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Written by

Holly Webb

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"Maisie! Maisie! Are you there?"

Maisie and Gran and Sally looked up in surprise.

"Is that Miss Lane calling for you?" Gran asked, looking anxious. "You did do out her room nicely this morning, didn't you Maisie?"

"I did," said Maisie. "And I lifted up all the piles of clothes and books and things, and I

put them back exactly the same afterwards."

"And you didn't break anything?"

"Of course not!" Maisie rolled her eyes.

Miss Lane suddenly appeared at the kitchen door, in her smart outdoor coat, and a beautiful velvet hat. "Oh, my goodness, it's freezing out there," she said, brushing at her sleeves. "It's even beginning to snow."

"Is there anything you need, Miss?" Gran asked, standing up.

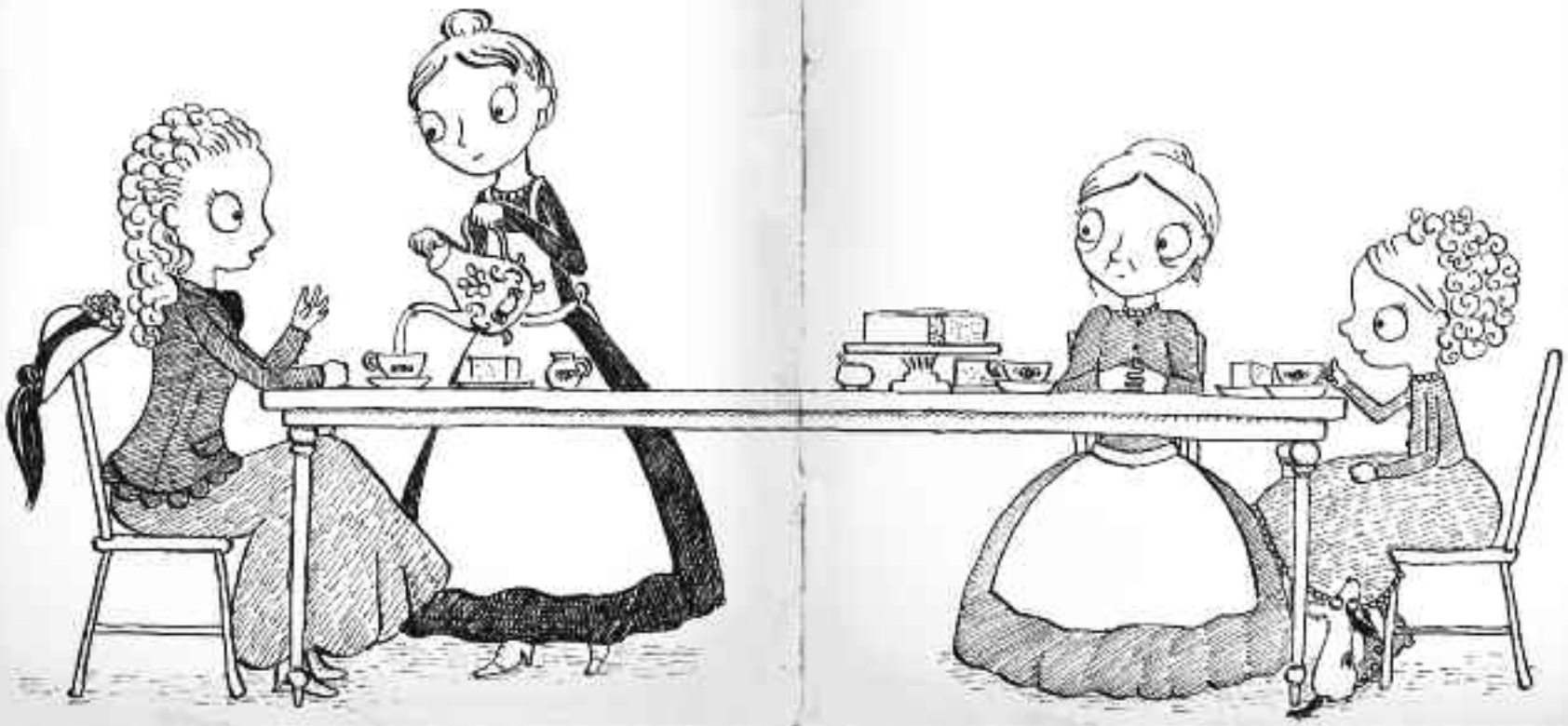
"Oh no, no… Well, actually… It isn't anything to do with the lodgings, Mrs Hitchins, don't worry. Everything's perfect. But I wanted to ask you something, you and Maisie." Miss Lane looked at her hopefully. "Could I sit down for a minute and talk to you?"

