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The Middle Passage

Cat in the Azores
A Play in Two Acts

by Julia Golding
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The Critics

*'Reading Cat Royal, I felt like some watcher of the skies,
when a new planet swims into his ken'*

– John Keats

*'A Cat Royal story? I'll point my telescope in that direction
any day!'*

– Caroline Herschel, astronomer

*'What, she's back again? Summon the navy and get rid of
her!'*

– William Pitt, Prime Minister

Principal Characters

CAT ROYAL – your intrepid guide

BILLY SHEPHERD – her annoying companion

MABEL FLANDERS – a stargazer

PETER FLANDERS – her telescopically obsessed
brother

RACHEL FLANDERS – their sister, who wants nothing
to do with the heavens

MR FLANDERS – their father

CHARLES AUBERT – curly-haired French rival

ALBERT AUBERT – his brother, not blessed in his
looks

ANNA-MARIA AUBERT – their shy sister

MADAME AUBERT and MONSIEUR AUBERT – their
parents

*Gossiping servants, drunken sailors, mistaken magistrates
etc.*

And two donkeys.

Prologue: All at Sea

Somewhere in the Atlantic
Late Summer 1792 – Curtain Rises

The most annoying person in the universe is the one who retains his appetite while his travelling companion is suffering from seasickness. I can now attest to this newly coined proverb from my own experience. In the middle of the recent mid-Atlantic storm, while I had my head over a certain nameless object, Billy Shepherd, former Covent Garden street thug turned gentleman, was tucking in to a good square meal of salt pork and beans in the captain's mess.

Following that incident, I began an alphabetical list of all the words describing Billy. 'A' was easy – 'awful', though 'abominable' came a close second. No, no, I changed my mind: 'arrogant' won by a nose. I put my pen down on the little ledge on the writing desk I had cobbled together from packing cases and stretched my arms above my head. The sea beyond my porthole was blessedly smooth, a calm deep blue; the sky a paler expanse thanks to a light cloud cover. Now I came to think of it, there were so many words for Billy, this little exercise was going to pass the tedious days on board the *Dolphin* very well. I savoured

some of my favourites further on in the alphabet. A very satisfactory feast of delicious epithets.

The object of my lexicon of revenge stuck his head into my cabin. 'Wot you doin', Cat?' I think he seeks my company because I am the only entertainment available.

'Contemplating human nature,' I replied tartly, gathering up my papers.

'Captain says we've almost reach the Azores.' Billy was looking like the pirate he was at heart: tanned, clothes salt-stained and more than a bit scruffy, dark brown hair needing a good wash and visit from the barber. 'E's going to call in to make repairs before the last leg 'ome.'

I wrinkled my nose, trying to imagine where the Azores were on the navigational charts. 'Gone a bit far south, haven't we?'

'You don't argue with a storm like the one we weathered. Besides, Captain Bates knows the islands well.'

'I bet he does.' I shoved the manuscript on which I'd been doodling into my sea chest. It was an unpleasant fact that the only passage I could obtain from Tortuga in the Caribbean back to England had been on board a slave ship, empty of human cargo but now stuffed with slave-made goods: sugar, indigo and tobacco. I would have much preferred not to

mire myself in the ugly web of the trade in human misery, but it seemed impossible to live in the British Empire without being implicated in what we were doing to our fellow men. Thinking of that iniquitous trade, I was reminded of my friends, Pedro and Jenny, who had stayed behind in San Domingo to help the rebel slaves fight for their freedom. I muttered a little prayer for their protection.

‘So, Moggy, are you comin’ out?’ Billy stood back, giving me a glimpse of the busy deck beyond my door. I had the cabin next to the captain’s, a berth of honour. Everyone else shared quarters in hammocks in the stifling lower deck (being the only female paying passenger has its benefits). There were a few older women who had come aboard in the Caribbean; I did not enquire too closely into their status – their alliances with their husbands were somewhat fluid – but as they gave every indication of being tougher than the sailors, I assumed they were well able to shift for themselves. Billy had warned me to steer well clear of these ladies or be ‘eaten for breakfast’ (I quote).

‘Of course, I’m coming out. Can’t wait to clap my eyes on land after having to endure your ugly phiz for the last month.’

Billy grunted. ‘And I’ve ’ad to put up with your sharp tongue. Been a voyage worthy of Odysseus.’

I gaped. Billy *kept* on doing that: luring me to thinking he hadn’t changed from the street urchin I knew and then reminding me that he had paid good money to get a swift education in the essentials of passing as a gentleman. Homer – in Chapman’s translation obviously – had clearly figured on his reading list.

‘So that makes me...what? Scylla? Charybdis?’

‘Nah, a siren.’ He offered me his arm with mocking solemnity.

‘Stuff your ears with wax then.’ I placed my hand on his forearm and gave it a pinch.

‘Been tempted, Moggy, been sorely tempted.’

He steered me to the foredeck and the dolphin-shaped figurehead. The sun was high and the light curiously flat. I couldn’t see the islands on the horizon as I had hoped.

‘Not a sign – not even a pimple.’ I shaded my eyes. ‘Is he sure we’re close?’

Billy shrugged. ‘E’s the boss so I ‘ope ‘e knows wot ‘e’s doin’.’

I eyed the nearest mast.

‘Oh no, you don’t.’ Billy’s grip on my arm tightened.

What was his problem with my urge to climb? I had my sailor’s trousers on underneath my skirt. I tried to tug free. ‘Let go.’

'I vowed last time you went up the mast like a monkey that I'd stop you if you tried those tricks again.'

'I'm fully trained in all aspects of skylarking.' I wriggled my arm clear. 'If you don't like it, you could always come with me to keep me safe.'

If he hadn't been burnt brown as a berry, I would lay good money on him going the colour of good parchment. 'Can't,' he muttered.

'*Can't?* What, you don't like heights or something?'

'Don't like ropes.' His words were barely audible as he made the confession shame-facedly.

There was only one bad association someone of his profession had with ropes – and that involved a scaffold, priest and judge. I guessed Billy had once or twice come too close to taking the nipping jig.

'You stay here then. I won't be a moment.' Making my escape, I darted up the first shroud I reached. The sailors on deck cheered when they saw me go. The chief bookmaker among them started counting – there was a bet that I could reach the top in twenty seconds if I went flat out. Those who put their faith in the cat were going to be a lot richer in nineteen seconds because I felt like showing off my prowess today.

I reached the crosstrees as the sailors' all roared 'Eighteen!'. I clung on to a line and gave them a jaunty wave. Billy had his hat pulled over his eyes –

he couldn't bear to look when I got in one of these moods, which was partly why I did it, of course.

Standing up with my arm locked around the mast, I took a deep cleansing breath. This was the only place on board where you could rise above the stench of the ship – the old odours left by the poor human cargo of a month back and the smell of too many unwashed sailors who were a rough lot by anyone's standard. I'm sure I wasn't too sweet myself, having not had a proper chance to wash in more than a thimbleful of water since we left San Domingo.

'Can you see anything?' bellowed Billy.

I scanned the horizon – there on the very margin was the bluish hint of land, a mountainous island by the looks of things. 'Yes! Land-ho!'

'Then get down from there, you idiot girl!'

I reached for the nearest line heading to the deck.

'Not again!' he groaned.

With a hoot, I swung out and skimmed my way hand over hand down to the deck and gave the assembled company a bow.

'Cat Royal on deck, sir!' I saluted Billy.

His reply is not fit for decent folk to read.

Act I

Scene I: Stargazers

The Portuguese settlement of Angra do Heroismo was surprisingly beautiful, a cluster of white-washed houses and churches set against the steep slope of this fertile volcanic island like a stack of ivory betting tokens scattered on a green baize table. Angra clung on by the merest whim of fate that saw the volcanoes dormant for the present; with turn of fortune's wheel, I guessed it could be swept way. The Azores boasted some of the tallest mountains in world if you took note of their dramatic rise straight out of the Atlantic Ocean. My mind whirled to think how much lay hidden under the waves – they had to be huge.

The *Dolphin* was now riding at anchor near the docks and all but the core of the crew dismissed to amuse themselves in the taverns of Angra. Well used to welcoming travellers, the harbour rejoiced in numerous squalid establishments catering to the lowest of tastes. I imagined that Billy would feel completely at home and be raring to sample these dubious delights, but instead he insisted on keeping me company as I went in search of a more respectable place to spend the days while our ship was repaired.

'Really, you needn't,' I said for the hundredth time as we scaled a flight of stairs winding up the hillside between the houses. It felt hot in the airless streets after the breezy days on board, but I welcomed the sensation that the land under my feet was going to stay put. Perspiration ran down my forehead, the band tying my sunhat in place itched against warm skin.

Billy paused to fan himself with his battered tricorne. 'Course I do. I don't even want to imagine what trouble you'll get in if I leave you to wander the taverns on your own.'

I put a cautious hand over the place on my shoulder where I now sported a cat-shaped tattoo, memento of a night in a certain tavern in Bermuda. He didn't know about that, did he? To be sure, he had seen me in my nightgown on the occasion when I'd been delirious with malaria, but he would have teased me about it before.

'What kind of mischief could I possibly get myself into?' I asked, a shade too innocently.

He chuckled. 'Cat Royal – low dives heaving with the rummest bunch of sailors this side of Marrakesh – you'd be knocked over the 'ead and shipped for the white slave trade before you could say "Drury Lane".'

'I wasn't planning to frequent any such establishment. I *am* planning to find somewhere quiet and decent so I can pass a few pleasant days without annoying company.'

'Not possible.' Billy poked me in the side. 'You and quiet cancel each other out.'

'Oh, shut up, Billy.' I continued walking not wishing to witness his smirk.

