

Her MAJESTY'S
League of
REMARKABLE
Young LADIES



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Chicken
House

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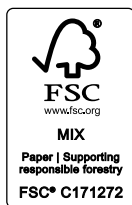
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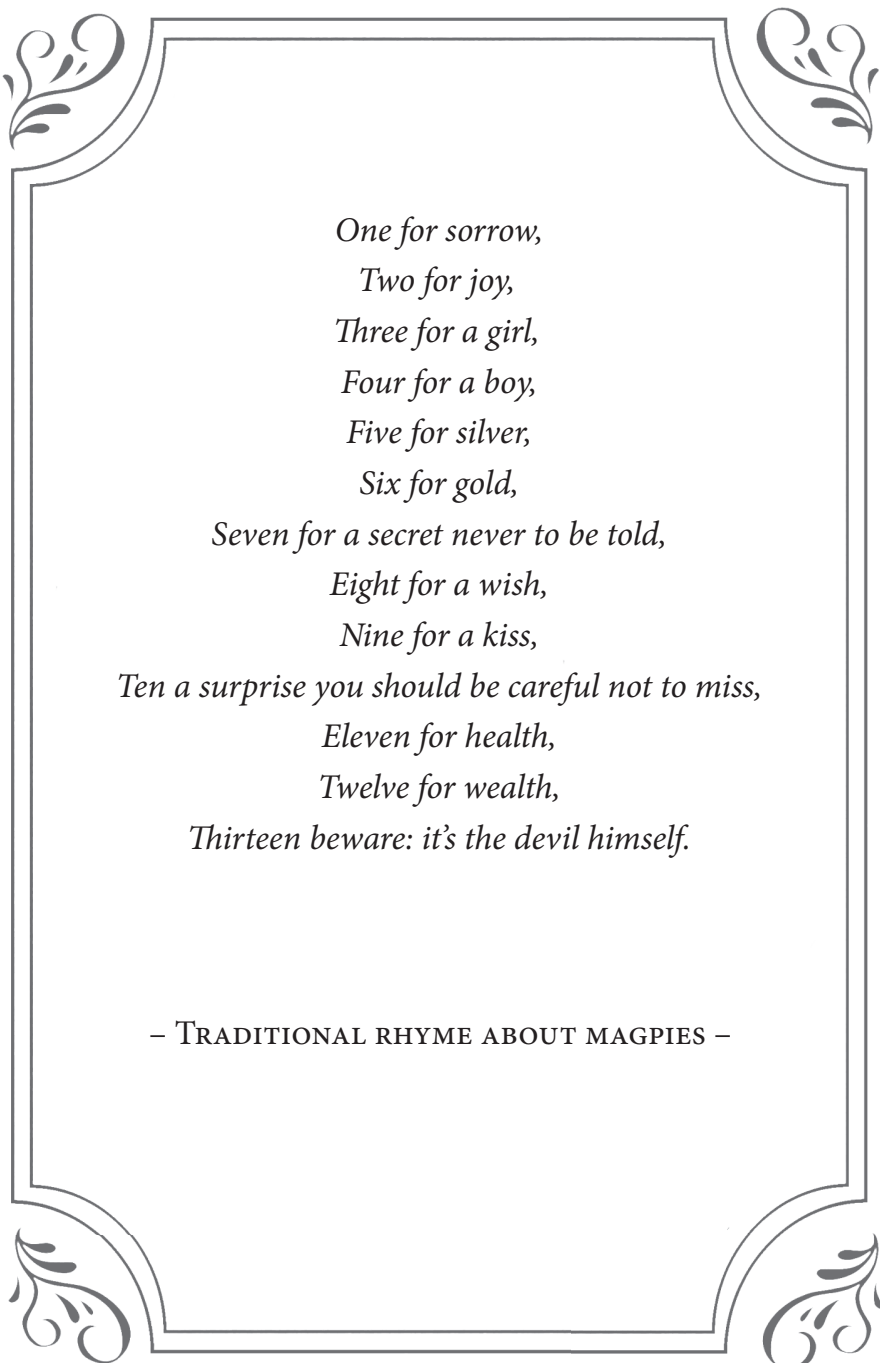


