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BOOK~
SELLER'S
APPRENTICE

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THE MARKET CARNIVAL

Paddy's Market was loud, filthy and wild.

Billy Pyke loved it.

Every Saturday, the market flooded his ears with the noise of animals and music and hundreds of voices in dozens of accents. It surrounded him with the reflections of gaslight on plump fruit and fresh fish and the eyes of pickpockets, who knew spells for prying a lady's brooch off her jacket from ten feet away. It reeked with smoke and spice and cheese. It sparkled with jewels and magic and coins changing hands.

And under the market's four long iron canopies, the rules of the ordinary world did not apply. There was a young lady who could beat any man at wrestling. The market's four bluestone laneways rang with accents and languages from across the world – as far distant as Cornwall and Canton, California and Calcutta, Coranderrk and Cork. A kid in hand-me-down

clothes had just as much right of way as anybody, and he could tip his hat to whomever he liked. The market was a world of dazzling possibilities, danger, excitement and excess.

Billy was not about to give it up without a fight.



It was a dreary Saturday morning in the winter of 1871. Billy was hauling a toy wagon piled with his family's weekly shopping, leading his sister Emma through the market's crowded laneways. Melbourne was at its soggy worst today, and Billy's raincoat had soaked up more rain than it had kept off. His cap was dripping into his chestnut hair, down the back of his neck and under his shirt collar. His left boot had a cracked sole. His wet sock squished with every step.

Yet anger and determination burned inside him, warming him through. Apparently, his parents' combined wages were no longer enough to feed, clothe and care for all their seven children. Now, they said, it was time for their eldest to pitch in. Many of the neighbourhood children had started work when they were nine, in line with the law. Billy was twelve, and attended the Model National School on Spring Street. He could read, write and calculate. And he had long known, in the back of his mind, that someday he would grow into this new phase of life.

He could bear to leave school, with its repetitive lessons and harsh discipline, but Saturday mornings in Paddy's Market? Absolutely not. He was not about to let himself be trapped in the boring nail factory, with his boring father, counting boring

nails for the rest of his life. Yesterday, Mama and Da had asked if he would like to start work on the factory line. They did the same whenever he had to clear dishes or change baby Johnny; they asked if he'd *like to*. Billy had said that of course he would not *like to* stand in one place for six days a week, staring at cold grey things, counting forever. But they'd only said they were too tired to argue and sent him to stack the firewood. And while stacking the wood, he'd thought of a plan.

They couldn't put him to work if he found a job first.

Quite a good one happened to have been advertised in the previous day's newspaper, hanging on the nail in the dunny-ken. And so now Billy tramped through the market with a scheme in his head, and his hopes in his pocket, and indignation smouldering in his chest. Would he *like to*, indeed. Would he *like to* let seven years of learning go to waste? Would he *like to* make do with second-hand and second-best all his life? And perhaps he'd *like to* eat gravel and sawdust from now on, too – would he *like* that?

Behind him, Emma stumbled on the flagstones, almost dropping her basket of eggs. 'Billy, are you cross with me?'

Billy didn't stop. 'No.'

Around them, chickens crowed and squawked in their cages. People crowed and squawked, too: 'Getcha baking apples!' and 'Fresh crayfish!' and 'Step right up to the amazing Strength Testing Machine!'

'Is it because I'm too slow?' Emma said, sidestepping a suspicious-looking puddle.

'You're not.'

‘I can take the wagon if you want me to.’

Billy realised how fast he was walking. ‘I’m not cross with *you*, Em.’

And he wasn’t, much. It wasn’t Emma’s fault their parents were trying to shove him into a life he didn’t want. If Billy was to be taken off shopping duty, somebody had to replace him.

A raindrop from the metal roof splattered onto his brass-rimmed glasses. As he took them off to dry them with his handkerchief, the world turned into soft blobs of colour: golden fruits, purple flower dabs, red and green Chinese lanterns hanging from a cheapjack cart.

