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Opening extract from

Twilight Robbery

Written by

Frances Hardinge

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Macmillan Children's Books

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TWILIGHT ROBBERY

Praise for Fly By Night*:*

'I wish I'd written it, but even better, I know I couldn't have' Meg Rosoff

'Hardinge is a hugely talented writer of tireless invention and vivid prose' *Guardian*

'Frances Hardinge's phenomenally inventive *Fly By Night* is remarkable and captivating, masterfully written and . . . Full of marvels' *Sunday Times*

'Mosca is, rather like Philip Pullman's Lyra, a fierce black-eyed street survivor . . . *Fly By Night* is like delving into a box of sweets with a huge array of flavours' *TES*

'*Fly By Night* is a wonderful and wondrous novel . . . Frances Hardinge has joined the company of writers whose books I will always seek out and read' Garth Nix

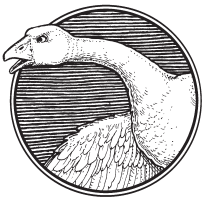
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Verdigris Deep

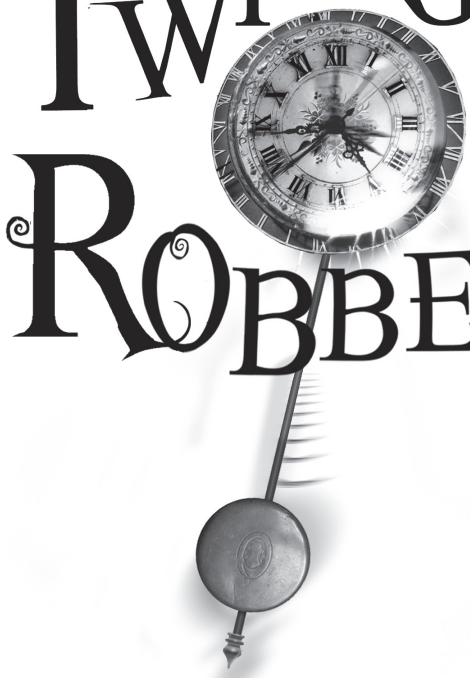
Gullstruck Island

Another Mosca Mye madcap adventure . . .

Fly By Night



TWILIGHT ROBBERY



FRANCES HARDINGE

MACMILLAN



To Martin, for being my partner in crime, fellow adventurer and one true love, and for being wiser than anybody has a right to be



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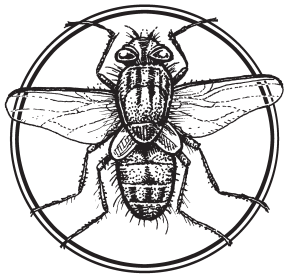
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Goodman Springzel, Bringer of Surprises



'Read the paper for you, sir?'

One small voice strove against the thunder of rain, the shuffle and huff of the passing mules, the damp flap of canvas as the last sodden stallholders gave up their fight against the dismal weather. Market day was coming apart like a biscuit in coffee, fragments of it running for cover with trays and baskets held over their heads.

'Oi! Gentlemen! Read the paper for you?'

The two farmers that had been hailed hurried on, without looking up to see where the voice came from. And so they did not notice a small figure that had found, if not shelter, at least a place where the rain simply pelted her instead of pummelling her. The upper storeys of the courthouse, debtors' prison and magistrate's house all jutted themselves forward like three frowning foreheads, and beneath this the figure hunched against the wall, bowing so as to shield a crumpled, sodden copy of a much-travelled *Pincaster Gazette* from the worst of the rain. Small wonder that the poor *Gazette* drooped so forlornly. Even in the cities reading was a rare talent, and here in the little sheep-farming town of Grabely none of the inhabitants could read the tiniest tittle.

The rain washed people, stalls and barrows from the market square, leaving only that one figure like a particularly

stubborn stain. Drips fell from the tip of a pointed nose. Beneath a drooping bonnet with a frayed brim, hair spiked and straggled like a tempest-tossed blackbird's nest. An olive-green dress two sizes too big was hitched at the waist and daubed knee high in thick yellow mud. And behind the clinging strands of damp hair two large black eyes glistened like coal and gave the marketplace a look that spoke of coal's grit, griminess and hidden fire.

This shivering, clench-jawed scrap of damp doggedness had a name, and that name was Mosca Mye. 'Mosca' meant fly, a housefly name well suited to one born on an evening sacred to Palpitattle, He Who Keeps Flies out of Jams and Butterchurns. It was a name that would have been recognized in her home village, where a number of people would have had questions to ask about the burning of a mill, the release of a notorious felon and the theft of a large and savage goose. In Mandelion, a city port to the west, a well-informed few would have known her name, and how it fitted into the tale of conspiracy, murder, river battles and revolution that had turned the city upside down and shaped it anew.

Three months had now passed since the gates of Mandelion closed behind Mosca. Those three months had brought in winter, eaten the soles of her shoes to a paper thinness, pinched her cheeks, emptied her purse and, most importantly of all, used up her last ounce of patience with her travelling companion.

'Mosca?' A faint, querulous voice sounded behind her, rather like that of a dying great-aunt. 'If you do not wish me to perish from want, you might try to use a little charm. The

flower girls manage to coo or sing their wares – they do not shriek like an attacking hawk.'

