rims and hoped that they would do the trick.

Then books began to rearrange themselves. One morning, he came downstairs at nine o'clock to open up and found all the books shelved upside down and, on another day, he discovered that the books with

similar-coloured jackets had grouped themselves together. The rainbow effect of the blue books sitting next to the green books, the yellow books, the red books and so on might have appealed to Mr Hardbattle if the whole thing were not so deeply disconcerting. Thinking that he must have sleepwalked in the night and done the rearranging himself, Mr Hardbattle went to see a doctor. The doctor listened to Mr Hardbattle's troubles, nodded innumerable times and asked if he was suffering from stress. When Mr Hardbattle said that yes, he thought so, the doctor prescribed a hot, milky drink before bed.

'And a biscuit?' Mr Hardbattle asked.

'I don't see why not,' said the doctor. 'I'd recommend a fig roll or an Abbey Crunch.'

Despite enlisting the help of medical professionals, buying a new pair of spectacles and drinking a cup of cocoa every night before he turned in, strange things continued to happen.

It all got too much for Mr Hardbattle so he telephoned his Auntie Pearl. His aunt was a spirited lady who had made a lot of acquaintances in her ninety-seven years. Mr Hardbattle was surer than sure that if anyone knew the right person to ask what he should do about his predicament, it was his Auntie Pearl.

'Queer goings-on, you say? How immensely thrilling!' said the gung-ho, upper-class voice of Auntie Pearl all the way down the telephone line from her

cottage in the Quantocks. 'If I were you, dear boy, I'd give Bertie Braithwaite a bell. Hold on a tick while I find his number . . .'

Bertie Braithwaite's field of interest was the supernatural, and when he heard Mr Hardbattle's accounts of marbles with minds of their own, restless wastepaper baskets and yawning bookends, he was able to assure him that his bookshop was not haunted. Anxious to be of help, Bertie put Mr Hardbattle on to a market stallholder in Crewe who advised him to try a retired brigadier in Nempnett Thrubwell who suggested that he should pay a call on Mrs Elizabeth Trinket of Two, Bolton Gardens, Brightlingsea.

Mrs Trinket was not on the telephone, and the strange goings-on in the bookshop seemed too fantastic to put in a letter so, the following day, Mr Hardbattle picked out his smartest bow tie, closed his shop and started up the van, which he used for his deliveries. The van was bottle green and, on both sides and the rear doors, the name of his bookshop, Hardbattle Books, had been painted slantwise in cream. Mr Hardbattle took with him a map, a beef and horseradish sandwich and coffee in a Thermos flask, and drove his van the hundred-and-twenty-one miles to Brightlingsea. He knocked on the door of Two, Bolton Gardens. Fortunately, Mrs Trinket was in.



'Magic. That's what's behind it,' Mrs Trinket said, waiting until her guest had lowered himself into one of her armchairs. She had learned from experience that momentous news was best delivered after its recipient had sat down. 'It's a classic case,' she continued, setting down a tray and pouring out two cups of tea. 'You've been in the same premises for years, you said. I'll bet it's dark and dingy and has never seen a duster.'

Amazed by her powers of deduction, Mr Hardbattle nodded.

Mrs Trinket slid a teaspoon into the sugar bowl. 'They're just the sorts of conditions that magic would thrive in . . .'

'Magic? Fairies and so on? Loose in my shop?' blurted out Mr Hardbattle, gripping the cushiony arms of the chair. 'It's incredible! Why, I had no inkling that magic even existed. Good heavens, madam. You've taken my breath away.'

Stunned and bewildered, Mr Hardbattle took the cup and saucer that were offered to him. His first sip of tea made him splutter. It was as if he had just dipped his tongue in seawater.

'*How* many sugars are in here, dear lady?'

'Six,' answered Mrs Trinket, stirring her own cup of

tea and smiling at him in a motherly way. 'Sweet tea is good for shock. Most folk find it hard to swallow.'

Mr Hardbattle murmured, 'I'm not surprised', and placed his cup back on the tray.

'Closed minds, that's what most people have,' observed Mrs Trinket, gesturing to her guest that he should try one of her coconut buns. 'Can't entertain the thought that magic might be real and not something that you just find in storybooks.'

'Could you tell me some more about magic?' Mr Hardbattle asked. He was a well-read, intelligent fellow and a few months ago before the arrival of The Smell, he might have regarded talk of magic as whimsical tosh. However, Mrs Trinket's theory was the only one that he had been presented with and, besides, he did not want her to think that he had a closed mind. 'How did it come to be in my shop, do you suppose?' he asked. 'Could some prankster have put it there?'