‘Where are we meeting Frankie, again?’ asked the pink blur that was Emma.

Carting the Pykes’ weekly supplies a mile uphill was a job for two people. Their brother Frankie, Billy’s usual market helper, was working his way through a different shed this morning to share the load. Knowing Frankie, he was probably sidetracked, letting stray dogs lick his hands or dancing to a busker’s fiddle.

‘We’ll wait for him at the book stall,’ Billy replied.

‘Why can’t we wait outside?’

‘It’s still raining.’ The world sharpened into focus again. ‘Anyway, the book stall is nice. You’re allowed to read the books for free.’

At a nearby doughnut stand, the vendor tipped a new batch into the pan. The aroma of frying batter barged in among the other smells. Emma stopped, staring.

‘Em,’ Billy whispered, nudging her as they started off. ‘You’re gawking again. Pretend you’ve seen it all before.’

‘But I haven’t.’

‘You don’t want the thieves to know that. Or the hawkers. Or the Great American Painless Dentist. They’ll take you for an easy target.’

She glanced behind her, as if to catch a pickpocket sneaking up on them on tiptoe. ‘There weren’t any thieves when we used to come with Mama.’

‘There were. She didn’t tell you because you were little.’ He put a hand on her shoulder, guiding her aside for a donkey pulling a cart. ‘But you shouldn’t worry about the thieves as much as the—’

But Billy had already lost his sister’s attention. A ginger-bearded man in a pinstriped suit had stepped into her way.

‘How would you like to see a man eating shark, lass?’ Behind the showman stood a curtained booth bearing the sign *Jim Crilly’s Exhibition of the Unexpected*. ‘It costs sixpence for adults but I’ll let you and your brother in for half-price each.’

Emma clasped her hands in excitement. ‘Oh, Billy, can we?’

‘Not today,’ Billy said, without slowing.

‘There’s only so long I can keep this man eating shark, you know.’ Jim Crilly’s eyes roamed the crowd in search of the next sucker’s sixpence. ‘Pretty soon, he’ll be tired of fish and I’ll have to feed him something else!’

The curtain of Jim Crilly’s booth whipped aside. Out stepped the previous customer, red in the face. ‘This is outrageous. You can’t charge half a shilling just to watch a bloke eating kippers for breakfast.’

‘Not kippers!’ Mr Crilly said brightly. ‘Fried flake, it is!’

‘What does that matter?’ said the unfortunate customer.

‘Because you got what you paid for, didn’t you, mate? A man, eating shark.’

The barking of the vendors drowned out the onlookers’ laughter at the poor fool as Billy and Emma walked away.

‘Don’t know how he gets away with it,’ Billy said. ‘Last week, it was the three-foot rat.’

‘Ugh!’ said Emma. ‘Where do you find a rat that big?’

‘No,’ said Billy. ‘It’s the Exhibition of the Unexpected. He says he’s got a three-foot rat, and you *expect* some monster three feet long. But it’s only a normal rat with a leg missing. And his dragon was a really a water dragon – which is some type of lizard.’

‘I would still pay to see the lizard.’

‘I know you would.’ Billy tugged the wagon over a lump in the flagstones. A parsnip jolted loose and rolled on the ground.

Emma scooped it up and placed it back on the overflowing wagon. ‘Aren’t you going to organise this?’

‘Suppose I’d better.’ Billy pushed his sleeves back from his wrists. His way of organising was better than just packing things neatly. His system was, quite literally, magical. Successful magic relied on three central principles, and mastering them was difficult. One was imagination: picturing the desired result in his mind. Conviction – confidence in his own ability – was another. The third was articulation: expressing the caster’s wish in the physical world through speaking, writing, drawing or gestures, depending on the person. Most things people did with magic were for convenience or enjoyment: small magic, with small consequences

if something went wrong. After all, a doubt, mistake or wandering thought could make a spell fail before it was even completed.