The voice came from a narrow, barred window set in the wall of the debtors' prison. Peering in, Mosca could just make out a ponderous figure lying in its shirtsleeves upon a bed of straw. The man in question had allowed a tragic and injured expression to settle upon his plump face, as if it was he and not Mosca who was braving the elements. His coat, wig and pocket-watch chain had all been sold, leaving his much-patched waistcoat on display. Eponymous Clent, poet extraordinaire, word-wizard laureate and eternal bane of all those mean-minded enough to expect him to pay his bills. Once upon a time Mosca had thought it a good idea to continue travelling with him instead of settling in Mandelion. They shared a love of words, a taste for adventure and a dubious relationship with the truth, but such common ground can take two people only so far – and it was starting to seem as if it would take them to Grabely and no further.

'What's your charm done for us, Mr Clent?' snapped Mosca through her teeth. 'Why don't you charm your way out of that cell? Why don't you charm us some dinner?'

'She mocks me,' murmured Clent with a maddening air of stoic forgiveness. 'It is her nature. Those of tottering intellect and meagre spirit always turn against their best friends and protectors as soon as they face real hardship. She cannot help it, Fates.' He sighed. 'Madam, you might reflect upon the fact that you at least have your liberty.'

'Yeah, it's lovely out here.' Mosca glared up at the louring sky of her liberty. 'If I was any freer, I'd have influenza already.'

'Or,' Clent continued with a hint of bitterness, 'you might reflect on the reason I find myself thus incommoded. After all, you would insist on bringing *him* into this accursed town.'

Mosca made a crab-apple face, but here sadly Clent had a point. If it had not been for her, Saracen would not have been with them. For a good deal of her childhood Saracen had been the orphaned Mosca's only friend and ally, and so she had taken him with her when she fled her damp and miserable home village. Since then she had resisted all Clent's attempts to sell him, lose him or lure him into a pie-case. Mosca usually kept Saracen on a muzzle and leash, but on their first night in Grabely a laughing ostler had made the mistake of assuming that if something waddles it is funny, and that if it is funny then it is harmless, and that if it is harmless there is nothing to be lost by removing its muzzle . . .

Clent had been thrown into the debtors' prison due to his inability to pay for the resultant damage to the inn. The ostler, who was somewhat damaged himself, was carried off demanding that Saracen be put in the stocks (into which his wings would hardly have fitted) and that he be publicly flogged (which nobody seemed willing to attempt). And by the time the townspeople had collected their courage and an array of long sharp objects, Saracen had escaped into the countryside.

Since that time Saracen had been making a name for himself. That name was not 'Saracen'. Indeed the name was more along the lines of 'that hell-fowl', 'did-you-see-what-it-did-to-my-leg', 'kill-it-kill-it-there-it-goes' or 'what's-that-chirfugging-goose-done-now'. Every time Mosca begged, stole or earned almost enough to pay off Clent's debt, another

bruised and bleeding farmer would limp into town to report a shattered roof or a stunned mule, Clent would be blamed for Saracen's doings and they would find themselves right back where they started.

'Naturally I would earn our way if I could,' continued Clent in the same dolorous tone, 'but since the Stationers stopped buying my poetry . . . what am I to do?'

Although nobody usually admitted it, everybody knew that between them the powerful guilds that represented the main professions and crafts of the land held the country together. The formidable Guild of Stationers controlled the printing of all books in the Realm, and burned any book they considered dangerous. Most people were glad to leave them to this, for it was believed that reading the wrong book could drive you mad. The Stationers appeared the lesser of two evils, albeit one with a tendency to correct your grammar while burning your neighbours. Clent had once worked as a spy for the Stationers, and it was on their orders that he had travelled to Mandelion with Mosca at his heels. The Stationers had not, however, ordered him to help overthrow the city's government, and had been unamused by Mosca and Clent's involvement in Mandelion's revolution. Over the last three months they had shown their lack of amusement by refusing to buy any of Clent's work, not so much as a limerick.

'Why do you not cut off my hand if you will not let it write?' Clent had railed at them. 'Why not cut off my head if you will not let it dream?'

'Don't think it wasn't considered, Mr Clent,' had been the curt response.

Remembering all this did nothing to improve Mosca's mood. At the moment the most marketable commodity Mosca owned were her eyes – and the fact that she and Clent were the only people in Grabely who knew how to read. Newspapers sometimes washed up in Grabely, declarations and wanted posters were pinned to the door of the courthouse by the decree of the nearest cities, but they might have been covered in bird footprints for all the sense the inhabitants could make of them. And so every day for the last two weeks Mosca had been standing in the square offering to read newspapers, letters, wanted posters and pamphlets to anyone who would pay her a penny. Mosca had always felt a passionate hunger for the books everyone else feared, but right now most of her waking thoughts were taken up with a far more ordinary sort of hunger.

Most people were interested in the copy of the *Gazette*, of course, wanting to hear more of the strange rebel town of Mandelion that had overthrown its duke and, with a reformed highwayman as its leader, still held out against the disapproval of its neighbours. Unfortunately after the first week there was nobody in town who had not heard every word in the newspaper, so Mosca had started making up more stories, and she was afraid that people were beginning to notice.