We reached the top of the hill and found ourselves on a garden walk surrounded by some of the finer houses of the settlement, the homes of the shipping agents and merchants who clung to this little outpost in the ocean. A broad-leaved fig tree shaded a bench, ripe fruit dropping on the ground to the delight of a horde of wasps.

I here admit, Reader, to a peculiar antipathy to these striped nuisances, terrors that plague our summers and autumns in England. I would hazard that my irrational fear of them must stem from some childhood incident that has since slipped from my memory. Suffice to say that whenever I hear that particular buzz, I flee.

'Let's find somewhere else,' I said quickly, tugging Billy round to the top of the stairs.

'You daft?' Billy mopped his brow. 'We've just climbed all the way up 'ere and you want to go back

already? No way, no flippin' way, Cat Royal. I'm sticking 'ere.' He plumped down on the bench, heedless of the wasps buzzing round his feet.

I cringed, edging out of range to perch on the wall overlooking the harbour.

Billy could not help but notice my unusual reticence. 'Wot's the matter with you?' He squashed a wasp under his heel, then reached up and picked a fig, swishing away the clouds of insects that rushed to enjoy the fruit in his fingers.

I closed my eyes, not wanting the image of Billy stuffing soft fig with wasp-garnish in his mouth forever in my memory.

'Go on, tell yer Uncle Billy,' he urged through a mouthful.

Oh lord, I feared my sea sickness was returning. I swallowed against the bile in my throat.

'You've gone green, Cat.'

'I don't like wasps,' I ground out.

He had the gall to laugh. 'Bleedin' marvellous! Fearless Cat is terrified of something no bigger than 'er fingernail. Don't tell me, you're scared of mice too?'

'Am not.'

I heard him approach so opened my eyes quickly. He was holding out a fig for me.

‘See, no wasps. ‘Ave one – they’re ripe.’

Like a hunter on a fresh scent, a wasp zoomed in over his shoulder and dived at the fig brandished an inch from my nose. I shrieked, tried to bat it away, and only succeeded in knocking the fig flying in what in cricket would have been declared a six by any impartial umpire. The irate wasp, deprived of its meal, turned on me, buzzing straight at my face. I screamed and flapped it away – but only as far as the neck of my gown. Caught in the raggedy lace, it took revenge and sank its stinger into my skin.

‘Bi-lly!’ I yelped.

With a clap of his hands, the wasp was no more.

‘It’s only a little sting. Stop makin’ such a fuss. You’re embarrassin’ me.’

My head began to swim. I couldn’t see the place the wasp had struck but I was sure it was swelling up like a hot air balloon. ‘It hurts!’

‘Yeah, it’s a sting – they ’urt.’ Billy was quite disgusted by my feeble behaviour, but he didn’t understand. Give me a black eye in a scrap, then I would bounce back and give you one in the canister. Push me over then I’d bring you down too. But wasps were different. Wasps were evil. God was having one very bad day when he created them.

‘Oh lord...’ I slid from the wall and cast up my accounts in a flowerbed.

‘Blimey, you really aren’t takin’ this well, are you, Moggy.’ Billy sounded almost – and I stress *almost* – sympathetic. A handkerchief wafted into view.

I was about to agree, when to my eternal mortification, I fainted.

‘I think she’s coming round.’

I could feel a cool, soft surface underneath me. Cotton sheets and a breeze from an open window. A slim hand patted my cheek with a damp cloth. I opened my eyes to come face to face with a girl of my own age, slender, with a mass of black curls looped up in a complicated hairstyle. Her eyes were intelligent – dark brown with long lashes – but her face a little too thin to be declared conventionally pretty. Everything about her, from her fine clothes to her elaborate coiffure, declared her to be a product of a privileged upbringing.

‘Ah, there you are. Feeling better?’

English. She was speaking English with no foreign accent.

A second girl came into view – blond, slightly younger, dressed in the shade of pink that I knew

looked ghastly on me but on her was very pretty. 'I'll tell her friend that she is awake.'

With a swish of her skirts, the blond vanished out of sight.

'Where...?' I asked.

'Where are you?' the first girl supplied quickly.

I nodded.

'You are in our house, Bellevue Mount. Your companion carried you in from the heat when you fainted. Said you took on so when you were stung by a wasp.'

I had to be in one of the fine residences by the garden. Recovered enough to feel embarrassed, I groaned and turned my face into the pillow.

The cool hand came back to my brow. 'Do you still feel poorly?'

'No. Ashamed.'

The girl laughed. 'No need for that. Your friend explained you'd only just landed and are not used to our climate.'

'Not the climate – the wasps.'

She shivered. 'Oh, I understand that. Hate the little demons myself. I can't walk near the fig tree at this time of year. They breed them big and vicious in these climes.'

A girl after my own heart.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Mabel Flanders. That was my sister, Rachel, you saw a moment ago, and there's also my brother, Peter, but he's with your friend, Mr Shepherd.'

'Wouldn't exactly call him a friend,' I grumbled, trying to sit up.

Mabel blushed. 'Oh. I assumed you must have an understanding as you are travelling together.'

'We do – but not the sort you mean. I understand he's a low-down scoundrel and he understands I'm a plague on his peace of mind. Believe me, if I had a choice, he would not be my travelling companion but somewhere along the way the chance to voyage with a chaperone disappeared.' I frowned, remembering just how I had ended up on board this particular ship with this old enemy. 'Probably when I got caught in the slave rebellion and had to take ship from Tortuga. Not many decent ladies waiting to escort girls home to England from there.'

'I imagine not.' Mabel helped me stand and shake my skirts out. I suddenly remembered just how grubby I was compared to this beautiful house and spotless inhabitants. Not to mention how unsavoury I must smell.

I gestured to myself. 'I'm not usually like this. I feel terrible landing on you in such a condition.'

She shrugged. ‘Strangely, we are used to it. Father runs the Azores office of the Starline shipping company – we often get unexpected guests in a worse state than you. Mr Shepherd says you are looking for a place to stay for a few days while your ship undergoes repairs. You’re welcome to remain here if it would suit?’

I was astounded that she would accept a stranger into her house without further references. ‘Are you sure?’

Mabel smiled. ‘Well, you don’t look dangerous and Mr Shepherd seems to know the Starline shipping company well – went out to Jamaica on one of our vessels, he says.’

‘If you are certain, I’d love to stay here.’

Mabel waved any objections away. ‘Good, that’s settled then. To be honest, we are dying of the tedium of island living and welcome any English guests to break the monotony. I imagine you would welcome a chance to bathe and change your clothes?’

‘I would name my first born after someone who gave me that,’ I replied fervently.

She laughed. ‘Not necessary – and imagine how a boy would do at school named Mabel.’

Yes, I was right: she was splendid.

Half an hour later, bathed and decked out in borrowed finery, I emerged from the bedroom. Mabel led me to the terrace that shared the wonderful sweeping views down to the harbour. I could clearly make out the *Dolphin* riding peacefully at anchor, men busy with the much needed repairs to the rigging. Soon our vessel would be as fit as I now was to face her public.

We turned a corner and I saw the comfortable sight of three people sat round a table, sipping cool drinks under a shady vine. The two men stood as Mabel and I approached.

‘Feeling better, Miss Royal?’ Billy asked, assuming the formal ‘gentleman’ manner he had perfected for such company. No dropped aitches or swallowing of his words.

‘Yes, thanks to my kind hostess.’

Mabel touched my arm. ‘May I introduce my brother and sister? Peter and Rachel.’

Peter, a scholarly-looking young man with an earnest expression, gave me a clumsy bow. Rachel dipped an elegant curtsy. Billy was grinning at her in appreciation which made me suspect that she had been practicing her skills at flirtation on him. I would

have to take her aside and whisper a warning – he was definitely not worth the effort. I took a seat between Rachel and Peter, accepting the offer of a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Heaven – as long as there were no wasps.

Mabel saw me scanning the nearby flowers suspiciously. ‘We have a trap for them.’ She nodded to a honey-lure set on a side table.

I relaxed and took a mouthful of juice.

Billy smirked. I kicked him under the table – hard.

‘Whom do you live with? Are your parents here?’ I asked, seeing no adult in attendance. A female servant in black hovered inside the doors to the house waiting to see if anything else was required, but otherwise the house was very quiet.

Mabel shook her head. ‘Our mother died many years ago.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ Trust me to put my foot in it.

‘Our father is at his office. He won’t be back till late – if he comes back at all. He often sleeps down there if he is waiting for a ship to come in.’

So the three of them were left to their own devices in this splendid house – not a bad fate. ‘So who is in charge?’ I teased. ‘Mr Flanders, as the oldest, is it you who has the impossible task of managing your sisters?’

He didn’t hear that I was only joking and took my question seriously. ‘Indeed, I suppose I am in command of the house in our father’s absence. The girls’ new governess is not expected for a month or so. And my tutor has just left as I am to start work with Father very soon.’

‘Oh, that sounds very...um...exciting,’ I said politely, not at all sure that I would fancy a lifetime in shipping, calculating cargoes and export duties.

Peter frowned, his pale scholar’s face wrinkling to make him look prematurely old. ‘Not really, but that is what Father expects. I’d prefer to go to university. Mr Shepherd, which of the colleges did you attend – or perhaps you are about to go up?’

I snorted into my orange juice. The only college Billy attended was the university of life.

‘I went straight into business like yourself,’ Billy said, giving me a repressive glare. ‘I have a talent for making money and none at all for Latin.’

Peter leaned eagerly towards him. ‘But it is not the languages I would like to study, but mathematics. I’ve always dreamed of going to Cambridge.’

‘As have I,’ lied Billy, ‘but needs must.’

If Billy had ever dreamed of Cambridge, it was a fantasy where he robbed the dons blind, got drunk with the rich students and never put a foot inside

a lecture hall, but I would put good money on the thought never crossing his mind before.