Today, the wandering thoughts were most likely to ruin it. Imagination required the mind to be clear and focused – and Billy’s mind was not. But if he got it right he’d save some time and trouble, so it was worth a try. He took a deep breath, and as he let it go, he imagined all his thoughts of Frankie and Emma and home and nails and the weather and his wet sock rushing out with it until his mind was clear of everything but the shopping in the toy wagon.

‘Supplies,’ he addressed it. ‘Order yourselves from heaviest to lightest, expeditiously.’

In his head, he could see how all the bags and boxes and loose vegetables would stack together, each item fitting into the gaps formed by the others. At the last word, they began to hop and slide and shuffle into place. The sack of potatoes wriggled to the bottom of the heap. A bag of dried beans wedged itself under the lettuce to keep it from rolling away.

‘Billy, look!’

The last few items thudded on the ground. Emma had distracted him, making the imagination principle fail. Still, it had mostly worked. At least his focus was the only thing that had been broken.

‘Sorry,’ Emma said, as Billy picked up the fallen apples. ‘Quick, look – they’re the prettiest doves I’ve ever seen!’

Billy looked where she was pointing. Up in the metal rafters, three Lahore pigeons were preening. They were larger than the

market's usual grey pigeons. Their faces, bellies and flared foot-feathers were white, but they had long sweeps of black from their heads down their backs and wings to the tips of their tails. One pigeon glanced down, tilted its head at Billy and said, 'Ooh.'

'They're cheeky,' he said, laughing for the first time that day. 'They've got their eye on our shopping.'

'They look like they're wearing little black jackets.' Emma's smile turned to a look of concern. 'Won't their owner be worried about them?'

'They've escaped from the Pigeon Exchange, I'd say. The pigeon fanciers come here on Fridays to buy and sell their special breeds.' Billy began to pull the toy wagon again. 'And I don't think the owner will be bothered. He was probably breeding them to be eaten.'

'Eaten!' Emma gasped. 'Who could eat such adorable pigeons?'

Billy shrugged. 'Rich people. It's very fancy to eat pigeons. Turtles, too.'

'You're just teasing! I've never heard of people eating pigeons or turtles!'

'People have been eating pigeons for thousands of years.' History was Billy's favourite topic. 'Since the Ancient Egyptians.'

Emma looked into the rafters again. 'They're still following us.'

'Well, let's hope they get closer.' Now Billy *was* teasing. 'We can take home a feast.'

The pigeons did not come closer. But they did follow Billy and Emma all the way to Cole's Books – and that was odd, even for Paddy's Market.

TWO STRANGE MEN

The book stall was one of Billy's favourites. The shelves were crooked and crowded, the taller ones forming walls on either side. Tucked in the nooks between shelves and tables were wooden chairs, which folded themselves down when a reader approached to sit. A trestle table served as the front counter, arrayed with books and decorated with a pair of potted ferns. Edward Cole, the bookseller, stood behind it in his splendid scarlet jacket, chatting with a customer. At his side, a golden-brown monkey crouched on a crate, carefully poking and biting on a pine cone to pick out the nuts. A sign bearing a thin rainbow hung over the stall, its letters changing and fading between two welcoming messages: *READ FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE. NO ONE ASKED TO BUY.* Both Mr Cole and the sign made for a pleasant contrast to the stall and its keeper across the way. Fletcher's Fine Taxidermy was not magical.

Mrs Cora Fletcher sat scowling at her counter with her white hair pulled back tightly. Her sign declared *NO ADMITTANCE TO CHILDREN*.

Billy nudged the wagon under a table of cheap romances and beckoned Emma to follow him up to the counter. She trailed her fingers across the shelves. The Pykes didn't have enough books at home to fill one shelf, let alone entire bookcases.

