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Opening extract from

The Case of the Feathered Mask

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For Thea

~HW

For Dinah and John with love and thanks

~ML



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Holly Webb Illustrated by Marion Lindsay

Maisie Hitchins



The Case of the Feathered Mask

Stripes



Maisie and Eddie hurried back along Albion Street. The professor had sent her out to buy two-pennyworth of nails to fasten up the last of the packing cases, which was good as he'd probably give Maisie a penny for herself, too. She'd be able to buy Eddie a nice bone at the butcher's.

"Oh, look, Eddie," Maisie muttered.

"Another nosey parker waiting outside. It's that newspaper article. It made it sound like the professor was keeping half the treasures of the Americas in our house. People think they're going to see great big gold statues, I suppose."

The man standing outside number 31 was quite elderly, and he was swathed in layers of scarves against the chilly March weather. His bowler hat was tipped forward over his nose, so that all Maisie could really see of him was a long, droopy moustache.

"I hope Gran hasn't noticed," Maisie told Eddie. "She hates all these people standing about. Maybe I can get rid of him." She coughed politely as she came up beside him. "May I help you, sir? I live here."

"Oh…" The man stared at her, and then took a step backwards, his head turning

from side to side, like a trapped animal. Then he turned and hurried off down the street.



"That was easier than I thought it would be," Maisie said, looking down at Eddie in surprise. "I wonder why he was so nervous? Perhaps he was another professor." Professor Tobin had entertained a few learned gentlemen, and as far as Maisie could tell, all professors were odd. Either they were wearing most of their breakfast, or they had their waistcoats buttoned up wrong. And they all, every single one, had eyebrows like big, furry caterpillars.

"We'd better go and take these nails upstairs," she said, when the strange man had vanished round the corner. "The men from the museum are coming early tomorrow morning."



Fastening up the cases took longer than Maisie had thought it would. It seemed that as

soon as the professor had one tightly nailed shut, he would suddenly remember something vitally important that should have been on a label, and have to pry all the nails out again.

Maisie suspected that actually he didn't need to undo the cases at all. It was just harder for the professor to give up his treasures than he had thought it would be. He didn't want to say goodbye.

At last the professor collapsed into his armchair, almost squashing Eddie, who had sneaked into it when neither of them were looking. "Oh dear…" he said wearily. "Don't worry, Maisie, I shall finish that last case tomorrow morning. All the specimens for the Natural History Museum are ready, that's good. It's only the masks and those carvings that still need to be packed." He sighed and looked up at an eerie wooden mask,

hanging on the wall. It was carved with dark, squarish eyes, a hooked, beak-like nose, and fringed with bright-red feathers that looked remarkably like Jasper's. "You're a good girl, Maisie, you've been a great help."

Maisie looked down at him, concerned. "You do want to give them away still, don't you? You haven't changed your mind?"

"No, no… It's a little sad, Maisie, that's all. Some of these things I've had for many years. And some were given to me. But it's right that they should be in a museum for everyone to see. It's selfish to keep them here all to myself. I'm keeping a few smaller things. Some of the things that I love, but they're a little battered, or not so rare." He waved a hand at a rather tatty-looking wooden mask with a furry trim, not nearly as smart as the red-feathered one.

Maisie nodded. Even she could see that the man from the museum wouldn't be as excited about that.



"I shall keep this one, you see. And of course I can always go and look at the other artefacts in the museum, like everyone else…"

"And you *are* going to go and get more, after all," Maisie reminded him. "You need to make room."



Lugging boxes around in between all her other work had left Maisie exhausted. She crawled wearily under her blankets, and felt Eddie snuggle up warmly beside her.

She must have fallen asleep at once, and it felt like only seconds later that she was dragged awake again.

"Oh, Eddie, shhh! Shhh! You'll wake the whole house. What is it?" She could hear him dancing about in front of the door, his claws clicking on the stone flags, and

then scrabbling frantically at the wood. "What is it? Didn't I put any newspaper down?" She had trained him very carefully, and he hardly ever made a mess. Maisie lit her candle and looked around, but the newspaper was there, just as it usually was. Something else was wrong. Eddie was still barking – and he kept looking at her, as though he couldn't understand why she wouldn't let him out.

Maisie gulped. She'd never seen him like this before. "Is someone in the house?" she whispered. "Is it a burglar?"

She got out of bed, her heart thumping. She could feel it, high up and tight in her throat. She wanted to crawl underneath her bed, where no one would find her. But Gran was upstairs, and Sally, and Miss Lane, and the professor, and old Madame Lorimer, too.

Detectives did not hide under beds. Her hero, the detective Gilbert Carrington, would fetch his swordstick and be off up those stairs straightaway.

Maisie didn't have a swordstick, but she picked up a large, heavy frying pan from the kitchen on her way past. Eddie had stopped barking now – he was growling instead, in an angry, breathy sort of way. He sounded as though he'd like to bite a lump out of any burglar, but he was so tiny Maisie didn't want him to get hurt. "Heel, Eddie," she whispered comfortingly.

They came up the stairs from the kitchen into the hallway, and Maisie peered anxiously up the next flight of stairs. She couldn't hear anything – but was that a faint light coming from the professor's rooms? She held her candle up to the grandfather

clock, which said four o'clock. The middle of the night. Even if the professor had decided to stay up to finish packing, surely he'd have gone to bed by now.

Maisie stepped slowly up the stairs to the first floor, wondering whether to scream and wake everyone up, or try to catch the thief unawares with her frying pan. *Had the thief heard Eddie barking?* she wondered. The lodgers were used to hearing him bark every so often – they had probably just stuck their heads under their pillows, cursed him and gone back to sleep. But the burglar didn't know that. He would be expecting the household to come searching – and he didn't know that Eddie was only little, either.

So whoever it was, they were very determined. Maybe even desperate.



Maisie gulped and wondered if even Gilbert Carrington might go and find some help in this sort of situation. Perhaps she could find a policeman in the street? She turned to look down the stairs again, peering out of the fanlight window over the door. It was very dark.

Then there was a crash, and a thudding of footsteps. Maisie gasped. The thief was coming! She grabbed determinedly at the great heavy figure that went blundering past her down the stairs. But whoever it was pushed her back, and Maisie felt herself waver on the edge of a step. She reached for the banister, but it slid away from her fingers as though it was greased, and she began to fall, bumping down the hard wooden stairs after the burglar.

"Ohhhh!" she wailed, and Eddie yelped,

scrabbling down the stairs after her.

Maisie landed with a thud at the bottom, her head ringing where she'd banged it against the banister. She felt dazed and sick, and her candle had gone out. She couldn't see a thing. She could feel Eddie sniffing at her, his damp nose on her cheek as he tried to see if she was all right. Then Eddie yapped and darted away through the open front door after the thief. Maisie watched the faint white blur disappear into the darkness, and then she leaned her aching head against the wall and closed her eyes.