‘I have a good friend going up to Trinity this autumn,’ I said, letting Billy off this uncomfortable hook. ‘The Earl of Arden.’

Mabel’s brows winged up as she showed sensible scepticism that I would know such an exalted personage. Rachel, however, was impressed.

‘You know an earl, Miss Royal? What is he like? Is he handsome?’ she asked.

I shrugged. ‘He does well enough, I suppose.’ Hard to think of Frank like that – we’d spent too long together on board the *Courageous* for me to think of him in his polished noble grandeur, but I suppose he was fine looking to an impartial observer.

Rachel clasped her hands to her breast. ‘Oh, I would die to meet a real earl!’

‘Good job he’s not with us then,’ quipped Billy, amused by the girl’s enthusiasm.

‘Forgive my sister.’ Mabel handed me a plate of tiny sweet biscuits that melted on the tongue in a fizz of almond and sugar. ‘She is set on her debut – even though it is some years away.’

Rachel frowned at her sister. ‘Only three. Aunt Helga has promised to get me an introduction to all the best families in London. I have to be ready.’

‘And how does one get ready for a first season?’ Billy asked, humouring the chit.

Rachel rose and drifted across the veranda as if it were a ballroom. ‘You learn to dance, polish your accomplishments and hold polite conversation.’

‘That’d count you out then, Cat,’ Billy said to me in an undertone, ‘the *polite* conversation, I mean.’

His shins received a second kick.

‘Rachel!’ called Mabel, embarrassed by her sister showing off before strangers.

The girl came to rest by the wall at the edge of the veranda. ‘Better to prepare to be a lady than to go squint-eyed staring at the stars all night.’

‘Oh?’ Now my interest was pricked. Astronomy had become all the rage since William Herschel discovered a new planet, dubbed Georgium Sidium after the king, in our solar system ten years ago.¹ His marvellous telescopes had become the expensive centre piece of the collection of any gentleman of a scientific bent. Us ladies had not been far behind as Herschel’s sister, Caroline, had made the wonderful discovery of a comet some seven years ago – becoming the first

1. Some are arguing for a name more in tune with the other planets – Uranus being a favourite among cosmologists.

lady astronomer of note in modern times. She was one of my heroines, along with Mrs Siddons and Miss Burney – all masters of their respective fields of science, stage and story. ‘And who likes to stargaze?’

Mabel raised a hand. ‘I confess to this weakness. Peter is another enthusiast, though his interest is in the equipment and the calculations required to plot our sightings.’

Rachel waved a hand in front of her mouth, indicating her boredom in a theatrical yawn.

‘Do you have your own telescope then?’

Peter’s face lit up with enthusiasm. ‘Oh yes, I have a really first rate one – a Herschel seven-inch reflector.’

‘Sound the alarm – telescope bore alert!’ muttered Rachel.

‘Father ordered it from the Herschels for me – the waiting list was huge but he pulled a few strings thanks to his friendship with Astronomer Royal.’

Mabel lent a little closer to me. ‘An exchange of favours. We hosted a party of astronomers for a recent eclipse.’

‘And this telescope – how much is it worth?’ asked Billy shrewdly.

Peter tugged at his cravat. ‘At least a hundred guineas.’

Good gracious! That was equivalent to an annual income for many a respectable shopkeeper. The Starline had to be a profitable enterprise for a father to afford such a gift for his son. I hoped Billy was not planning to relieve our kind hosts of this valuable piece of kit as our parting shot.

‘I look after it very carefully,’ Peter added. ‘Not just anyone is allowed to use it, are they, Rachel?’

His youngest sister stuck out her tongue at him. ‘I only used it once to spy on the ships.’

‘I suspect you were more interested in ogling the officers.’ Mabel smiled at her.

‘Might we see this marvel this evening?’ Billy asked.

Peter checked the skies. ‘Yes, indeed. It appears to be a capital night for stargazing. What say you, Mabel? Are we ready to travel the galaxies?’

‘Of course, I’d be delighted to take our guests on a little spin around the heavens. Did you know, Miss Royal, that Herschel thinks you can see life on the moon – canals and forests?’

‘Truly?’ I wasn’t sure if I believed in this – the moon was just a flat white disk, wasn’t it?

‘See for yourself – in about four hours.’ Mabel rang a little bell on the table, summoning a servant to clear the table. ‘Until then, I would advise you to take a siesta as we do. The afternoons are unbearably hot.

We dine late – at about seven – as a result. Does that suit?’

Feet up for the afternoon, a good meal in prospect and an evening of entertainment ahead: this was turning out to be quite a splendid holiday.

‘That suits admirably well.’ I grinned at Billy who looked remarkably pleased with himself for finding us so comfortable a berth. I would have to keep my eye on him but I guessed that even he would not get up to anything nefarious while our means of escape was still riding at anchor. When we received news that we were to set sail, I’d have to check his pockets very carefully.

Scene II: Laboratories of the Universe

After a delicious dinner of pork cutlets cooked with figs (naturally), lemon mousse and other island delicacies, we convened on the terrace for our evening of star-watching. Rachel excused herself, preferring to employ her time practicing on the harp in the music room. Her accomplished performance drifted out the open windows, adding a lovely musical accompaniment to the scene before us. Below shone the dim lights of the port, glittering like fireflies on the slopes down to the water’s edge; above blazed the bright

stars, a net scattered across the heavenly seas waiting to catch our attention.

Peter had excused himself early from the table to set up his pride-and-joy. An octagonal wooden tube set within a frame, about five feet in length, it stood like some strange wading bird on a dark corner of the terrace, neck stretched to the skies.

‘Come closer!’ he called enthusiastically as he heard us approach. He must have run his hands through his hair many times during the tricky procedure of lining his beauty up with the stars as his bristly locks were sticking out from his head like spines on a hedgehog.

‘Excuse my brother,’ whispered Mabel, ‘he gets a little mad when he’s at work. As do I,’ she added, gripping her notebook with a not entirely reassuring fervour.

‘What do you have in there?’ I asked.

‘My plan of the heavens. I’m sweeping the skies looking for new nebulae and, um, other things.’

‘What are nebulae?’

She repressed a roll of the eyes at my ignorance. ‘Star clusters. I can’t hope to keep up with the Herschels or the Astronomer Royal, of course, but we are on such a different latitude here, Peter and I have hopes of being the first to sight something new one

day.' She smiled like one guarding a secret. 'Perhaps very soon.'

'But it takes dedication,' Peter chipped in, twisting the little brass scope on top of the barrel of the telescope. 'Not for the faint-hearted.'

'We do this every night when there are no clouds.' Mabel set her notebook down on a table ready for the purpose near the telescope.

No wonder Rachel was tired of the whole business – she was abandoned every night for the superior attractions of the heavens. I could understand how she might resent her siblings' hobby. I vowed I would make sure I spent some time with her during my stay – after I had satisfied my curiosity about stargazing.

Impatient by nature, Billy cracked his knuckles. 'If you wouldn't mind, Mr Flanders, I'd like a look at this here telescope of yours.'

Much to my delight, Peter beckoned me forward. 'Ladies first. Miss Royal, do step a little closer. Now, I have used this scope,' he tapped the brass instrument on the top of the barrel, 'to line the telescope up with Mars. Look through this aperture on the side here and tell me what you see.'

It took a while for my eyes to adjust, and then I could see a reddish blob, circular in shape. 'It's red!'

Mabel touched my shoulder. 'That's why astronomers often call it the red planet. They speculate that ours would be blue if seen from space, thanks to the light reflecting from our oceans. Wouldn't that be something – to look back on our own home?'

I squinted but it was hard to make out any detail on the blob in the aperture. 'What about the moon – does that planet look the same colour as with the naked eye?'

'The moon is not classed as a planet as it revolves around the Earth, not the sun – but seen through the telescope it is silvery grey and very pitted and pocked somewhat like a sufferer from small pox.'

Pop went many of my romantic notions of the moon. 'What about this new planet of Mr Herschel?'

'Georgium Sidium? Oh, that's so far away and so hard to see none of us know very much about it. It could be huge though – much bigger than little old Earth. Calculations suggest it is far beyond Saturn so even to be seen by us with our powers of magnification, it has to be a substantial size.'

'I'm amazed.' And I was. I felt like the top of my head was lifting off as my ideas of space trebled and quadrupled.

Billy edged me away from the instrument, his gentlemanly manners only stretching so far. 'My turn.'

He bent over the aperture. ‘My Aunt Fanny, that’s an eye-opener! All that up there and I never knew.’ He stood up and scratched his chin. ‘People would pay good money to get a goggle at that.’

Mabel didn’t understand his lapse in to London slang. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘To goggle – to look or stare,’ I whispered. ‘Mr Shepherd is a man from an unusual background.’

‘I rather like it – *take a goggle*. Hmm, Peter take a goggle at the new nebulae mentioned in the Royal Society papers. Down by Andromeda’s belt.’ Billy and I exchanged smiles: the street cant sounded hilarious in her ultra-refined accent.

Peter bent to the telescope. ‘Yes, I see it. Magnificent.’

‘Did you know, Miss Royal, that Mr Herschel thinks these nebulae might be where new stars are made – laboratories of the universe he has called them.’

‘So who is the mad alchemist brewing them up?’ I asked. ‘Can you see God stirring the mix?’ I wanted another peek but Peter was hogging the aperture.

Mabel laughed and shook her head. ‘Doubtless He is behind it somewhere, but it is enough for me to see the process of creation underway. Makes you think when you realize creation didn’t all stop with the Garden of Eden but is going on even as we speak.’

‘Not exactly,’ piped up Peter. ‘If you think how long it must take for the light to travel to us here, it means that what you are seeing all happened aeons back.’