'Try calling out again, this time in a sweeter manner . . .'

'There's nobody here!' exploded Mosca. 'There's nobody on the blinkin' streets! Nobody wants to know how the world's going! I'm sellin' the news to the bleedin' pigeons! There's nobody – oh, hang on . . .'

A serving man had just come out of the courthouse,

staring in confusion at a poster in his hand, before pinning it against the door, upside down. When official declarations and bills were sent to Grabely, the local magistrate always ordered them to be posted outside his courthouse in the approved fashion, despite the fact that even he had no idea what they said.

'Mister! Mister! Do you want me to read that for you? Mister! Only a penny!'

The man looked at her, then swept his wet hair out of his eyes.

'All right.' He tossed a penny. 'Just the gist. Make it snappy.'

Mosca tilted herself so her head was almost inverted, gripping her bonnet as she did so.

'It's a . . .' Unlike every other ounce of Mosca, her mouth was suddenly dry. 'It's . . . It's an announcement of a . . . new . . . tax . . . on . . . table legs.'

'Table legs!' The man swore, and turned up his collar. ''Twas only a matter of time, I suppose,' he muttered as he clipped off down the street.

Mosca turned back to the poster and gaped at it white-faced. What it actually said was this:

> Eponymous Clent – Wanted for thirty-nine cases of fraud, counterfeiting, selling and circulating lewd and unlicensed literature, claiming to be the impecunious son of a duke, impersonating a magistrate, impersonating a horse doctor, breach of promise, forty-seven moonlit flits without payment of debts, robbing shrines, fleeing from justice before trial, stealing pies

> from windows and small furniture from inns, fabricating the Great Palthrop Horse Plague for purposes of profit, operating a hurdy-gurdy without a licence. The public are advised against lending him money, buying anything from him, letting him rooms or believing a word he says. Contrary to his professions, he will not pay you the day after tomorrow.

Eponymous Clent was known in the debtors' prison by his real name. That had been unavoidable.

Nobody ever did lie about their name, not least for fear of angering their patron Beloved. The Beloved were the little gods everybody trusted to take care of running the world, keeping clouds afloat, hens laying and dust out of babies' eyes. There were far too many Beloved for each to have a whole day of the year sacred to them, and so instead every little god had to make do with a fraction of a day or night. If you were born in an hour sacred to a particular Beloved, it became your patron god, and you were given one of the names linked to that god. Everybody agreed that your name was who you *were*, your destined, god-given nature. Lying about it was as unthinkable as slapping a god in the face or trying to glue a new soul into your body.

Clent had been named 'Eponymous' because he had been born under Phangavotte, He Who Smooths the Tongue of the Storyteller and Frames the Legendary Deed. While he was shameless enough to impersonate anything from a High Constable to a hedgehog, even Clent would not lie about his name. And so, sooner or later, somebody else who could read

would turn up in Grabely and look at the poster, maybe read it aloud . . .

'Oh muckbuckle,' muttered Mosca. 'We're sunk.'

And then, not for the first time, it occurred to her that only Clent need sink, and that she did not have to be aboard when it happened.

The thunder of the rain hid the clatter of clog on cobble as she ran along this wall and that, making her way towards the easterly road. It did not take long. The town was tiny, and soon her clogs were squishing into mud. The houses fell back, and she was gasping and sneezing and gazing out along a barren dirt track ribboning across the grey heath.

Ranged along the road like a rough-cut welcoming committee were Grabely's statues of some of the Beloved. These particular Beloved were hacked and hewn from wood, which the water glossed to a slick, dark red. Greyglory with his sword, Halfapath brandishing a sextant, Tombeliss beating on his drum.

The morning had been sacred to Goodlady Emberleather, She Who Prevents the Meat from Becoming Chewy and Unwholesome. The hours between noon and dusk on this day of the year, however, were devoted to Goodman Springzel, He Who Tips Icewater Down the Collar and Hides the Pearl in the Oyster, the Beloved in charge of surprises both good and ill. Somebody had placed a crude wreath of leaves around his statue's neck to show that this was his sacred time.

Like everybody else, Mosca had been brought up worshipping the Beloved. Every habit of her mind told her that she *needed* to perform little gestures of respect to these miniature

gods, in order to ward off disasters great and small. *But*, wondered her fierce, rebellious, practical mind, *what happens if I don't?*

Mosca's mother had died in childbirth, and thus the only parent she had ever known had been her father, the studious and uncompromising Quillam Mye. He had died when she was eight, leaving her an orphan. Some remembered him as a great thinker, and a hero in the fight against the murderous Birdcatchers, who had ruled the Realm for a few bloody years. However, the wild and radical views on equality that filled his later books had seen him exiled, spending his last years in the miserable backwater village of Chough, where his daughter was born and raised. Mosca's childhood had always been tainted by the villagers' suspicion of her father. Had they known the full truth of his views, the people of Chough would probably have burned him when he first set foot in the village . . . for Quillam Mye had secretly been an atheist.

Ever since discovering the truth of her father's atheism, Mosca had discreetly stopped nodding to the Beloved's statues, reciting prayers to calm them or leaving offerings in their tiny shrines. In spite of this it did not seem that rain made her any wetter, or that her milk curdled any faster, or that she was any more prone to attack by wolves.