Gran nodded doubtfully, and then glared at Sally. "Put the kettle on, girl! And Maisie,

you fetch that seed cake out of the larder." Gran bustled about, clearing the vegetables off the table, and dusting a chair for Miss Lane with her apron. The lodgings at 31 Albion Road were quite smart, and lodgers did not usually turn up in the kitchen. It made Gran jumpy. But now Miss Lane was here, she had to be treated properly.

"What can we do for you, Miss?" Gran asked, once she had Miss Lane seated opposite her, with the best silver-plated teapot in between them, and the seed cake on a glass dish. Maisie sat next to Gran, with Eddie on her feet, hoping for cake crumbs.

"I need help, Mrs Hitchins. To be quite straight about it, I need Maisie."



Maisie nearly dropped her teacup, she was so surprised. "What for?" she gasped excitedly.

"Mind my best china, Maisie," Gran snapped. "What do you mean, Miss Lane? What do you need Maisie for?"

"Has Maisie told you about my friend, Miss Sarah Massey? She's appearing at the Dauntry Theatre. She's the star."

Gran looked slightly uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I don't know much about the theatre, Miss. I'm too busy for gallivanting about."

Miss Lane nodded. "Of course. But Miss Massey is very nice. A very sweet girl. The thing is, she's been terribly unlucky recently. A necklace was stolen, a valuable one, and actresses are very superstitious, you know." Miss Lane smiled. "I never, ever let a black cat cross my path, Mrs Hitchins. I'd be convinced

that something awful would happen."

"Lot of nonsense," Gran muttered, but not very loudly. Maisie knew for a fact that she felt the same way, and she always looked at her tea leaves after she'd finished the cup.

"Some silly person told Sarah that the necklace was cursed, and she'd brought disaster on herself by losing it. So now, of course, she's so worried that everything seems to be going wrong."

"Poor dear," Gran said sympathetically.

"Yes," Miss Lane agreed. "But I don't think it's anything to do with a curse.

I think someone – someone very unpleasant could be playing tricks. Playing on Sarah's nerves. Trying to make her lose the part."

"But that would be so cruel!" Sally gasped.

Even Gran clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Poor child."

"Do you think Miss Massey would stop worrying about all her bad luck if she got the necklace back?" Maisie asked.

Miss Lane sighed. "Well, probably. But I don't see how she will. Sarah raised such a fuss when the necklace disappeared that all the cast and the stage crew are being searched before they leave which makes me think that whoever stole it must have hidden it in the theatre."

"Unless, of course, the thief got it out of the theatre before she even noticed it was missing," said Maisie.

"That's true," said Miss Lane. "But it seems unlikely – they would have had to be very quick about it." Miss Lane was quiet for a moment, as if she was thinking it through.

Then she sighed. "Anyway, they can't keep the searching going on for much longer. Sarah says that everyone's been complaining about it. And if they stop, sooner or later someone will be able to sneak it out. And to be honest, they could have done already if they were daring." She winked at Maisie. "I bet I could hide an emerald pendant somewhere in my petticoats.