'A marvellous morning to you, Mr Pyke!' said the bookseller as they approached. It was never simply a *good* morning with Mr Cole – always *excellent, delightful* or *superb*. He was from the south of England, having come to Victoria in the Gold Rush, and a trace of his accent remained.

'Morning, sir,' said Billy, touching the brim of his cap. 'You remember our Emma, don't you?'

'I remember your *little* Emma Pyke,' said Mr Cole in pretend surprise. 'She's only six. Who's this young lady?'

But instead of giggling and insisting that she was Emma, truly, she said nothing. She was looking across at Fletcher's Fine Taxidermy. The stuffed animals on display all faced outwards, seeming to glare back.

'Billy,' muttered Emma, 'what's wrong with that poor dog?' Her eyes were on a striped, scrawny creature at the front of the display.

'It's not a dog – it's a Tasmanian tiger,' Billy said. 'And Mr Cole asked you something. Don't be rude.'

'Are they supposed to look like that?' asked Emma, still

gazing at the lumpy specimen.

Billy nudged her with his elbow, but when Emma took no notice, he spoke for her. 'She's nine, sir. And she hasn't been to the market in a long time, so please excuse her. She can't stop staring.'

'There's plenty to stare at around here,' Mr Cole said. 'Tell me, Emma, can you read and write?'

At last, Emma remembered her manners. 'Yes, Mr Cole.'

'And what do you like to read about?'

'Animals,' said Emma in a voice so quiet that the market noise almost smothered it.

'Animals!' Mr Cole reached over his bench to lift down a thick blue hardcover. 'Then you've simply got to see this.'

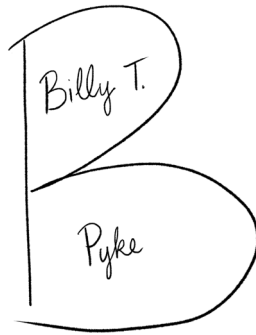
Emma let it fall open in her hands. Billy glimpsed the illustrations: large colour plates showing an eagle, a lyrebird, a spotted thing like a cat. Mesmerised, Emma shuffled away. A chair opened for her.

Mr Cole rested one elbow on the counter, looking pleased with himself. 'And how did you fare this week, lad? Have you found the answer yet?'

'Yes, sir,' Billy said. 'I can write my name in one letter.'

'Let's see it, then. Yes, madam,' Mr Cole added to a customer who had come to pay for a stack of books. 'That's a very interesting read. Now ... ninepence for that one, sixpence for that ...'

With a pencil and a scrap of paper from the counter, Billy wrote a large B. Then, adjusting his grip for the smaller letters, he wrote his name inside its rounded spaces.



‘There it is, sir.’ Billy pushed the paper towards Mr Cole as the customer left. ‘My name in one letter.’

Mr Cole’s smile couldn’t be seen through his beard, but it could be heard in his voice. ‘Very good. Your turn.’

Their tradition had started two years ago with one of Mr Cole’s unique advertisements: *What kind of pen has never written a word? Come to Cole’s Books, Paddy’s Market, and you shall see.* Billy had been so pleased to work out a riddle at last, after having seen them in the newspaper so often without understanding them, that he’d run up and yelled, ‘A pig pen!’ without any introduction. Ever since, they had taken turns perplexing each other every week. Mr Cole always thought up new riddles. Billy dug them up from books on history.

‘All right,’ Billy said. ‘I think you’ll like this one:

*Four to walk and four to hang,
Two defending, one to clang,
It has two ears, it has two eyes,
It has a dangling tail and flies.’*

‘And who came up with that one?’ asked Mr Cole.

‘The Vikings.’ Billy had found it in a translation of *The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek* – a legend that included plenty of riddles along with its tales of gods, wars and kings.

Mr Cole ran his hand down his beard. ‘They had dragons in Norse mythology, didn’t they? Is it a dragon?’

‘No, sir.’