And thus she felt no particular qualms about sitting down upon the wide flat head of Goodman Springzel to consider her situation. She took out a wooden pipe and chewed angrily at the stem, but left it empty and unlit. It was a habit she had developed long ago, whenever she needed to clear her thoughts.

I'm done with Mr Clent – done for good this time. All I need to do is find Saracen, then I'll leave that ungrateful old bag of lies to stew in his own juice.

But where could she run? To the west, back towards Mandelion? It was not that easy. She had friends there . . . but after the revolution a number of powerful and dangerous people had made it clear that she, Clent and Saracen should leave Mandelion and never come back. Besides, even if she did strike out for the city, she might never reach it. The land around it was starting to sound like a warzone in the making.

A month ago all the big cities within spitting distance of Mandelion had passed hasty new laws decreeing that nobody was allowed to trade with the rebel city. The idea was to starve them out, but what it really meant was that suddenly all the little towns like Grabely that needed their trade with Mandelion to make ends meet found themselves with meagre market stalls and dwindling granaries. And so some people had decided that life might be better in Mandelion itself and had tried to flee to join the rebels. Now many of the local towns and cities had beadles and other lawmakers patrolling the moors in search of such refugees, ready to drag them back to a worse cell than Clent's.

Could she last the winter in one of the nearby towns or villages to the north or south? Unlikely. Soon there would be no more apples to tug off the trees, any hint of good humour and charity would be pinched away by the cold and nobody would pay to have a newspaper read to them. Knowing would become less important than eating.

Where did houseflies go in the winter?

'They don't,' muttered Mosca with her eyes full of water. 'They jus' die. Well, squash that for a start.'

She would go east. Somehow she would find a way across the 'uncrossable' River Langfeather that roared through its gorge from the mountains to the sea. She would trudge her way to Chanderind, or Waymakem; everybody said the living was easier there. But how to get past the Langfeather? The only bridge that spanned it for a hundred miles was governed by the town of Toll, and nobody could pass over without paying a fee quite beyond her means.

. . . But perhaps she would try her hand at getting money from a stranger one more time.

Looking back towards the edge of town, Mosca could see a figure sheltering in a broken barn, half hidden by the water that streamed in crystal pipes from the sodden thatch. He was tall, he held his shoulders slightly hunched as if his coat was too tight and he was beckoning to her.

Mosca hesitated only an instant, then tucked away her pipe, sprinted over and ducked into the little barn, hastily pushing the wet draggles of her hair out of her eyes to look at her new acquaintance.

His face was knife-thin, long-nosed. There was a strange stillness about him, which made Mosca think of a heron motionless beside a pool, waiting to became a javelin of feather and bone as soon as a trout was lulled to torpor in the water below.

'You know your letters?' The question was deep and gravelly.

'Yeah, you want me to read a newspaper? I got . . .' Mosca boldly brandished her fistful of sodden paper pulp.

'No, not that. Come with me. You need to talk to some friends of mine.'

Mosca followed him into the adjoining barn, her eye making an inventory of the stranger's mildew-coloured coat, good boots and weather-spotted felt hat, her mind caught up in feverish calculation. She would charge this man and his friends too much, of course, but how much was *too* too much? How much would cause them to walk away in disgust instead of haggling?

There were four men in the next barn, sitting bowed on bales of hay, one of them mopping at his collar with a soaked kerchief, another trying to wring out his hat. They all looked up as Mosca and her guide entered the room.

'So that's the girl, is it, Mr Skellow?' asked a young man with a mean mouth.

'That's her,' answered the man who had brought her in. 'What's your name, girl?'

'Mosca.' Yes, now they would look at her and see a housefly, a snatcher of scraps, a walker on ceilings. There was no help for it. One could not lie about one's name.

'She doesn't look much like a scholar to me,' objected the mean-mouthed man. 'It's a ruse. She's no more a reader than we are.'

'I can prove it!' exclaimed Mosca, stung. 'Give me some letters and I'll show you! Or get me to write some for you!'

'All right,' answered Skellow. 'You there – Gripe. *You* know a letter or two, don't you?'

A bearded man in a brimless hat looked furtive.

'Only my given name,' he murmured into his collar.

'Well, scratch it out on the floor. Let's see if she can see the sounds in it.'

Mosca watched as the bearded man knelt and drew lines in the dirt and straw scraps with his forefinger.

'Your name's Ben,' she said when he was done. 'But your B's back to front.'

The men exchanged long looks.

'She'll do,' said Skellow.

'I charge more when it's raining,' Mosca added through chattering teeth. 'Cos it's a special service then, you see. Risk of drowning in floods, and ruining of clothes, and . . . and . . . pleurisy.' She was pleased to see the impression created by the unfamiliar word.

Yeah, and I also charge more for people with good boots who hide in a barn on the edge of town instead of heading to the inn, even though they're wetter than herrings. You got something to hide and something important you need read, Mr Skellow, so you can pay me for it.

'How much more?' asked Skellow.

Mosca opened her mouth and hesitated, breathing quickly as she assessed her chances. She held Skellow's gaze, then found herself naming the sum needed to pay Clent's debts, plus a little more in case he tried to haggle.