‘So it could all be over?’ I smiled at the thought of God packing up after millions of years of work and no one noticing. That would make us like an audience sitting in a theatre long after the star of the show had made his exit, all watching the candles burn down to their sockets.

‘Yes, the stars you are looking at could have winked out of existence and we wouldn’t know for some time – lots of time.’

‘Gracious. I can’t absorb all this.’ I peered up at the skies. In my lazy way, I had always thought of the heavens like a painted dome arching over the Earth in a protective embrace. These two stargazers were suggesting that I was looking out on a vast sea with tiny pinpoints of light like shoals of fish swimming in fathoms upon fathoms of nothing.

‘Do you know what Newton said about all this?’ Mabel asked me.

I shook my head, only having a passing acquaintance with Newton – apple and gravity summed up my knowledge.

‘He said he felt like a child gathering up seashells on a beach, while a great ocean of truth stretched before him.’

So Cat Royal and Sir Isaac Newton shared a thought. Fancy that.

Billy and I did not share the utter devotion of our two hosts. After an hour of star watching we were both ready to retire inside. Rachel was sitting with a book, a candle by her side, when we came in to the drawing room. She threw it aside without a second glance as she realized she was to have some company for once.

‘What shall we do?’ she asked eagerly. ‘Cards?’

‘If you wish.’ I helped her clear a little table while Billy expertly shuffled the pack she had handed him. Long fingers made the cards arch from hand to hand. ‘How long will they be out there?’

Rachel sighed. ‘All night probably. They’ve been very excited about a new star they’ve spotted low on the horizon. They’ll want to plot its progress.’ She squeezed my hand. ‘I can’t tell you how pleased I am that you are here. I hope they take a very long while to mend your ship.’

‘Have you no other friends here?’

Billy began dealing.

‘A few. There’s a French family who live in the house next-door. I hesitate to call them friends, but we sometimes get together. The girl is bearable, but her brothers, Charles and Albert, are horribly competitive – always after Peter and Mabel about their telescope.’ Rachel tapped her fingers on the table as we waited for the cards to fall. I fanned my cards in my hand and realized I’d been dealt a dud selection. I scowled at Billy, suspicion high.

He smiled with smug pleasure at his own hand. ‘I do enjoy a good game of Whist. What are we playing for? Guineas?’

‘Please!’ I spluttered. ‘I doubt Rachel’s father would approve of you turning his drawing room in to a gaming house.’

‘Oh, I don’t know – that sounds rather fun,’ chimed in Rachel, evidently not unhappy with her own hand. ‘But I don’t have enough pin money to join a game played with stakes set so high.’

‘AND you shouldn’t gamble.’ Good lord, I sounded like a Quaker, but with Billy trying to lead our hostess astray, it would appear I was all that stood between Rachel and financial ruin. Half the noble families in England had been wrecked by that particular vice and I knew better than to gamble with Billy. He had a way of twisting bargains in his favour. ‘We play for

biscuits.’ I plonked a plate of the almond ones I had so enjoyed earlier.

Rachel clapped her hands, looking her age for once rather than her usual thirteen-going-on-a-world-weary-thirty. ‘Agreed. I prefer sweet things anyway.’

It was Billy’s turn to scowl: he would never live down the damage to his reputation if news got out that he had spent the evening tamely playing cards for confectionary. He doubtless regretted passing up the chance of debauching himself in the dockside inns.

‘Your lead, Cat,’ he growled.

‘Always is.’ I smiled sweetly at him and threw down a knave of clubs.

The following morning I woke late, enjoying the luxury of a soft bed by an open window. A cool breeze ruffled the sheets and stirred my hair. I sat up, stretched and yawned. The only relic of the previous day’s adventure with the wasp was a slight tenderness on my chest from the sting, otherwise I was in full fighting form, eager to get out and face the world.

Below my room, on the terrace, I could hear the chink of cutlery on china and the scrape of chairs. Breakfast must be proceeding in the open air – how lovely. I was about to stick my head out of the window

to call a cheery good morning, when I caught the tail end of a conversation. One of the speakers was unfamiliar: it appeared Mr Flanders Senior had returned during the night and was interrogating the family.

‘Who did you say they were, Mabel?’ I spied a portly gentleman with a shiny dome of a head tucking in to a plate of eggs and bacon.

‘A young lady and gentleman from London, passengers from the *Dolphin*.’ Mabel gave the answer calmly as she poured him some tea. She was clearly not worried that she was going to spark any extreme reaction in her father. Just in case I began dressing: if I was to be out on the street in a moment, I would prefer to be in my day clothes than a night gown.

‘The *Dolphin* is not a respectable vessel,’ Mr Flanders said severely.

‘They weren’t on board by choice. Mr Shepherd travelled out on one of your ships – the *Artemis*. They got stranded on San Domingo and things are so unsettled there they had little choice when it came to arranging a passage home.’

Mr Flanders harrumphed but from the sounds of knife on plate had turned his attention to his breakfast.

Scrape of chairs again.

'Ah, good morning, Mr Shepherd. I trust you slept well.' Mabel made the introductions to her father. I paused out of sight, intrigued to catch this glimpse of Billy in society when he didn't know I was watching.

'Mr Flanders.' Billy's tone was nicely judged: respectful but not obsequious. 'Thank you for letting us stay in your very pleasant home. Your children have been first rate hosts.'

Mr Flanders was placated by the compliments. 'Not at all, sir, not at all. Do take a seat. You are rested, I hope?'

'Your accommodation is faultless.'

'Bacon?'

'Not for me this morning. I rather over-indulged on biscuits last night.'

'Yes, yes, my cook is a marvel when it comes to creating such fancies. Tell me, what line of business you are in?'

Extortion, theft and general thuggery.

'I am in the import and export business, luxury goods in the main. I deal directly with the best of the London warehouses.'

Scenting an opportunity for profit, Mr Flanders set about persuading Billy of the virtues of his shipping line. My interest no longer held by the boring turn of their conversation, I decided it was time to go down.

I reached the breakfast table just as Peter came running in from the other direction.

'Mabel, Father!' he shouted, his face pale with shock. 'Someone has stolen my telescope!'

Scene III: The Theft

'What!' Mr Flanders stood up, knocking his chair to the floor. 'How could this have happened? You know better than to leave it outside.'

'It wasn't outside. I put it away late last night after our last session.' Peter stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Mabel saw me if you don't believe me. It went into the storeroom as usual – but the door was forced and that was all they took – well, Mabel's notebooks too, but nothing else of value.'

Mabel gasped.

My eyes went to Billy but he looked only mildly interested, not shifty as if he had something to hide. 'Do you have many burglaries round here?' he asked.

Mabel was hugging her arms to herself, too shocked to say much. 'Never – not that I can remember,' she whispered.

Rachel flounced in at that moment, a froth of lemon skirts, unaware of the drama at the table. 'Morning, Papa.' She stretched up to kiss his cheek. 'What's

wrong? Have you met Miss Royal and Mr Shepherd yet?’

Mr Flanders shook himself like a dog emerging from a river. ‘Apologies, my dear. I quite forgot my manners. Miss Royal.’ He bowed to me and I curtsied. ‘Please forgive our distraction – that telescope means a lot to us.’ I could tell he wished Billy and I to the devil this morning, uncomfortable having strangers in the house while dealing with this crisis.

‘I know it does,’ I said, taking a seat beside Mabel and patting her wrist. ‘Please, do whatever you think necessary and take no notice of us.’

‘Telescope? Something happened to that mouldy old thing?’ Rachel asked blithely, twirling a ribbon hanging from her waistband.

‘Rachel, do you know anything about it?’ Her brother rounded on her, his suspicion obvious in his tone. ‘Did you take it as a joke?’

‘It’s gone?’ She looked up at him, hurt in her eyes. ‘And you suspect me? I don’t find anything remotely funny about that obsession of yours, and I certainly wouldn’t take it. You might as well suspect Miss Royal here, or Mr Shepherd.’

‘But you never liked it.’ Peter folded his arms stubbornly.

‘Peter,’ Mabel warned quietly, ‘it wouldn’t be Rachel. She knows how much it means to us.’

‘And it wasn’t me,’ I added, trying to deflect attention before the three siblings came to blows. ‘I could find no more use for it than as a hat stand.’

‘If you would accuse me, you are welcome to search my room, sir,’ Billy added stiffly, playing the outraged gentleman with great conviction. Funny, because in almost any other situation I would have put him at the top of my list of suspects. That was unless he was playing some very deep game (always possible with him). He could have stolen it in the dead of night and stowed it away somewhere.

Billy caught me staring at him as I tried to fathom his guilt or innocence. He raised a mocking eyebrow, aware of exactly what I was thinking.

‘We must gather the servants – find out if any of them saw anything,’ Mr Flanders stated, ringing a bell on the table.

‘My notebooks,’ Mabel whispered in shock. ‘All my work – and our new findings. Oh, Peter, what are we going to do?’

He came round the table and hugged his sister. ‘Get them back, of course. I won’t accept any other outcome.’

The morning passed in a subdued mood. No one liked the feeling that we were all under suspicion. Mr Flanders conducted a search of the house from attic to cellar, impartially looking through every room, even his own. Nothing. The telescope and notes were not under his roof.

Billy offered his services to detect how the thieves had got in. I accompanied him to the storeroom while the search of the rest of the house continued, intrigued to see what he thought he could discover. He did nothing for a while, just stood looking at the scene of the crime. The storeroom door had been forced with a crowbar; the woodwork splintered round the keyhole. He then crouched down and examined the area where the telescope had stood, studying the marks on the floor.

‘Anything?’ I asked, a tad impatiently. I hated the feeling that he knew more than I did about this.

‘Not your professional cracksmen, Cat,’ he announced, straightening up.