‘A monkey, then. I’m sure the Vikings sailed to North Africa at some point.’ His own pet monkey dropped its pine cone, and leapt onto his shoulder to be patted. ‘They can walk on all fours, hang from any limb, and swing so fast through the trees that they seem to fly.’

‘It isn’t a monkey, either. It goes *clang*.’ Billy had tried the riddle out on his siblings on the way to school, and thought it was just right – neither too easy, nor too cryptic.

Come to think of his siblings, Frankie would be here any minute. Billy glanced about the stall, wondering how best to change the conversation to his main reason for coming. Perhaps it was best to simply spit it out. ‘Mr Cole, I saw your ad in the paper yesterday.’

‘The poem about the happy reader? I do enjoy writing those.’

‘No, the other one.’ Billy had memorised it – *BOY WANTED: intelligent, industrious, honest. Apply at Cole’s Books, Paddy’s Market.* ‘Are you still looking for an assistant?’

A slight frown passed across Mr Cole’s features. ‘Well, I haven’t had time to read all fifty letters yet ...’

Billy’s heart lurched. There was no chance he was the best out

of fifty. Others would have read more books. Others would have dressed better. Nevertheless, he pulled himself up as straight as he could and thrust his letter towards Mr Cole. 'Then here is number fifty-one,' he said. 'And since you don't have time for the rest, just read the best.'

Mr Cole gave a small chuckle at that, but Billy couldn't tell whether he was laughing at the pitch or at Billy's foolishness. Billy was suddenly aware of the fact that he had not had a proper bath in a week – only a weekday wash with the basin and the rag. He clenched his hands behind his back as Mr Cole opened the letter. It had looked so proper when he'd sealed it with the dollop of wax, but in Mr Cole's fingers, it seemed crumpled and childish. Last night, Billy had hunched over his parents' dresser, the nearest thing to a private desk in the house, and written in his most careful handwriting:

Dear Mr Cole,

I am replying to your advertisement in the Friday 7th of July 1871 edition of The Herald newspaper to show my enthusiastic interest in the position you have available. I have been a reading customer at Cole's Books for a long time and I am eager to work with your exepcional business.

I am ~~tonch~~ conscionous conscientious and ~~pasist~~ persistent as well as the qualities you have speciefied. As for intelligence, I am top of my class for Reading, and in the top five in my class in Writing and Arithmetic. As for honesty, I have been trusted to mind my six siblings for many years and they have ~~never~~ hardly ever come to harm in

my care. As for industriousness industriy industry, I am the hardest working child in our house with the most responsibillities, because you can trust me to do things properly.

As you may be aware, I can do a little magic, which is good for tidying things. I do not take alcohol or tabaco terbbacow smoke, and I can give the best of references as to my good character.

Sincerely,

William Thomas Pyke

55 Macarthur Place, Carlton, Melbourne, Victoria (Australia)

As Mr Cole lowered the letter, Billy saw the crossed-out words again. He hoped they didn't make him appear careless. Perhaps he should have had someone else check his spelling, but Da had been too busy with the little ones last night and Mama struggled with writing, having never been to school.

Mr Cole's balding forehead was furrowed. 'Mr Pyke, when you say your siblings have *hardly ever* come to harm ...'

That did sound suspicious. 'Well, sir, it's hard to avoid with little ones. They're always scraping their knees, or bumping their heads, or getting into Da's shaving case and playing with the razor while I'm changing the baby ... but I'm very good with them! I can patch them up and calm them down as quick as anything, sir.'

To Billy's surprise, Mr Cole nodded slowly. 'I grew up in a large family, too.'

'I'm the eldest of seven,' Billy said. 'And now that my parents can't afford my school fees anymore, I've got to go to work.'

The Model National School wasn't as expensive as grammar schools, but Billy's tuition still cost three silver shillings a month. The Ragged Schools were free but they only took in children from the very poorest families, and they didn't have proper teachers anyway. 'I'm supposed to work with my father in the nail factory, but I don't want to be stuck doing that forever. So I'm going to find a good job on my own.'