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For Paul



*One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
Four for a boy,
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret never to be told,
Eight for a wish,
Nine for a kiss,
Ten a surprise you should be careful not to miss,
Eleven for health,
Twelve for wealth,
Thirteen beware: it's the devil himself.*

– TRADITIONAL RHYME ABOUT MAGPIES –



PROLOGUE

~STAFFORD HOUSE, ST JAMES'S~

21 March 1889

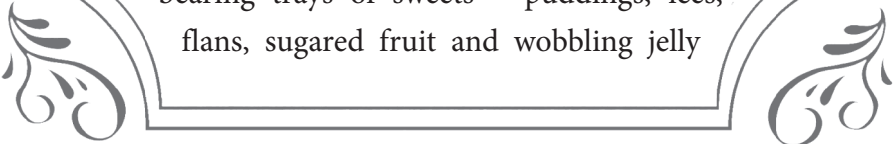
Queen Victoria sat at the head of a dining table laden with rich food. To her right was her daughter-in-law, the elegant Alix Princess of Wales, and to her left was Bertie the Prince of Wales, her middle-aged son. The occasion was Bertie and Alix's twenty-sixth wedding anniversary – and the long table was filled with guests from the upper echelons of British society.

Prince Bertie sipped from his wine goblet before turning to flirt with the radiant actress seated to his left. The woman's peals of laughter rose above the din of chatter.

The Queen twitched at her son's casual behaviour.

But, as always, she had to endure. At least now there was dessert to look forward to. She readied her spoon.

As if on cue, a swarm of servants descended, bearing trays of sweets – puddings, ices, flans, sugared fruit and wobbling jelly



towers. Two sweating footmen deposited an enormous platter covered with a swan-shaped silver dome in front of the Queen. The butler bowed. 'If it pleases Her Majesty, *Bavarois Surprise au Chocolat*.'

Her favourite!

The butler lifted the enormous silver lid with a flourish. His eyes boggled, and he let out a squeak of dismay. He fumbled the cloche, dropping it on the floor with a *BONG!* that echoed around the dining hall.

The chatter hushed, and thirty-nine faces turned towards the offending dessert.

The pudding was a glistening castle-shaped jelly, around which lay a circle of dead birds with open beaks and lifeless eyes. Their wings overlapped in a clever pattern of the black, blue and white feathers, three facing one direction, three the other, and in the middle the seventh bird lay on its back, feet sticking up and trussed with red floss. Perched on its tiny talons was a calling card. The Prince of Wales snatched it, setting the chocolate castle aquiver.

*Compliments of
Mr Magpie*



CHAPTER 1

~BEACON ACADEMY FOR POISED &
POLISHED YOUNG LADIES~

140 Gower Street, Bloomsbury, London
Early Friday afternoon, 22 March 1889



The door to the attic room flew open with a bang, sending Winifred's notes swirling in the draught. Miss Adelaide Culpepper slipped inside and closed the door. 'Winifred, we have a problem.'

Winnie held her focus on the tiny brass gear she was drilling. 'One moment, if you please. This is the smallest gear for my improved mechanical slingshot. After this final adjustment, I can assemble it and test it . . .'

'This is urgent.' Adelaide wrung her hands. 'We have a visitor – that is to say, *you* have a visitor.'

With a pointed sigh, Winnie looked up. Oh, no! Adelaide's lips were pressed together in a slight frown; her long neck strained inside the lace of her high collar. How odd to see such an outstanding older pupil of the

Beacon Academy for Poised & Polished
Young Ladies in an unseemly State of



Agitation. Although only seventeen, Adelaide had mastered the lady's art of Always Maintaining Calm.

More impressively (at least to Winnie, who was fourteen and rarely calm), Adelaide was brilliant at mathematics, logic and stenography, not to mention fencing, croquet, archery and tennis. (She also secretly rode a safety bicycle around London – in disguise, of course – a feat so daring Winnie was made to promise on her mother's grave she'd never mention it.)

Adelaide hissed, '*Sir Phillip* has paid a visit.'

'Sir who?'