‘How can you tell that?’

He tapped the doorframe. ‘No self-respecting thief would make such a pig’s ear of this – risk wakin’ the house – not when there’s a lock that could be picked with no trouble at all.’ He sniffed at the inadequate security. ‘Child’s play – couple of picks and hey pres-

to, you’d be in. Smashin’ the door like this is a mark of a rank amateur.’

I could see his point and was surprised none of us had heard anything. I said as much.

‘No one sleeps this end of the house but Mr Flanders,’ Billy said. ‘I checked already. And ‘e was late home so that puts the theft between midnight and two in the morning – that or ‘e sleeps like the dead and didn’t wake up when the thieves were chopping at his defences.’

‘Have you learnt anything else?’

‘Hard to say. Marks on the floor suggest it was dragged out on to the terrace, but they might be from when Peter set it up earlier.’ He cracked his knuckles then rubbed his palms together. ‘Let’s see if we can find a trail in the garden.’

I could tell he was enjoying himself, pitting his wits against our thieves. This more than anything persuaded me that he was innocent of the crime.

‘You’ve lost your vocation in life, Billy,’ I said as I trailed after him in to the leafy walks of the garden below the terrace. Bright blooms decked the dark foliage with such gusto, reminding me of the time when the milliner had gone particularly wild on the Duchess of Avon’s Easter bonnet. I plucked a petal and crushed it between my fingers. The air was al-

ready humid, the ground steaming, scents heavy in the air. ‘You should’ve turned thief-catcher for Bow Street, not be their most wanted.’

He snorted and batted a branch out his way. ‘Wouldn’t see me working for a bunch of Charlies like them. I know enough to keep my own boys in line – I ‘ave to know all the tricks or they won’t respect me.’

I thought it doubtful anyone respected him – feared, yes, but respect? Still, the theory was sound: knowledge kept you one step ahead of those who would harm you.

‘Can you teach me?’ I asked seriously.

He spluttered. ‘Gawd, Cat, don’t make me laugh!’

‘I’m serious.’

‘Thinkin’ of turnin’ into a Moll? I thought you’d already turned down my offer to join my gang.’

I swatted him with a broad leaf snatched off a nearby bush. ‘Don’t be daft. I know enough to use a long spoon to sup with the devil.’

He grinned, understanding all too well which role I had cast him in.

‘I just think it’s best to know – be wise to the tricks of others.’

‘Too right. But it would come with a price if I tell you anythink.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘There goes my lovely idea. I’ve already struck a bargain with you once, Billy, and look where that got us – me escaping a French prison by the skin of my teeth and you in a right pickle when I outwitted you.’

He scowled, not liking to remember our stormy meeting in his house after my return from Paris. ‘Right pickle’ was perhaps not stating the case strongly enough: he’d come close to killing me and realized a few things about himself he didn’t like – for one, that he was soft when it came to hurting me. And above all else, Billy despised softness. It was also probably why he liked me as he knew I had claws.

‘I’ll think about it then.’ He held out a hand to stop me going any further. ‘Won’t ask for more than you want to give.’

As we say in the theatre, pull the other one, it’s got bells on.

Billy knelt down in the mud to look more closely at the ground. ‘This is where they went over.’ He looked up at the fence. ‘I guess they took the telescope apart and hefted it up then dropped it on the other side – that’s how we can be sure there was more than one. See!’ He pointed to the flattened earth the other side of the boundary. ‘One of them stood there.’ He squinted. ‘Boots. Size eight or nine. Like mine.’ He

winked as he showed me his own salt-stained pair from Bond Street.

‘So men rather than women? We can count out most of the domestic staff.’

‘Oh, I don’t know: there’re a couple of hefty lasses in London I know very well whose feet are as big as mine.’

I blushed. ‘You can spare me the details, Billy. I want no further information about your crew of thieves.’

He looked mock-hurt. ‘I thought you wanted to know the secrets, Cat?’

I folded my arms. ‘I’ve thought better of it.’

He flashed me a grin then turned back to our business. ‘No, you’re right, Moggy, last night’s thieves were lads not ladies. I wonder where this goes? Not the straight route back down to the port. If I had a valuable bit of kit to flog I’d be heading down to the dock to shift it as soon as maybe.’

‘Perhaps they aren’t as experienced as you at fencing stolen goods?’

He tapped my nose with his grubby finger. ‘Excellent point, Cat. You’ll make the gang yet, you will.’

I rubbed off the smudge he must have left behind. ‘No chance. You wait till I put in my application with the Runners – then you should worry.’

He laughed at that. ‘They haven’t got the sense to employ you – what with you bein’ a girl and all that. But if they did, you’d halve the crime in Covent Garden in a month – I ‘ave every faith in your abilities. ‘Ave me out of business before I could say Robinson Crusoe.’

I was rather pleased with the compliment – even if it did come from Billy. ‘Why thank you, Mr Shepherd.’

He leaned closer, changing the banter for something else – something I definitely didn’t want between us. ‘You’re welcome, Miss Royal.’

I ducked, avoiding the kiss he’d been planning to plant. I wanted no repeat of the incident at the Bath Assembly Rooms. ‘Let’s get back and tell the family what we’ve discovered.’

Billy groaned. ‘Why don’t you just give in to what we both want?’

I started walking. ‘I suspect what I want and what you want are as far apart as London and Botany Bay, Billy. Miss Abingdon, remember?’

He swore at the reminder of his affianced status to a brewery heiress.

‘Exactly,’ I said primly, anxious to get back among other people, feeling as if I had just had a very narrow escape.

Act II

Scene I: The Rivals

News of the break-in at the Flanders house attracted the neighbours like the wasps to the fig tree. By midday the drawing room was overflowing with concerned well-wishers come to offer their support and, I suspect, gloat that it had not been them. The two maids were run off their feet keeping up with the demand for refreshments that all the family had to pitch in to help.

‘Who are all these people?’ I whispered to Mabel as we refilled the teapot in the scullery.

‘The wives and families of our father’s business acquaintances in the main. They all live up here – it is the best part of town. We all tend to live in each other’s pockets – it’s an island phenomenon.’

Billy strode by on his way out, his heels clicking on the flagstones.

‘Making your escape?’ I called after him.

He turned and doffed his hat to Mabel. ‘I do not have a talent for small talk – I’ll leave that to the ladies. I thought I would go see what I can find out down in the docks, put feelers out if anyone wants to

flog...I mean *sell* a telescope to a gentleman about to depart the island.’

‘Oh, good idea!’ Mabel gazed at him hopefully, her hands clasped to her chest. ‘And please, do ask after my notebooks too – they are more important to me than even the Herschel. That can be replaced eventually but my work can’t.’

Billy gave her a condescending smile that would have had me jabbing him in the ribs. ‘Of course, Miss Flanders, I will try my best.’ He nodded and continued on his way out, taking the back route to avoid the company in the drawing room who had spilled out on to the terrace.

‘Work?’ I asked, measuring out the tea from Mabel’s silver caddy.

She carefully poured in the hot water. ‘I’m not sure if I should let you in on the secret...Peter might not approve.’

I said nothing, hoping she would feel the urge to confide. Fortunately for my curiosity, she did.

‘We think we’ve spotted a new comet.’ She put the kettle back on the stove and looked up at me, expecting some reaction.

‘Oh, good.’ Was that right?

Apparently, not enough. She frowned. ‘When I say “new” I mean really new – one no one has ever seen

before. If we can get our information to the Astronomer Royal before anyone else plots it, we will get our name in the proceedings of the Royal Society at the very least.'

'I see.'

She sighed. 'No you don't. Think of it this way – you're from the world of the theatre, aren't you?'

I nodded.

'This to us is like our debut in a starring role before a royal audience, our launch as serious natural philosophers – now do you understand?'

I had a day-dream glimpse of myself standing centre stage at Drury Lane, flowers raining upon me as I curtsied for my standing ovation. Astronomers had strange ideas of public success, but I could sympathise with the desire to gain recognition. 'Oh yes, now I really see.'

Mabel picked up the tray. 'Problem is, all our evidence was in my notebooks. We have to be able to quote the times we saw it and where our comet was to prove our case and allow other astronomers to find it in their skies.'

I held the door open for her. 'Who else would want such information? I can see why they may want a valuable telescope but your notebooks?'

'I would guess someone who didn't like my brother or me very much.' Mabel fixed her social smile on her face again. 'Come, we can't abandon my father and Rachel alone with our guests.'

Having been introduced briefly to the neighbours I sat back in a corner the better to study the local society. It was entirely possible to my suspicious mind that one of them was behind the theft – if the motivation was personal as Mabel had suggested. I watched the ladies and gentlemen closely. Mr Flanders had retired to his study with some of the husbands, lamenting the breach in security over a comforting brandy. Peter stood in one corner with two young men of his own age. They seemed uncomfortable in each other's company but preferring it to the sea of muslin that dominated the centre of the room. Rachel had taken the leading role, stationed on the sofa surrounded by cooing Mamas, even though she was the least affected by the theft. I wondered if this was because she was too self-absorbed to think of her brother and sister or if she thought she was doing them a favour by drawing the emotional fire upon herself. One lady in an elegant green gown and rejoicing in a towering hairstyle was particularly solicitous, pulling Rachel to

her bosom and patting her on the back like a much younger child.

‘Who is that lady with Rachel?’ I asked when Mabel approached my corner with a plate of biscuits.

Mabel wrinkled her nose. ‘Madame Aubert, our nearest neighbour. Those are her sons standing with Peter and her daughter, Anna-Maria, is sitting with Senora Cavallo.’

I spotted a quiet girl with dark hair and eyes watching the goings on in the room intently. Our gazes met but she was the first to look away. ‘I think Rachel told me of them. Charles and Albert, the brothers?’