Mrs Trinket set her cup of tea to one side and leaned forward in her chair, lacing her fingers together. 'Magic is its own master, Mr Hardbattle,' she explained. 'It chooses where it goes and it gets there by any one of a hundred different ways. It can ride on the wind or attach itself to the sole of a shoe. It's even been known to burrow through the earth . . .'

Mr Hardbattle's horn-rimmed spectacles slid down his nose as a sequence of images flashed through his

mind. First, he pictured magic as a host of downy dandelion seeds; then as globs of chewing gum; and finally his mind conjured up a clump of glistening toadstools, gradually spreading and festering under the floorboards of his shop.

'Magic's very fussy about where it takes up residence,' Mrs Trinket carried on. 'Everything has to be just so. It arrives in dribs and drabs: a smidgen here, a trace there. But if enough magic turns up, it will form a cluster. You can't see these clusters and you can't feel them either, but the smell that they give off is unsavoury to say the least.'

'There's been an outbreak of awful smells in my shop!' Mr Hardbattle said, spitting out coconut cake crumbs in his excitement. 'My customers have inundated me with complaints, but, curiously, none of the odours they've smelt has been the same.'

'That'll be magic, right enough,' said Mrs Trinket. 'It doesn't like to be disturbed, you see, so it gives off a pong to keep people away, but humans are a contrary lot. A shockingly awful stink to one is a balmy bouquet to another. Magic gets round that by evoking the smell that each of us hates the most.'

'In my case that's horse manure,' Mr Hardbattle told her. Just the mention of it made his insides squirm.

'With me, it's cooked cabbage,' Mrs Trinket said. 'My grandmother couldn't abide fresh fish. In her day, of course, the smells weren't so ripe. Magic was found all

over, and the more thinly it's spread, the fainter the aroma. Everybody's attic had a sprinkle, but mostly it liked out-of-the-way places: barns, old churches, rambling farmhouses, water towers and poky museums. Places like that are rare these days. They've either been knocked down or done up. Half of them have been made into homes for the ridiculously rich. Dark, dry, secluded places are hard to come by in this day and age. Your bookshop's like a raft in a time of flood. No wonder magic's taken such a shine to it.'

'I should feel privileged, I know,' said Mr Hardbattle worriedly, 'but the truth is it's quite inconvenient.' He explained about his recent loss of customers and consequent plummet in sales.

'You could buy a vacuum cleaner. That would do the job. Magic's worst enemy, they are.' Mrs Trinket shot him a piercing look, challenging Mr Hardbattle to take her advice if he dared.

'Er . . . well, hmm . . .' he said, unable to look her in the eye. 'It seems a little *insensitive*.'

Mrs Trinket relaxed her stare and took a slurp of tea.

'Perhaps I should parcel it up and send it abroad. It would be sensible to relocate my magic somewhere wild and unfrequented . . . like Borneo . . . or Antarctica.' Mr Hardbattle beamed, mildly amazed by his own resourcefulness.

'Lord, no, that would never do!' said Mrs Trinket, so

appalled that she spilled spots of tea down the front of her blouse. 'You can't go mixing up magic! There are different strains and they've all got requirements. English magic is like a house spider. Remember I told you it hankers to hide in old buildings that are dimly lit? Well, in Holland, magic likes to be on the move. It clings to the roofs of trains and sneaks inside the saddlebags of bicycles; and Scottish magic's only content when it's somewhere dank and marshy. There's an old Scottish saying: "Where'er there are midges, there's magic." Surely, Mr Hardbattle, you've heard of it?'

'No, I can't say that I have,' he replied before heaving a weighty sigh. 'What do you suggest that I do, Mrs Trinket? Put up with the smell? Try to ignore the peculiar happenings?'

'If you really want rid of it, flick a duster around . . . redecorate,' said Mrs Trinket, her tone a trifle crisp. 'It will move on if you goad it enough, but *where*? That's the question.'

'It seems to me,' Mr Hardbattle said after a few minutes' thought, 'that magic has had a raw deal. It can't be nice for it, pushed from pillar to post . . . its old stamping ground taken over . . . people like me viewing it as a nuisance.' He shook his balding head despairingly. 'I'm at a loss to know what to do for the best.'

'Poor dear,' said Mrs Trinket tenderly. 'Have another bun.'