Adelaide pulled at her collar. 'Sir Phillip Runcliffe-Bowen, the secretariat of the British World Fair Selection Committee. He wishes to speak with "Master Freddy".' Her eyes widened.

Winnie dropped her precious tools, a tiny brass gear pinged into the air. 'Good golly! It must be news about my Petit Prix application.'

Winning the Petit Prix for Young Inventors at the 1889 Paris World Fair was nothing less than Winnie's most ardent dream. And it was barely two months away. She tugged at her plaits nervously.

Adelaide twined her fingertips together. 'Even if it's good news, his timing is dreadful: Headmistress will return from her visits within the hour.'

Winnie stood, her full skirt knocking over her chair.

‘I need a disguise – quickly! Help me transform from a Winifred into a Fred! Where are those boy’s knickerbockers and cap you wear while cycling?’ Winnie pulled open the top drawer of Adelaide’s dresser.

Adelaide shoved the drawer closed. ‘If you don’t mind, Winifred! That’s my drawer of . . . *unmentionables*! And my knickerbockers are supposed to be a secret! Besides, there’s no time to dress up. Sir Phillip is waiting in the parlour, hat in hand.’

Winnie smoothed the wrinkles in the sailor-style yoke of her Beacon Academy uniform. ‘Whose brilliant idea was it to enter the Petit Prix as a boy?’

Adelaide let out a bitter snort. ‘As if there’s any other choice! And it was your idea, as you know full well. I merely forged your father’s signature for you.’

Winnie growled. ‘It’s unfair and completely irrational that girls are not permitted to enter.’

‘Save that familiar tune for another time. Right now, we need a plan.’ Adelaide dabbed her brow with a lacy handkerchief.

‘I know!’ Winnie raced to the door. ‘My darling brother Freddy is poorly with mumps – or dropsy. No, it must be a vile illness – like consumption!’ She pushed Adelaide towards the door. ‘Please inform Sir Phillip of Freddy’s dire illness. Say he’s in his sickbed, but his deeply devoted sister will leave his side to discuss the application

on Master Freddy's behalf? Winnie scooped up an armful of blueprints from the worktable. 'I'll show him my designs – er, *Freddy's* designs . . . Would you carry the prototype?'

'Cholera! Gracious heavens! Your poor dear brother!' Sir Phillip thundered. 'Miss Weatherby, perhaps it would be best to withdraw Master Freddy's entry until, er, next year – assuming he . . .' Sir Phillip, a wiry, upright man, grimaced and adjusted his cravat. His pale eye darted behind his tortoiseshell monocle.

Winnie batted her hand. 'Oh, please! Freddy is as tough as an India rubber ball! I've no doubt he'll be out of bed by week's end. Meanwhile, he begged me to demonstrate my – *his* – invention to you.'

Sir Phillip waved his hand dismissively. 'No need, my dear. I've read his entry. While the idea has a certain charm—'

'Thank you, sir!' Winnie beamed and rocked on her heels. 'I will be sure to pass on your compliment. The Boot-Button Butler will make buttonhooks a thing of the past! While an antiquated buttonhook fastens one button at a time, my – *his* – invention makes it possible to button up to ten boot buttons at once!' She strummed her fingers across the ten copper hooks inside her invention, which in its previous incarnation had been a humble kitchen whisk.

Sir Phillip blinked, stroking the left side of his forked beard. ‘Despite its decidedly feminine application, it brings to mind a bear trap. And what if one’s boot has more than ten buttons?’

‘An excellent question! I toyed with increasing the number of hooks, but each one adds weight, making the device cumbersome. Ten hooks achieve the perfect ratio of efficiency and weight.’ She cleared her throat. *Besides, a kitchen whisk consists of only so much wire . . .* ‘I’d be delighted to demonstrate.’

Winnie wasn’t wearing boots – so instead, she darted to the French doors. ‘Adelaide, might I borrow your ankles?’

She gasped. ‘Miss Weatherby! I couldn’t – it wouldn’t be proper.’

Winnie scowled at Adelaide, who was shaking her head violently. This was no time for extreme modesty. Was a stockinged ankle such an unseemly bit of anatomy?