Mabel nodded. ‘Yes. And I imagine they are crowing with delight that we have met with this disaster. They have only a three-foot Newtonian.’

My mind was trying to fit the puzzle-pieces together. ‘Did you by any chance tell them what you thought you’d found?’

Mabel looked uncomfortable. ‘We may have hinted – they can be so annoyingly superior, always telling us how much better French natural philosophy is than English.’

My motives were adding up: jealousy, rivalry, pure spite. ‘Do you think they have it in them to make a strike like this against you?’

Mabel bit her fingernail nervously as she stared across the room at the two lean French boys. ‘Well, they can be scapegraces, getting into scrapes and getting others into trouble. The only beating I remember Father dealing out to Peter was a few years back when they took a boat round the bay in bad weather, all without permission.’

I let her follow my suspicious mind to the same conclusions.

‘You think it could be them?’

I shrugged. ‘I am new to this place but they are the most likely culprits from what I’ve heard so far. It is such a specific theft – I doubt common thieves are involved.’

Mabel sighed. ‘You’re right. But what do we do about it?’

‘Go look after your guests and leave it to me. I’ll see if I can come up with a plan.’

My plan came thanks to the wretched wasps. As I wandered the gardens in the cool of the evening I watched them (from a safe distance) drawn to the trap Mabel had placed on the side table. The sweet scent pulled them in and then they drowned in the water at the bottom of the jar. They had to have seen the fate of their fellow insects, floating on the surface,

even hear the fading buzzes as each died, but still they came. Why? Because the smell of honey drove out all thought of self-preservation. Their little wasp brains could only hold one thought at a time and in this case it was ‘food’.

If my suspicion about the French boys was correct, our thieves were drawn by the stars and the knowledge Mabel and Peter had painstakingly assembled. I guessed that they had heard rumours and caught hints that something big was happening on the terrace with each nightly survey but their own telescope was too poor to see the comet for themselves. Like the fable of the dog in the manger, they had decided if they couldn’t claim the pleasure of the sighting for themselves, they would prevent their neighbours from doing so. As we could hardly demand a search of the Aubert family’s house, we had to draw them into the open. Our honey was to the prize of being the first to announce the sighting of the new comet to the scientific community.

I explained my idea to Mabel that night. We had to be secret as neither of us thought Mr Flanders would welcome us casting aspersions on the family of his business associates without better proof than our shared instinct that they were likely to be guilty.

Mabel took out a sheet of creamy paper. ‘Yes, I can do that. Peter will help. I can draft a letter for you to carry back to England with what appears to be the proof – indeed I can remember some of the recordings I noted down – approximate time and elevation above the horizon and so on.’

‘Then we have to make a great fuss about me re-joining my ship tomorrow evening for immediate sailing – giving them no chance to send their own letter off. That should annoy them and force them to take action.’

Mabel raised the pen nib. ‘You mean against you. Are you not putting yourself in danger, Cat?’

I smiled, thinking just how feeble the two French boys appeared compared to previous foes. ‘Do not worry about that. Mr Shepherd and I are more than a match for them.’

She nodded and carried on writing. ‘Where is he, by the way? He missed supper.’

I bit my lip. Last time I saw Billy, he was heading down to the docks. He couldn’t have managed to fool me after all and stolen the telescope? What better cover than to claim to be making inquiries for the very item he had nabbed.

No, stop. I had to trust my instincts on this. Billy had it in him to steal, but this particular theft offered

too little profit and risked losing us our comfortable berth with the Flanders.

‘I expect he met with friends and is even now enjoying the dubious entertainments of your town,’ I suggested.

Mabel shook her head. ‘There’s something about him I can’t quite place. You and he know each other well – you act like a quarrelsome brother and sister if truth be told – but there’s a level to him that I don’t see in you.’

That would be the lying, thieving, mercenary level.

‘Yes, he is an interesting character. I do not travel with him by choice.’

She blotted her letter and folded it. ‘Oh? You seem to rub along well enough.’ Before I could protest that, she changed the subject. ‘I’ll show this to Peter and make sure the details are convincing enough.’ She turned her gaze to the window where the stars were already emerging. ‘I just pray that I will be able to compose a real letter. It is galling to know the comet is out there for anyone to see and we may never get the credit we deserve.’

I patted her shoulder. ‘You mustn’t fret. This is a good plan. If we do catch our thieves, we will put that to rights too. I’ll take a letter for you if no faster ship comes in to port before I leave and make sure

you make the headlines in the newspapers. You’ll be lionized when you do come to London for Rachel’s debut.’

Mabel grinned. ‘I have to do one of those myself first. I’ve been putting it off as long as possible but Papa is sending me next year.’

‘And you will be the leading bluestocking then – and I mean that in the kindest way. Gentlemen of learning and intelligence will flock to meet the young lady astronomer, a pleasant diversion from the vapid girls who crowd the ballrooms with more hair than wit. Miss Herschel herself has been much admired and she’s so old – at least forty. When you make your curtsy, you’ll set philosophic hearts pitter-pattering.’

Mabel chuckled at my teasing. ‘I’d be happy enough to meet Miss Herschel, forget the gentlemen you talk of.’

‘Perhaps it can be arranged. Come, let’s take this to your brother. We need him to break the news to Charles and Albert that they are going to be pipped at the post.’

‘Pipped?’

‘Beaten to the punch.’

She threaded her arm through mine so we could walk together. ‘Cat, you have a most extraordinary turn of phrase for a young lady.’

‘You should see my friends if you think I’m strange.’
She squeezed my elbow. ‘I’d like that. Are they like Mr Shepherd?’

‘No, they’re much, much nicer.’

Scene II: Setting the trap

I took a late breakfast and found that Billy still had not returned. Against all my usual modes of thought, I began to worry – and, Reader, let me assure you that it is mighty strange to worry about what had happened to Billy rather than worry what he was planning for others.

The only person at the table was Mr Flanders who was leafing through some letters while helping himself to a substantial meal. I decided to appeal to him for advice as to what I should do, but he seemed unruffled that one of his guests had gone missing.

‘You are a gently bred lady, Miss Royal,’ he began, buttering his toast.

If only he knew.

‘Your friend has different interests to a young girl. You should leave him be while he is on shore leave.’

Meaning Billy was probably on a grand tour of all the lowest dives Angra had to offer.

‘I thought he would send word if he stayed away,’ I explained.

Mr Flanders gave me a ‘poor girl’ smile. I tried not to hiss. ‘I will make enquiries if he does not return tonight. How is that?’

It would have to do. ‘Thank you.’

‘A man of many talents, your Mr Shepherd,’ Mr Flanders continued.

‘Not *my* Mr Shepherd,’ I chanted under my breath. This was becoming an alarmingly common accusation.

‘He has some fascinating ideas about how we can do business together.’

Oh no. ‘Ah, I see.’ I sipped my tea.

‘Indeed, I must see about drawing up a contract with him before you depart.’ Mr Flanders was now talking more to himself than to me. ‘I’ll call on my lawyer this morning. When do you expect to sail?’

I glanced at the maid clearing the plates from the table. This was all part of my subterfuge. Mabel and I wanted everyone in the house to believe I was about to depart so that gossip would reach the Auberts through multiple sources. ‘I thought I might go enquire today, but very soon I would guess. The captain took on a consignment of perishable cargo in his hold – pineapples I believe.’

The maid was listening, I could tell from the sparkle of interest in her eyes.

‘I’m taking an important letter for Mabel with me – for her astronomer friends in London.’

Mr Flanders dabbed his mouth with a linen napkin. ‘Such a shame about their telescope. I must see about arranging for a replacement – won’t be as good of course, but it will be better than the naked eye. I can’t deprive my children of their chief amusement.’

It was far more than an amusement to them – I wondered if he realized how serious they were about it. But then, from my observation of families, parents often missed the obvious when they looked at their own offspring. Take Johnny and his father: the earl hadn’t realized his son was a radical cartoonist until almost too late.²

Peter and Mabel came in together, Rachel trailing behind.

‘We are going to pay a call on the Auberts, Miss Royal. Do you care to come and bid them farewell?’ Peter asked.

2. Please follow that adventure in [The Diamond of Drury Lane](#).

‘Yes, that would be perfect.’ I stood, pushing my chair back before Mr Flanders could assist me. ‘Let me fetch my bonnet.’

Walking the short distance to the Auberts’ house I realized that they lived in the opposite direction to the one the thieves had taken through the garden. This niggled. Had I got it wrong? Sharing a taste for astronomy and being male did not make you a thief.

Rachel skipped up and slipped her hand into mine. ‘Are you really going so soon? I thought you were with us for a week at least?’

Clearly Mabel and Peter, so used to their little cabal of two, had not thought to inform their younger sister what was afoot. I thought that very unwise: she could ruin our plan before we even started.

‘Rachel, can you keep a secret?’

She nodded, her honey-blond curls bobbing enthusiastically. ‘Yes, of course. How exciting!’

I quickly sketched out our suspicions and our scheme to lure the Aubert boys into a trap of our devising. She was quick to catch on, not surprised that I was accusing her neighbours of a horrid crime.

‘How can I help?’ she asked.

I decided there and then that there was more to Rachel than her brother and sister realized. ‘By pre-

tending that I am on the point of leaving. They must be forced to show their hand.'

The Aubert household was a little grander than the Flanders establishment, more servants in attendance, several gardeners clipping the hedges, a preponderance of gilt furniture in the foyer. I imagined it the kind of place that would appeal to Billy's showy tastes. The gardens were more controlled than their neighbours, showing the inhabitants' pretensions to ape the formal gardens of the Tuilleries rather than Mother Nature. The white stone mansion looked down on the same stunning view of the harbour. I could just spy my ship still riding at anchor, from this height a water beetle come to momentary rest on the surface of a blue lake.