Gran sniffed disapprovingly, and Miss Lane tried to look serious. "Well, on the positive side, there are a lot of people around the theatre at the moment, in and out of each other's dressing rooms all the time, so it would take a lot of nerve to try and sneak it away."

"Do you have any idea who could have stolen it?" Maisie asked, pulling out her little

notebook from the pocket of her apron.

Miss Lane sighed, and shook her head. "No. Not a clue. And I've an awful feeling we never will."

Maisie frowned, and nibbled on her pencil. "Wait a minute. You said everyone thought the necklace wasn't valuable, didn't you?. Or not very valuable, anyway. You thought it was glass. So why would anyone steal it?"

"Oh!" Miss Lane looked surprised. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that…"

Maisie leaned forward, frowning. "Isn't it a bit strange that all these horrible things are happening to Miss Massey now, just after the necklace was stolen? Just in time to make her think that the curse is working… How many other people at the theatre know what the necklace really is? Even Miss



Massey didn't know!"

Miss Lane nodded. "That's true… So someone must have worked out what it was before… Before Sarah even knew herself!"

"So perhaps it wasn't stolen so that the thief could sell it. Or that that wasn't the main reason anyway," Maisie murmured. "Because someone who works in a theatre isn't likely to know how to sell a fabulous emerald, are they? You couldn't just take it to any old jeweller's shop. They'd need a – a criminal mastermind." She nodded to herself, proudly remembering the phrase from Gran's newspaper. "I think it was someone who doesn't like Sarah. They stole the necklace just so they could make her think she was cursed!"

Miss Lane looked at Maisie in surprise. "I hadn't even thought of that, Maisie.

Goodness, I can see why you're so good at this detecting business. But how would they have know who Timmy was, and what it was he'd given her? Even Sarah didn't know for ages."

Maisie frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure about that bit. She turned to Gran. "Miss Massey's admirer is the son of a duke," she explained. "He didn't tell her who he was – but there are drawings of people like that in the society pages of the papers, aren't there? Photographs, even, sometimes. I know Miss Massey didn't know who he was, but maybe someone else recognised him?"

Slowly, Miss Lane nodded. "I think that could be it, you know. And they might have been jealous… Sarah's only nineteen. That's very young to have such a starring part, and there's been a lot of horrible, catty talk from

the girls in the chorus. Lots of them think it should have been them playing the part. If someone found out that Sarah had a lord as an admirer, as well... And she kept on showing off that pretty necklace." Miss Lane laughed. "Even I got a little sick of Sarah telling me how beautiful her necklace was, and I'm her friend!"

"So they might decide to steal it, just to serve her right?" Maisie suggested.

"Exactly… Oh, dear, it's even worse than I thought it was," Miss Lane murmured. "Mrs Hitchins, please do say I can borrow Maisie."

Gran stared at her. "But you've still not said what you want her for, Miss Lane!"

"Oh!" Miss Lane shook her head. "Sorry. It's spending the morning with Sarah, I'm all mixed up. She needs a dresser. Someone to help her in and out of her costumes, and

tidy her dressing room, that sort of thing. And with the way things are at the moment, it needs to be someone that Sarah can trust. Someone who knows what's going on with Lord Tarquin, and won't gossip! I told Sarah she could certainly trust Maisie."

"But what's happened to Miss Massey's own dresser?" Maisie asked, feeling excited. She'd wanted to go to the theatre, just to see a show. She'd never, ever thought of working in one.

"Lucy's broken her leg," Miss Lane said grimly. "She fell down the stairs."

"Someone pushed her?" Gran asked, her voice full of horror.

"No. It was cleverer than that, Mrs Hitchins. Pushing her would be too obvious. The stairs were greased. Only a little, but it was enough, if you were running down them

in high-heeled dancing slippers." Miss Lane pressed her cheeks with her hands wearily. "Lucy only came down the stairs because Sarah forgot her fan, you see. She had to run back and fetch it. Otherwise, the next person down those steps would have been Sarah, all in a hurry as she had a quick change before her next entry. It was meant to be Sarah that fell, not poor Lucy."