There was a cold pause, and one of the men gave a bitter cough of a laugh, but nobody moved to throw her out.

'You must,' Skellow said icily, 'be very, very afraid of pleurisy.'

'Runs in my family,' declared Mosca promptly.

Skellow stared at her for a long time.

'All right,' he said.

Mosca could feel her eyes becoming larger and brighter, and the effort required to avoid a delighted grin made her face ache. She had it, she'd bluffed it, she could feel her problems loosening with a click like manacles and clattering to the ground at her feet . . .

Skellow reached for the purse at his belt and hesitated. 'It's just you I'm paying, am I right? We won't dish out the coin and then find out you've got, oh, a master, or starving parents, or pleurisy-ridden brothers and sisters who need as much again, will we?'

Mosca's mind flitted to Clent, and the thought of him as her 'master' rankled.

'No,' she snapped with venom. 'There's nobody. Just me. Nobody else I need to worry about.'

'Perfect,' said Skellow. He made the 't' at the end sound like a stone chipping a windowpane, and he smiled as he did so. The corners of his mouth climbed high up his cheeks, dragging furrows in all directions, and showing rows of narrow teeth. It was the face of one who does not smile often because they cannot smile well.

And that smile was the last thing Mosca saw before a muffling, stifling weight of cloth was thrown over her head, drowning her in darkness.

Goodlady Plenplush, Binder of Bargains



Idiot! Idiot idiot idiot! You fleawit, Mosca, you puddinghead, you muffinskull. Let your guard down, didn't you, you gormless grinning gull? Even when he agreed to a price he should have choked on. Even when he stood right there and near as skin asked you if there was anyone who'd miss you . . .

There was a sack over Mosca's head, and a tight grip around her middle that pinned her arms to her sides. The roar of the rain drowned her screeched curses, and as the sackcloth around her grew sodden she knew that she had been carried out of the barn once more, twisting, kicking and hating with all her heart and soul.

Someone gripped her wrists and tied them behind her. Then she was hefted on to what felt and smelt a lot like the back of a rather damp horse. One of her clogs fell off with a splotch, and she doubted that anyone would stoop for it. A few juddering, unwilling horse breaths, the sound of hoofs, and she was lurched into jolting motion.

She was rollicked along in this undignified way for what seemed like hours, hearing nothing but the rain and the clop of other hoofs on either side. All the while she listened for the sound of new voices or a passing wagon, some cue for her to yell for help. But no, it seemed that all the world but Mosca and her captives had the wisdom to hide from the rain.

Just when her ribs were bruised with bouncing and her limbs soaked to the bone, she was tugged off the back off the horse and set on her feet. The sack was dragged off her head.

The town was gone, and all around was nothing but craggy moor. She was standing beside Skellow and two of his men in the shelter offered by a crab-apple tree, the grass still dotted with the amber pulp of rotting fruit. The clouds had come down to earth and oozed softly between the heaped granite, the throaty purple of foxgloves.

'Come on.' Skellow took hold of her arm and gestured towards a shadow in the face of the nearest crag. Staring at it through her wet lashes, Mosca realized that behind the dismal trickle of water from above was the entrance to a cave. 'And try to look grateful. Not many girls like you will ever get a chance to attend a Pawnbrokers' Auction.'

Mosca might have found it easier to feel privileged if she had not been sopping, half shod and all too aware of a knife prodding her in the back as Skellow followed her into the cave. His comrades made no attempt to accompany them.

Mosca had heard of the Guild of Pawnbrokers, though until now she had had little expectation of attending one of their auctions. Once the pawnbrokers had simply been a means by which desperate people could gain money quickly, leaving their valuables in the care of the pawnbroker in exchange for a small sum, in the hope of returning later and buying their possessions back. During the last thirty years, however, the Realm had seen countless times of trouble, and the Pawnbrokers had found themselves in possession of varied

and valuable things whose owners were a little too dead to reclaim them.

Their subsequent auctions of these curious items had become legendary. Over time the auctions had become stranger, more secretive and more exclusive. It was said that if you could only earn an invitation to one such auction you would find all sorts of unusual and unimaginable things on sale – the skulls of kings, the services of assassins, crystal balls with wicked spirits trapped in them, deadly secrets, beasts with tusks and wings . . .

Just within the cave an iron hook had been hammered into the wall, and from it hung a dark-lantern. In its narrow bar of light stood a walnut desk, at which a man in a smart waistcoat and cravat sat with his quill poised expectantly over a great leather-bound book. He looked like an ordinary clerk but for one thing – he had no head. Then Mosca drew closer and realized that he did have a head, but that it was shrouded in a black hood with eyeholes. Above him hung a frame on which were suspended three metal globes, the sign of the Pawnbrokers.

'Heydayhare,' murmured Skellow in his gravelly tones, and the man nodded. Mosca guessed that this must be a password. 'Name of Skellow.'

'Expected.' The hooded man ticked something in his book. 'What's that?' The quill pointed at Mosca. Mosca opened her mouth to speak, then felt the point of the knife press against her spine and closed it again.

'It's my scribe,' said Skellow.