Madame Aubert received us graciously in her morning room. She had an embroidery frame at her side, a needle trailing scarlet thread as she worked a fleur-de-lis into the fabric. Anna-Maria sat on a low stool by the window, a book open on her knee.

'My dears,' she said in French, 'and Miss Royal. How kind of you to call. I'll ring for something cool to drink.' She fanned herself. 'By all the saints, it is hot today!'

I looked around the room, hoping to spot the brothers lurking, but no luck.

We took the offered seats. Rachel immediately placed herself beside Anna-Maria; Mabel glanced over once then left the younger girls to their hushed conversation.

Peter waited for the lemonade to be served, then broached the main reason for our presence.

'Are Charles and Albert here, Madame?'

'Oh no.' Madame Aubert smiled serenely. 'They are down at the port with their father – an interesting consignment of books came in from Paris last evening. Several scientific works which might amuse you, Peter – do ask them to share.'

'What a shame: it looks as though I will miss them,' I declared brightly. 'I expect to sail any moment now so I came to bid you farewell.'

Madame Aubert gravely bowed her head. 'A brief acquaintance, Miss Royal, and one sadly marred by the theft. I hope you do not leave with a bad impression of our little island society?'

'Oh no, you've all been most kind to a stranger.'

After another twenty minutes of small talk (how do fine ladies do this every day?), we heard a noise in the foyer – laughter and male voices. Madame Aubert rose.

'Ah, we are fortunate: they are back earlier than I expected. I will call them in.'

The two chief suspects sauntered into the room. The taller, Charles, reminded me somewhat of his English namesake, Charles I: a head of long dark curls tied back, and large puppy-ish brown eyes. It was hard to imagine him doing anything wicked until you saw him smile – his lips were ripe with mischief. Albert had limp black hair cut short and a rather unfortunate complexion that looked like the surface of an uncooked currant loaf. I hoped for his sake he would grow out of it. If I had to guess, I would say he was the brains behind the two brothers' escapades, making up for lack of looks with excess of cunning.

'My darlings, you are just in time to say goodbye to our Miss Royal. She returns to England immediately.'

Charles flourished a bow, deeper than necessary in a drawing room of a merchant's wife. 'Our lives will be all the poorer as we will lose her.'

Definitely guilty. Someone capable of such empty observations must be culpable – of breaching good taste at the very least.

'Thank you, sir. But I am pleased to take a little memento with me as well as doing a service to my kind hosts.' I smiled at Mabel and Peter. 'Fortunately, our astronomers here were able to record their exciting findings before their telescope was so cruelly taken from them. I rush to Greenwich to announce

the news of their comet with the Astronomer Royal himself.'

'A new comet?' exclaimed Rachel. 'Is that what you've been working on all those nights?' She turned to Anna-Maria. 'I told you they were up to something.'

Anna-Maria's expression became very sour at the revelation, prompting me wonder if she was part of her brothers' conspiracy to spoil the English astronomers' plans. Thus far, I had rather overlooked her as she was so mouse-like.

'Yes, it is quite an honour for the island,' I continued to gush, hoping I was annoying them all to the point where they would retaliate. 'The first time such young persons have sighted a comet I understand. They will be the toast of European drawing rooms.'

'Congratulations,' growled Albert, sounding as if he meant quite the opposite.

'You must show us tonight,' smiled Charles blithely. 'Oh, I forgot, you can't – you have no telescope.'

'But it is there, nonetheless, we have proof,' Mabel said with fighting spirit, daring him to cast doubt on her word.

'How lovely.' Madame Aubert picked up her embroidery again. She for one took the news with complete calm – I would wager the box office takings at

Drury Lane that she was ignorant of any plot by her children. ‘We wish you plain sailing, Miss Royal.’

I rose, signalling the end of the visit. Our message was passed; now we had to wait the result. ‘Thank you. I pray you excuse me: I am heading down to the port this evening to go aboard and I must pack.’

The rest of the company got to their feet. Charles showed us to the door, promising Peter to call by later with the new books he had retrieved from the latest consignment.

‘Impressions?’ I asked as we drew far enough away to talk without being overheard.

Peter rubbed his chin. ‘I’m not sure, Miss Royal. Charles and Albert were interested to hear that you were departing – and annoyed by the announcement – but I still hard to imagine them arranging such a spiteful theft. They are my friends.’

I noticed he did not say *good* friends.

Rachel tugged my arm. ‘Anna-Maria was furious. She hates anyone stealing the thunder from her brothers – she thinks of them as gods.’

Peter raised his eyes to heaven in mock appeal. ‘Oh why, oh why, did I not get a younger sister like that?’

Rachel batted him in the stomach – he let out an obliging ‘oof!’. ‘Because you don’t deserve it.’

Mabel frowned. ‘Charles must know something – he was gloating about the telescope, wasn’t he?’

I agreed, but felt there was something I was missing – other than Billy, of course: his absence still rankled. ‘All we can do now is wait until this evening. Please make sure you have witnesses from the household posted to keep an eye on my luggage. I will make sure everyone knows where I stow your letter when we say our farewells. I want to make this easy for them.’

Our little pantomime began as twilight gathered over the island, staining the sky with a fantastical display of salmon red clouds and molten fire on the horizon. The actress in me rejoiced in the suitably dramatic set the Good Lord had painted for me. I kissed the girls and curtsied to Peter, then took the letter from Mabel and made sure everyone see me place it at the top of my little valise.

‘That should do it,’ I whispered to Mabel. ‘All your servants and a good many others on the lane saw where it went. If the gossip chain works as effectively as you think, this will be no secret by the time I arrive at the bottom of the steps.’

As part of our act, the Flanders siblings appeared to stay at home, consigning me to the escort of a stout male servant and maid for the hot walk down. They

had offered me the service of a local burro – the preferred means of transport for ladies – but I decided that the presence of a donkey would only complicate the scenario so refused. I regretted that halfway down as the perspiration began to gather on my brow.

Come on, Cat Royal, I berated myself, you survived malaria – a little walk will not kill you. And you're not even carrying your own luggage.

We arrived at the dockside – a busy scene compared to the cool peace of the wealthy heights. Barrels and coils of rope lay on every spare patch of land. Seagulls pecked at fish scraps, screeching their raucous calls like the audience at a bawdy play. Sailors walked or staggered by, depending on their level of inebriation, one bellowing out a sea shanty with the most shocking words I'd ever heard. This was not a place for a decent girl to linger for long but I rather liked it. I'd certainly pick this over another morning call in a rich merchant's drawing room.

'Please put my box there,' I ordered the manservant, 'and then go and enquire for a boat to take me out to my ship.'

'Are you sure, Miss?' the man asked, thinking that he had better stay to protect the two damsels in his care.

A dose of sensible was exactly not what the doctor ordered at the moment. 'Yes, I am quite sure. I will stand by the customs office here. No harm can come to us.'

The maid and the manservant exchanged an exasperated look, doubtless thinking the visitor was hopelessly naive. This pleased me as that was exactly the impression I wanted to create – I had to be an easy mark for anyone wanting to steal the letter.

'I won't be long then, Miss. Don't move from this spot.' He touched his cap and hurried off.

How long would it take our French thieves to make their move, I wondered. To help them take the bait, I engaged the maid in an animated conversation about the latest London fashions, turning my back on my box. I had to hope no other alert criminal made a move to nab it before the ones we wanted to catch summoned up their nerve.

When they made their play, it was executed with more panache than I had expected. It began with a man jostling me to the ground in a pretended drunken lurch. The maid screeched, hissing Portuguese curses at the man that she thought I did not understand. Our disreputable drunk apologized extravagantly, helping me to my feet and kissing my hand in mock contrition. With most people this might have

been taken at face value, but I recognized it as one of the oldest tricks in the book. I was therefore not surprised when a whistle blew behind us. The drunkard stumbled round, took stock of the scene and loped off as fast as he could. Peter was restraining a man in the very act of rifling through my possessions; Rachel was the owner of the very shrill whistle, bringing attention to us. Mabel had rushed in to the customs house to summon an official. In a very short time, the man was under arrest, a messenger sent for Mr Flanders, and we were all escorted within the building to clear up the business.

But what I neglected to tell you, dear Reader, was that I did not recognize the thief at all. Perhaps it had been unwise of me to expect Charles and Albert to have done their own dirty work, but we were left with another layer of mystery to solve with this stranger on our hands. Obviously a local from his Portuguese expressions of innocence and sunburnt complexion, I guessed we had caught ourselves a hired hand, not the mastermind of this plot against the Flanders.

Mr Flanders came rushing in with the Angra equivalent of the magistrate, a grey-haired, puffed-up representative of the law.

‘Are you all unharmed?’ Mr Flanders asked, patting Rachel down as if she had just survived a carriage accident.

‘No harm done, Papa,’ she assured him, her eyes sparkling with enjoyment at this excitement in their usually humdrum life.

‘Then WHAT WERE YOU DOING DOWN HERE AT THIS TIME OF NIGHT!’ he bellowed.

Parents – don’t you just love them? Get furious when their children had been quite splendid. I wished I had a father to bellow at me for taking a risk. I had to make do with a set of over-protective friends.

‘Father, we think we’ve caught one of our thieves,’ Peter said calmly. He then explained the bait without naming the ones we suspected. ‘All we need do now is find out whom this man is working for.’

We all turned to the man sitting on a bench surrounded by burly customs officers. He folded his arms and shook his head.

‘Didn’t do nothing,’ he muttered in Portuguese (Mabel offered this translation unprompted but I’d got the gist from his demeanour).

‘Is this about your missing telescope?’ asked the magistrate.

Mr Flanders nodded. 'As far as I can gather. It appears my own children have been hatching plots without telling me.'