'Why do you think you'll be stuck doing it forever? Ah – Jacko, careful.' Mr Cole winced as the monkey grabbed his face for balance and climbed down into his arms.

'Isn't that how life works?' Mama had been folding matchboxes and Da had been filling out forms for as long as Billy could remember.

'Not necessarily. I've had lots of jobs. Lamplighter, basket-maker, carpenter, glass-blower, house-painter. I was a photographer and a seed-collector for a few months. I fixed umbrellas ... I've sold jam, sausages, cordial, pies ... and now, books. Which I think is what I'm truly meant for.' Mr Cole looked Billy in the eye across the counter. 'How old are you, Mr Pyke?'

'Twelve, sir.'

'Hm. Sixteen would be ideal ...'

Disappointment pierced Billy's chest. An older boy would be taller, stronger, more confident, able to carry more books, able to talk to customers more easily.

'But that ought not to rule anybody out.' Mr Cole placed Billy's letter to one side. 'Thank you, Mr Pyke. You're always

welcome to a free education here, if you find yourself wishing for school.’

That was that, then. It was no good begging.

‘I’ll just see how my sister likes that animal book. Good luck, sir.’ Turning away to let Mr Cole serve his customers, Billy tugged his cap down as low as it would go over his reddening face. It would be a dream to work in a place like this. Stacking books all day. Talking to people. Reading when things got quiet. It would be such a change from racing around, picking up after the Pykelets. But if Mr Cole had set his mind on a sixteen-year-old, then Billy could not do much to improve his chances.

He stopped at the history section to try to take his mind off his failure. History arranged everything that had ever happened into one epic tale of humankind. It turned scattered bones back into people and broken objects into stories. Perhaps one day Billy could be an archaeologist.

If he wasn’t stuck in a nail factory all his life.

Maybe the nail factory wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe he could switch after a few years and find what he was *truly meant for*. They might be a pretty miserable few years, even so. Da said it was always cold. He said that the constant grinding noise of the machinery lodged in your ears after a while and never went away.

‘Four to walk and four to hang,’ said a deep and lovely voice right behind Billy’s head. ‘What a dreadful crime that must have been.’

Billy froze. Someone had overheard him talking to Mr Cole.

He didn't much feel like talking to a stranger, but it would have been impolite to ignore them, so he turned around.

Stranger was the wrong word. *Strangest* was more like it. The eavesdropper was very slender and very tall. His heritage was impossible to tell from his looks; like a sun-kissed sailor, he might have fit in at any port city in the world. He was wearing the wrong kind of clothes for Paddy's Market. Rather, he looked like he was going to see an evening show at the theatre next door, or possibly appear in one. He was all crisp, elegant edges: long limbs, a stiff new top hat, a jacket that tapered down to two sharp ends, and a handsome, angular face. Even his beard came to a neat point. Most men, including Mr Cole, grew them large and bushy.

'The question is whether the *right* ones walk or not.' He spoke like a distinguished gentleman, and dressed like one, but he was not sitting like one. He was lounging. One leg stretched out in front of him, almost reaching the shelves on the other side of the aisle. His trousers were in the new narrow style, perfectly tailored to fit.

Billy had never owned trousers that fit. All his clothes had been someone else's first. 'I'm sorry – I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Your riddle.' The stranger's eyes were like two shining drops of fine black ink. 'The cell door clangs shut. Two lawyers defend the accused. Four men are pardoned and walk away free. Four are condemned to hanging. The dangling *tale* is some mystery that was not solved during the trial, and the news of the scandal flies about town.'

The stranger sounded so sure of himself that Billy couldn't resist pushing back. Well-dressed gentlemen could visit Paddy's Market if they liked, but they ought to remember that in this place, they were no better than anyone else. 'You forgot the two ears and two eyes,' Billy said matter-of-factly. 'Anyway, it's not a trial.'