'Very well. You are responsible for its behaviour during

the auction.' Two grey cloth masks were pushed across the desk. 'Once past this point you must not remove these masks, nor must you speak a word to anyone but each other, and even then not loud enough for others to hear. If you break these rules, you will lose *all* rights.'

There was something in the man's cold, incisive tone that suggested that breathing might be one of these 'rights'.

Despite herself, a little flame of curiosity started to burn in Mosca's chest as she walked down a narrow, rough-hewn passageway, the mask feeling rough but dry against her cold cheeks. *Well, these might be the last things I see, so I might as well get an eyeful.*

At the end of the passage the rock opened out in all directions, and Mosca found herself standing on the edge of a huge cavern, some of it craggy and natural, some bearing the marks of picks and chisels. Dozens of lanterns dotted the darkness, each resting on a table at which a grey-hooded figure was seated. From the cave roof hung a far larger pawnbrokers' sign. The globes were circular cages in which many candles had been set, so that the contraption helped illuminate the chamber like a peculiar chandelier and silently dribbled pale wax on to the cave floor.

Against the back wall stood a timber frame platform, to which was still affixed a pulley that had once been used to lower buckets into a square shaft in the floor below. On this platform stood a pulpit-like structure, behind which stood a black-hooded figure in black overalls. Other similarly clad figures scurried through the cave, taking slips of paper from those seated at the tables and carrying them to

the waiting hand of the auctioneer at the front. He in turn read each slip and called out a series of numbers in a nasal monotone.

Bidding on pieces of paper. No wonder Skellow needed a scribe.

Skellow was shown to one of the empty desks and yanked at Mosca's arm so that she was forced to kneel beside him.

The current auction seemed to be entering a state of subdued frenzy, and Mosca listened spellbound to the auctioneer.

'. . . thirty-five guineas . . . forty guineas . . . gentlemen, remember the sacred nature of these relics; surely a few guineas more . . .'

On the pulpit before the auctioneer was a candle in its last throes, scarcely more than a cratered stump. Mosca realized that this must be an auction 'by candle'. When the candle died, the auction would be over. As its flame flickered blue, several bid carriers broke into a run, and it was all the auctioneer could do to seize the flourished papers in order.

'. . . we have fifty . . . we have . . . done! The candle is dead, gentlemen. The knucklebones said to have belonged to Saint Wherrywhistle herself go to Guest Forty-nine . . .'

'No!' An echoing cry filled the cavern, as one of the grey-hooded figures in the main body of the cavern leaped to his feet. 'This is an atrocity! Why will you not wait until we have more money? The knucklebones should never have been stolen from our cathedral in the first – what? – wait!'

A dozen black-masked figures had homed in on the shouter without the slightest fuss and laid hands upon him. In a second he was swept off his feet and borne forward

towards the auctioneer's platform. Legs cycling furiously, the hapless rule-breaker was hurled without ceremony into the waiting shaft, which threw back only his descending, despairing wail.

'Guest Twenty-four's rights revoked,' the auctioneer declared sharply, tapping at his gavil with his hammer.

Skellow's cloth-covered face leaned close to Mosca's cloth-covered ear.

'Hush up,' he whispered almost inaudibly. The injunction was unnecessary. Mosca had never felt more like hushing up in the whole of her life.

'Now,' the auctioneer continued unflappably, 'we are pleased to place on auction the services of one Romantic Facilitator.' The mess of the last candle was scraped away with a knife, and a new stub lit in its place.

Skellow nudged Mosca vigorously with his elbow and pushed the quill and ink on the desk towards her hand.

What the blinkin' 'eck's a Romantic Facilitator? This chisel-faced maggot can't have kidnapped me because he needs someone to help him get a ladyfriend, can he? Mind you, how else would he get one?

However, she obediently wrote down the sum that Skellow whispered in her ear, and handed it to one of the swift-footed messengers in black masks as they hurried by. She thought about writing, 'Help, I've got a knife in my back,' but decided against it. She had the feeling that nobody except Skellow would care.

'Five guineas.' Mosca's eyes crept to Skellow's hood again as his bid was read out. Surely even Skellow couldn't be *that*

desperate for a ladyfriend? And could he really have that sort of money?

For the first two minutes the bids came slowly, intermittently. Skellow turned out to be someone who cracked his knuckles when he was nervous, and Mosca winced each time he did so, in case the sound was enough to see them shafted. Then the lip of the candle collapsed, hot wax spilling creamily on to the tabletop, and the room was galvanized. There was a frenzy of scribbling, then the pat-a-pat of feet as the bid-carriers ran to and fro. Clearly Skellow was not the only person interested in the Romantic Facilitator.

Six guineas. Eight. Twelve. Frantically Mosca wrote down each sum Skellow growled in her ear. The candle's flame was growing squat and uncertain.

'Fifteen guineas!' hissed Skellow. 'Write it fast! Faster!' The knifepoint jabbed at her spine. Hand shaking, Mosca scribbled the bid, waved the paper over her head and watched heart in mouth as a runner tweaked it from her fingers and sprinted to join the gaggle clustered about the auctioneer.

The auctioneer had just time to snatch one last paper as the candle flame flared, buckled and died, leaving a faint quill of smoke trailing from its wick.