"No!" Sally gasped.

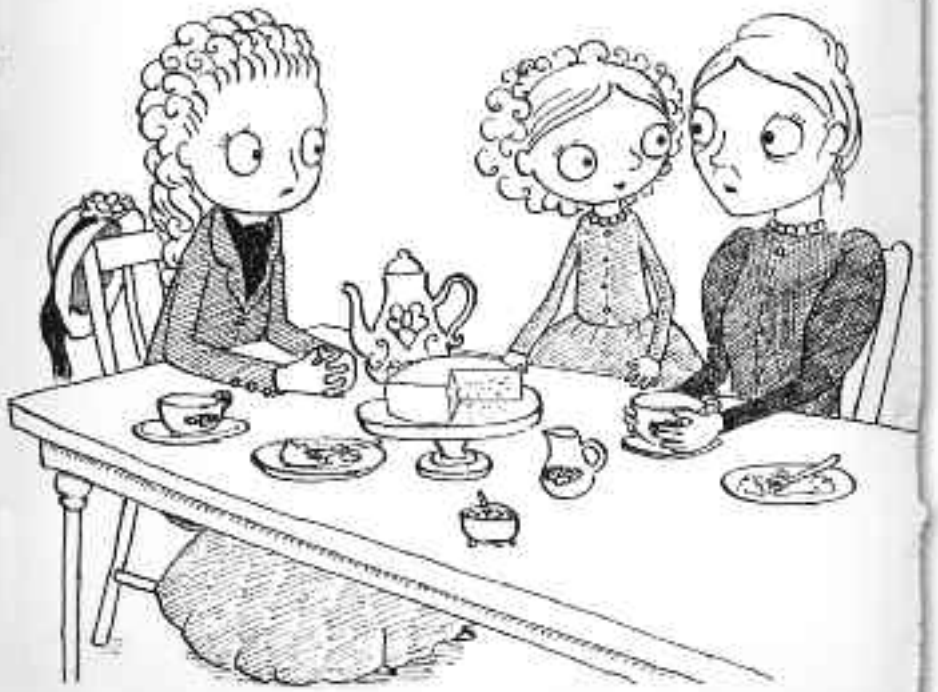
"I think so." Miss Lane nodded. "I can't prove it, of course. No one thought to check the stairs at the time. But Lucy's up and down those stairs ten times a day. And she said she didn't trip – her feet just sort of slid out from under her. That made me think."

"And you want my Maisie to go and work in this place!" Gran said, her voice full of disapproval.

"Oh, Gran, please!"

"I want someone Sarah can trust, Mrs Hitchins. A good, well-brought-up girl who can help her in her time of trouble."

"Hmmm…" Gran still looked doubtful, but Maisie could tell she was softening. She'd always tried her best to bring Maisie up nicely.



Suddenly, Maisie remembered that Miss Lane was an actress too. Not quite so much of a star as Miss Sarah, but still a very clever actress. It was the way she leaned over and fixed Gran with her dark blue eyes, and her voice went a little bit husky and slow. Gran stared back at her like a confused rabbit.

"Yes, I know that, of course, but…"

"It's her duty, Mrs Hitchins. Maisie is so clever, and she notices things. If whoever it is tries to play any more tricks on Sarah, she'll spot it. And she might even find that dratted necklace."

"Well, I suppose she might be able to…"

"And," Miss Lane leaned even closer, "she'll be very well paid. Don't tell me that a little extra money wouldn't come in handy, Mrs Hitchins. I heard you talking to that

man about the leak in the roof."

"I'd do my work here before I went to the theatre, Gran," Maisie promised, staring at her hopefully. "I wouldn't leave it all to you and Sally."

Gran sighed. "I suppose so. But don't you go getting ideas, Maisie Hitchins. You're only helping out. Just for a week or two!"