'Oh, but I have the culprit in gaol as we speak. I picked him up last night. I am waiting for him to sign his confession. I thought I'd sent you word?'

Mr Flanders shook his head. 'I heard nothing of the sort. Who is it?'

This couldn't be right: both Charles and Albert were at large. We'd all seen them that very morning.

'A very suspicious character, claiming to be a gentleman, but he was asking odd questions around the port, looking for someone interested in the purchase of a valuable telescope.'

Oh, it couldn't be! This would be too priceless for words.

'His name isn't Mr William Shepherd by any chance?' I asked innocently.

The magistrate turned on me. 'You know him?'

'Yes, we all do.' I grinned. 'I imagine he is none too happy to be sitting in your clink, is he?'

The magistrate began to look worried that he had misjudged his man. I couldn't reassure him that he was in general right, though on this one occasion in the wrong. 'You can vouch for him?'

'I can. He was asking questions because he was helping Mr Flanders find the telescope. He thought that the thieves would try and sell it down in the port to get it off the island as quickly as possible.'

The magistrate tugged at his cravat. 'Is this the truth?' he asked Mr Flanders, hoping I was making this up.

Mr Flanders frowned. 'Yes, all true. Good Lord, Senor Carlo, I hope you haven't wrecked my new business relationship with Mr Shepherd.'

'Don't worry about that. I doubt he'd let a little thing like a night in gaol put him off profit,' I said happily.

'We'd better go and release him at once.' The magistrate made to leave.

I cleared my throat. 'Had we better not deal with the thief at hand rather than the innocent one in the bush, so to speak. We need to know who is behind all this if we are to get the telescope back.'

The man showed no more signs than before of confession. That was until Rachel approached him and tugged off his cap. She twirled it on a finger.

'I recognize this man. He's a groom at the Aubert house.'

So it was the French boys then!

'I also happen to know that he is a particular servant of Anna-Maria, responsible for teaching her to ride. She speaks of him often: he's called Leo. Is that not right?'

The man scowled but he did not contradict her.

Anna-Maria? Was that possible? Now I thought about it, was it not more likely that the jealous little sister would move in defence of her brothers – she had motive and the theft would surely be beneath young men with pretensions to be gentlemen. I now had a good reason to be pleased that we had not scattered accusations around without evidence.

Mr Flanders looked to the magistrate. 'I think this had best be cleared up in the privacy of the Aubert home.' He meant that he didn't want public disgrace to be brought on the children of a neighbour if it could be avoided. 'Let me take this man back to my house and I will call on Monsieur Aubert myself.'

The magistrate took a moment to come to the same conclusion. 'Let me know if you are going to press charges. I am ready to assist in any way I can. Now about my prisoner –'

I stepped forward. 'Please, sir, let me come with you and...' *Crow?* No, I couldn't say that. 'And offer him consolation for his trouble.'

Oh, the scene, the scene! Picture this, Reader, Billy sat on a miserable bench in a miserable cell, looking fit to spit nails for the injustice done him. And to think he had done this to others before: that made it just perfect for me.

I had persuaded the magistrate to let me go in alone to unlock the door. I stood outside the cell, waiting for him to realize I was there. He appeared to be lost in the contemplation of the mouldy straw at his feet.

'My, my, do I see a knight in distress. Never fear, the damsel is here to rescue him.' I jingled the keys.

Billy leapt to his feet. 'That damned idiot locked me up!'

I leaned against the wall. 'I know.'

'Stop grinning.'

'I'm not.'

Billy thumped the bars. 'You are.'

I shrugged. 'Maybe just a bit.'

'Let me out.'

'In a minute.'

'What are you waiting for?'

‘Just enjoying the moment.’

He growled in his throat then realized he had to have me on his side – I had the key. ‘Let me out, Moggy.’

‘Say “please”.’

He reached out a hand. ‘Please.’

All right: I’d had my fun. He had been trying to help. I put the key in the lock and gave it a turn. He pushed the door open with a bang and grabbed me. Oops. I’d forgotten while teasing that he would soon be free.

‘I’m so angry, I could kiss you,’ he growled.

‘Don’t,’ I gulped.

‘Say “please”.’

‘Please don’t.’

He finally saw the humour in the situation and let me go. ‘We make a fine pair, don’t we, Cat?’

‘Mabel thinks we’re like a quarrelsome brother and sister.’

He knocked the straw from his hat. ‘She does?’

‘She also thinks you’re a suspicious sort. In that way, she has more sense than her father.’

‘God save me from clever chits,’ Billy grumbled.

To ensure we arrived back at the Flanders house in style, the magistrate insisted we accept transport on

two donkeys escorted by his best men. Mine was a stubborn beast that kept nipping the tail of Billy’s, but it was a good deal easier than walking.

On our return, we discovered quite a scene in the drawing room. A tight-lipped man – Monsieur Aubert I gathered – had Anna Maria by the scruff of the neck, forcing a weeping apology from her as she handed over the missing notebooks.

‘I found these in her sewing basket,’ her father said in disgust.

Charles and Albert came in carrying the dismantled telescope between them. ‘And we found this in a gardener’s shed.’ Charles put his part down and approached his friend. ‘We’re very sorry, Peter, we did not realize how our little sister had taken our rivalry to heart. We are both ashamed of her.’

Anna-Maria began to weep even more noisily. I was torn between feeling a bit sorry for her and annoyance. If she had had the intelligence to think up such a plot, she could at least show more sense in accepting the blame. Where was the girl’s pride?

After several more apologies, tinged with relief that the Flanders showed no inclination to involve the authorities, the French family departed, Anna-Maria marched off in their midst like a prisoner. I would imagine she might be studying the inside of

her bedroom walls for quite a few days and a couple of servants reassigned to other duties away from her.

‘And now, Mr Shepherd, what can we do for you?’ asked Mr Flanders. ‘You too have suffered on our behalf.’

‘Draw him a bath and then you’re quits,’ I whispered to Rachel and Mabel.

It was an unfortunate truth that the Angra gaol was not the most sweet-smelling of holiday destinations.

Epilogue: Cat’s Comet

The *Dolphin* was finally ready for sailing and we had reached our last evening in our very comfortable lodgings at the Flanders. The letter had become a real piece of scientific reporting thanks to the returned notebooks, and I had promised to make sure it was delivered by the fastest mail coach as soon as I landed in Liverpool.

To mark our departure, the Flanders held a little gathering on their terrace, a celebratory supper. I hadn’t realized they had a surprise in store. Not the presence of Charles and Albert – they had been frequent visitors since the debacle over the stolen telescope, their rivalry muting into more healthy competition. I thought the male company was good for Peter; he had been less bookish since they had lured him out of his astronomy workshop. They had disappeared for whole nights, going for hikes with their inferior but much more portable telescope to stargaze at other points on the island. Mabel and Rachel had spent more time with each other as a result; I think Mabel had finally realized that her younger sister had more than fluff between her ears after her quick thinking at the Customs House. From

the sisterly giggles that came from their bedroom, I guessed they were getting on much better and Mabel was even seen with a ribbon or two about her person, softening her bluestocking looks.

No, the surprise they had for me was the very thing that had caused the whole adventure in the first place: the comet.

Peter led me to the telescope. ‘Can you see it?’

I squinted through the aperture. He assured me it had come much closer in the last few nights and even an amateur should be able to tell it apart from the stars. And yes, there it was – a white smudge in the sky. Very faint.

‘How fast is it travelling?’ I asked, awed to be one of the first to see it.

Mabel bent down beside me to hold back my hair that was in danger of obscuring my view. ‘Very fast.’

‘And how fast is that?’

‘At least a mile per second.’

‘Each *second*?’

‘Faster closer to the sun, like the point of release of a slingshot.’

‘That’s fast.’

I stepped aside to let Billy, then the Aubert boys see the comet for themselves.

‘Did you read my letter?’ Mabel asked.

‘Of course not – it was sealed.’ Naturally, I had peeked under the flap but had only made out a list of numbers.

Mabel was joined by Peter on one side and Rachel on the other. ‘Then you didn’t see the name we have asked for them to give our comet.’

Billy was quicker than I to catch on. ‘What? You want it called the pain-in-the-neck comet? Or the little-redhead-should-have-been-drowned-at-birth comet?’

I elbowed him in the stomach and everyone pretended not to notice.

‘No, nothing like that,’ said Peter gravely. ‘We have asked them to call it the Comet Royal. That should not raise any objections from the Astronomer Royal who will imagine we are doing him the honour..’

‘When all along it is another Royal we have in mind.’ Rachel grinned at me.

I pressed my fingers to my lips to stop myself from emitting an embarrassing squeak.

‘I think she’s pleased,’ commented Billy. ‘If she’s deprived of speech, it’s usually a good sign. Long may it last!’

‘I’m in the heavens?’ I whispered.

'Yes, you are immortalized as a lump of rock whizzing around the sun, here today and gone tomorrow – but coming back in all likelihood,' Mabel said wryly.

'Then I am most touched.' I curtsied deeply. 'I accept the honour.'

And then I turned back to my comet, watching it sail at incredible speeds across the night sky. The Comet Royal: how totally splendid.

Curtain Falls.

Cat's Glossary

CANISTER – head

CAST UP ONE'S ACCOUNTS – to be violently ill

CHARYBDIS – mythical whirlpool

CLINK – term for gaol

CROSTREES – top point of mast where lookout can stand

DONS – Oxford and Cambridge tutors

GOGGLE – to stare

MOLL – woman associated with a gang of thieves

NIPPING JIG – to be hanged

PHIZ – face

SCYLLA – mythical monster, eater of sailors

SKYLARKING – to play in the rigging

TUILLERIES – famous Parisian gardens and palace

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