'Done! Last bid before the death of the candle . . .' The auctioneer unfolded the paper in his hands. '. . . fifteen guineas . . . sold to Guest Seventy-one.' A runner trotted over and placed a small wooden token on the desk before Skellow.

The pressure from the knifepoint diminished, and Mosca let out a long breath of relief. The next moment, however, Skellow had taken her by the collar again and

tugged her into whisper-range.

'Write down exactly what I tell you,' he hissed through the double layer of cloth. 'You write a word awry and I'll spike you.'

Mosca nodded and listened, her quill poised.

Dear sir,

You are recommended me on account the Auctioneers say you have a name good enough for daylight. We are wanting you about a matter of a gentleman in the town of Toll who would marry the daughter of the mayor but for the difficulties put in his way by her family who are not being amiable on account of some damage recently done to his good name. And it have been put to him that sometimes the course of true love does not run smooth but needs help, and sometimes a few coins changing hands and a bit of sword-work like. And if you please I would meet with you at the old bastle house on Moordrick's Fell tonight to discuss how we can come by the lady and have her all safely wedded before she or her family can make any trouble about it. It is best that we discuss it there for it shall be devilish tricky to meet inside Toll. If I do not see you at the bastle house however I shall look for you just after Toll's dusk bugle in Brotherslain Walk the day after tomorrow. And with this letter you will find moneys for paying of the toll and living comfortable in the city.

Rabilan Skellow

This was the letter that was dictated to Mosca. However, it must be confessed that it was not *quite* the letter she wrote. *That* letter, while similar in many respects, was a bit longer and a lot more creative.

Barely five minutes later, a response was brought by one of their black-hooded hosts.

Dear Mr Scragface Pimplenose,

Many thanks for your eloquent epistle. I am sure you cannot possibly be as grotesquely ugly as you claim, and I look forward to making your acquaintance. I always say that a man who can laugh at himself is a man worth knowing.

Your star-crossed lovers sound quite charming, and I would be delighted to help.

One little superstition of mine I hope you will indulge. I never meet with perfect strangers in desolate bastle houses or alarmingly named alleyways at twilight. This trifling quirk I developed shortly after acquiring a large number of enemies. I would therefore purpose that, instead of meeting at either of the places you suggest, we meet at nine of the clock by the stocks in Lower Pambrick on Goodlady Goljock's Morn. I shall be wearing a Fainsnow lily pinned to my pocket.

Your faithful servant.

Mosca let her black eyes dart from line to line, then she glanced up at the ominous outline that was Skellow, his pale amber eyes glowing softly through the holes in his mask.

'I'm not reading this to you,' she hissed, 'until I got some certainty that I'm gettin' out of all this alive.'

'*What?* You . . .' Skellow winced at the sound of his own voice and looked about nervously, but his squawk of indignation seemed to have gone unnoticed.

The auctioneer appeared to be starting the next auction. 'Now, we have on sale the services of a lady who has made her name in one of the quick-fingered professions . . .' A black-masked messenger had materialized next to Skellow's desk with the air of one waiting to tidy it. Skellow rose, yanking Mosca to her feet.

'Outside,' he spat.

Mosca tensed as they left the cave, looking for a chance to pull her arm loose and sprint to the cold and rain-sodden freedom of the moors. Skellow seemed to have read her mind, however, and kept a cruel grip on her until they were surrounded by his friends once more. A sharp shove sent Mosca back against the rocky face, and she found herself ringed by a set of very damp men who appeared to be losing their sense of humour.

'Read it!' Skellow thrust the letter towards her. 'Or . . .' He was no longer making any attempt to hide the knife in his other hand.

'Or what? You'll kill me?' Mosca made fists in an attempt to stop her arms shaking. 'If you want me to read this letter, I'll need to be alive.'

'Yes,' said Skellow through his teeth, 'but you won't need your thumbs.'

There was a small pause during which Mosca realized

exactly how fond she was of her thumbs, and considered the many things she would be unable to do without them. These included untying knots and slipping keys out of enemies' pockets. Biting her lip so hard that it hurt, she snatched the letter back out of his hand.

'All right,' she said sullenly, then lowered her eyes to the page again and started to speak.

Occasionally her black gaze would creep up for a furtive glance at the lean, dripping faces of her captors. Did they suspect that the words on the page in front of her were not *quite* the words she was speaking? No, she thought not.

After she had finished reading, Skellow stood in silence for a while, chewing the inside of his cheek.

'So – our Romantic Facilitator cannot come to the bastle house tonight, but is happy to meet with me in Brotherslain Walk like I suggested?'

'Happy as a mouse in a marmalade jar.' Mosca gritted her teeth and fought to keep her gaze bold and unblinking. If Skellow sensed the lie in her words, he showed no sign of it.

'All right, then.' Skellow gave a tick of tongue against teeth. 'Come on, my boys. We're leaving.'

Once again, the involuntary scribe found herself bound and bundled, bouncing along on the back of the same wet horse. She tried to twist her hands out of their bonds, but the cold and damp made everything harder and the chafing ropes burned like a brand of ice.