The man replied with one raised brow.

'It's a cow. Four legs to walk. Four things hanging on the udder.' Billy, born and raised a city boy, wagged his fingers at the ground. 'Two horns to keep the wolves away. And a cowbell.'

'And how many flying cows have you seen?' drawled the stranger.

'*It has a dangling tail and flies.*' Billy pushed up his glasses. 'As in, it has a tail, and it also has some flies buzzing around it.'

'So it does,' said the man pleasantly. 'Well, perhaps I can solve your other conundrum.' He took off his hat, plunged his arm shoulder-deep inside it, rummaged around in a space that couldn't possibly be there, and took out a long black walking cane with a silver handle. 'Before you're stuck forever.'

The stranger must have listened to the entire conversation with Mr Cole. Perhaps somebody was listening to this one. Billy glanced around. Emma was still out of earshot, swinging her legs as she read. Frankie was yet to arrive. Mr Cole was busy serving, and the other customers were minding their own business. A black-haired girl in a dress striped like a humbug lolly sat nearby, doing something complicated with a piece of blue wool. She made eye contact with Billy, but a moment later

she was looking at the book of crochet patterns in her lap.

‘Mr Cole may not wish to help you – but I can.’ The man put his hat back on and ran his white-gloved fingers down his cane, which was divided into rotating wheels covered in tiny silver symbols.

‘Are you looking for assistants, too?’ Whatever the stranger did, it had to be more interesting than counting nails – and judging from his clothes, it paid better, too.

The man gave a short, soft laugh. ‘No. But I can procure a job for you. Or, in fact, anything you want.’ He waved the cane in Billy’s direction.

Billy’s wet feet were suddenly dry. His loose trousers cinched tight. His glasses were as clear as a fresh prescription.

He looked down in disbelief. The stranger had transformed his clothes into the regalia of a lord: a blue coat embroidered all down his chest with gold ferns, white leather gloves, smart cream trousers and a thin ceremonial sword.

‘Thank you,’ Billy said, startled. ‘But if you can do anything I want ... why did you do that?’

‘To show you how easy it is.’ The stranger flourished his hand and a Lahore pigeon appeared, perched on his fingers.

‘*Ooh,*’ it said.

‘You see,’ said the stranger, lifting a second pigeon from behind Billy’s ear, ‘I am a career magician.’

That explained the pigeons. Just as someone who was not an artist could draw a simple face, many people could do a little magic. Professional magicians, on the other hand, performed for

a living – conjuring ribbons out of the air, or turning pigeons into silk handkerchiefs and back again. But transforming or transporting living things with true magic was risky. A pigeon that was really changed into a handkerchief might change back when it was meant to – but it could also change back at the wrong time, or not at all, or become a cooing hanky, or a pigeon with useless fabric wings, or any number of other bizarre possibilities. Not many magic users were confident enough, or careless enough, to take such chances with their pets' lives. Most career magicians used sleight of hand for such tricks.

'Let me guess,' said the career magician, placing his birds on the bookshelf beside him. 'You're imagining that I frolic about on a stage doing this sort of thing.' In time with his words, he conjured from the air a deck of cards, which turned into a white rabbit. 'But I am far more than a simple entertainer.' He tossed the rabbit into the air. The animal wriggled as it fell. Before it hit the ground, the magician made it vanish. 'I am a purveyor of the incredible and the astonishing. A dealer in the things people believe cannot be bought or sold.'

Billy tugged at the trousers of his lordly costume. It was sure to get dirty if he had to walk through the market in it. 'What kinds of things?'

'Beauty. Fame. Talent. Wealth. Love. Ways out of hopeless situations. And it need not cost you a penny.' The magician lifted his hat. The last of the three pigeons was sitting on his head. 'Call me Magnus Maximillian. The one and only authentic Obscurosmith, at your service.'