There is no way of measuring time that is filled with nothing but darkness and knocks and cold and the rain's unending drum roll. *This might be the last thing I ever know*,

was the thought that went around and around Mosca's head, stretching each heartbeat to an eternity as if her frightened spirit was trying to draw the marrow out of every painful moment and live as hard as it could while it still could. She could not even hope for the ordeal to end, for how could it end well? What was she now? A tool that had served its purpose. Worse still, a tool that could talk.

She felt a tickle against her fingers and reflexively clutched at the bracelet tangled in the cords binding her wrists. The three carved totems that dangled from it were images of the Little Goodkin, the skeletal children said to protect any child endangered and lost in the darkness. Another child would have been chanting *Fenfenny, friends defend me*, and finding comfort in the rhyme. But Mosca had emptied her darkness of comforting imagined faces, and such words were hollow to her. She clutched at the bracelet because it had been a gift from a coffeehouse mistress named Miss Kitely in a precarious moment and still warmed her with a memory of friendship, but even this was small consolation.

At last the horse slowed and she was dragged off its back. The sack was yanked from her face, and she found that the world had become a darker place than before. Mosca was set on her feet, and her clogless foot instantly sank into cold, wet mud.

Through the clinging mask of her wet hair she could just about see that the horses had been tethered outside a bleak-looking farmhouse set alone on the moorland. It was built from large rough-hewn stones and its arrow-slit windows were chips of darkness. There were two doors, one set at

ground level, one ten feet above the earth with a wooden ladder leading up to it.

Mosca knew that this must be the 'bastle house' mentioned in Skellow's letter. A bastle house was a farmhouse designed to be its own little bastion. It was always dangerous to live near a border, what with the risk of invading armies, or raiding parties sneaking across to steal cattle or whatever else they could get their hands upon. The problem with the Realm, of course, was that it was *full* of borders. Decades before, it had splintered into smaller allegiances, each proclaiming the rights of a different absent claimant to the throne. Nowadays there was less fear of invasion, but along the borders buildings like this remained, some now derelict, like knobs of scar tissue to show where the Realm had been sliced asunder. To judge by its lightless windows, this bastle house had been abandoned.

For the first time, her captors' voices settled into a contented and relieved murmur.

'I'm frozen. Let's get in and light the fire.'

'Some food wouldn't kill me either.'

'What do we do with the girl?'

Silence. Mosca's black eyes flitted from face to face as the men exchanged glances.

'Keep her in the vaults for now,' answered Skellow.

The sturdy ground-floor door was heaved open, and with a *snick* and *hishh* of tinder a lantern was lit. Mosca found herself looking at a dungeon-like space broken up into long, vaulted tunnels with iron rings hammered here and there into the walls. Only the crusted grey discs of long-dry cowpats

showed that this space had been set aside to defend livestock, not to hold prisoners.

Mosca was taken by the shoulder and guided into the nearest 'vault', hearing the antique cowpats give under her feet with a papery rustle. The loose ends of the cord tying her wrist were knotted around one of the iron rings set in the wall, with just enough slack so that she could sit on the ground if she chose. Mosca, who had slumped against the rugged wall with every sign of meek exhaustion, furtively watched from under wet and spiky lashes as Skellow tugged at the cord.

Only when Skellow left the vault, taking the lantern with him, did Mosca's posture become less limp, less meek. Instead she bristled with attention, taking in every tiny sound from outside. The *shunk* of a bar being lowered across the door. The heavy grinding of an elderly key turning. Voices. The creak of footsteps on wooden rungs as Skellow and his friends climbed the ladder to the first floor. The shuddering slam of another door.

Mosca blinked hard, willing her eyes to make something of the darkness. It was not absolute, for even on this level there were arrow-slit windows, showing frayed ribbons of dull night sky.

Footsteps above, the scrape of a shifted chair. A wordless drone of voices. And then, at the far end of the vaulted tunnel, part of the ceiling opened with a clack, spilling candlelight on to the rutted floor. As Mosca watched a soft plume of grey ash puffed its way downwards, accompanied by a pattering of charcoal chips. Someone on the floor above had opened a hatch to sweep the debris from the fireplace into it.

Unbidden, there came into Mosca's mind a long-forgotten image of her aunt peeling potatoes, the long spiral curling down and down from the tuber and then dropping into the waiting bucket of throwings and leavings. The thought that she had been casually cast down like a piece of rubbish filled Mosca with a wild surge of un-potato-like rage.

Now that the hatch was open, the voices above were much clearer.

'Do you think maybe one of us should go down with some bread for that girl?' It sounded like the man named 'Ben'.

'What's the point?' Skellow's voice.

The distant amber aperture vanished with a slam, leaving Mosca in darkness once more.

What's the point? Those three words had told Mosca everything she needed to know. There was no point in feeding her because they did not need to keep her alive – did not *mean* to keep her alive. In Skellow's head she was dead already, and wasting bread on her would be like pushing food into the mouth of a stuffed deer head mounted on a wall.

Mosca could guess what had passed through Skellow's mind. How much had she seen and heard of his business? Too much for Skellow's liking and too little for her own. Perhaps he had never intended to let her walk away. He had, after all, asked her carefully chosen questions before concluding that she would never be missed, and that no hue and cry would come after him if one night the moors swallowed her like a grape pip.

Worst of all, Mosca reflected, he was probably right.