The older pupil pointed to the clock in the hall. Five minutes to the hour. Adelaide made a hurry-up gesture and pushed the French doors shut.

‘Er, Sir Phillip, seeing as I cannot find an available pair of feet, an inspection of . . . Freddy’s mechanical drawings will have to do. They’re here somewhere among these papers . . .’ As Winnie flicked through the designs and drawings stacked on the tea table, the entire pile

avalanched on to the floor.

Sir Phillip stooped to help her collect them, casting a glance over each blueprint. ‘My heavens! Your brother’s drawing skills are exceptional for one so young!’ He adjusted his tortoiseshell-rimmed monocle.

Recovering from the unexpected compliment, Winnie located the correct blueprint. ‘*Voilà!* Sir Phillip, I present the—’

Adelaide pushed her head around the parlour door – behind Sir Phillip – and mouthed, ‘She’s back.’

Ah – the formidable Headmistress Thornton was in the building.

Winnie rolled up her drawing. ‘Oh, dear, I believe I heard Freddy cry out! Well, Sir Phillip, it’s been lovely meeting you – on Freddy’s behalf. I hope you don’t mind. I’ll escort you out through the kitchen.’ She turned him towards the servants’ door at the side of the parlour.

Sir Phillip didn’t budge. ‘Egad! This design is phenomenal! Have you got a prototype of *this* invention?’

Winnie caught sight of the blueprints he’d picked up and gulped. Blast! Mixed up in her invention designs were Papa’s top-secret plans for the A.A. Weatherby (& Daughter) Telautograph Machine. The previous Sunday while visiting her father, she’d decided boldness was required, so she’d smuggled the plans out of her father’s laboratory to copy and add her *refinements* during the week.

To her horror, Sir Phillip had already spread the blueprint across the tea table and read the design description written in Winnie's neatest script:

*The Weatherby Telautograph Machine –
WA-model sends facsimiles of signatures and
handwritten notes over telegraph wires.*

'Why this is sheer genius! Can this also be your brother's work? How old did you say he is?'

'I'm sorry – this invention isn't ready for public scrutiny yet.' She snatched the design and hastily rolled it up.

'Miss Weatherby, I insist! Master Freddy must enter that invention. Forget boot buttons and the piddly Petit Prix for Young Inventors. The Telautograph could win the Grand Prix!'

Behind them, the French doors swung open. Headmistress Thornton strode in.

'Miss Culpepper, fetch my shawl, if you'd be so kind. I'm chilled to the . . .' She stopped. 'Oh, I beg your pardon. I wasn't aware we had callers.'

'Madam,' Sir Phillip said, bowing. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Phillip Runcliffe-Bowen, the secretariat of the British World Fair Selection Committee.'

Headmistress cocked her head. 'Sir Phillip, I'm delighted. Lady Jenny and I are acquainted, but I've never had the pleasure of meeting you.' Her voice flattened. She

narrowed her eyes at Winifred. ‘I see you’ve met one of my more challenging pupils.’

‘My sincere apologies, madam. I am most aggrieved you didn’t receive the letter I’d sent ahead, informing you of today’s visit. I’ve come on World Fair business to speak with young Master Fred—’

Winnie spluttered a cough and grabbed the gentleman’s elbow. ‘Sir Phillip was just leaving. Sir, your hat. If I may . . .’

‘Winifred Weatherby, unhand my guest!’ Headmistress Thornton smiled at Sir Phillip. ‘You simply must tell me how Lady Jenny and your daughters are. I hope you have time for tea?’ She gestured to the settee.

Sir Phillip bowed again. ‘Why, thank you, madam. Unfortunately, I have another engagement; otherwise, I’d be delighted, for I am keen to examine the designs Miss Weatherby is coyly holding behind her back. Freddy Weatherby’s invention is the most promising and lucrative I’ve seen in years! And I’ve seen plenty, as you can imagine.’

‘*Freddy Weatherby’s?*’ Headmistress Thornton raised a thin eyebrow, and Winifred squirmed. ‘Well, Sir Phillip, I’ll see you out. And I’m sure Miss Weatherby will tell me all about her *brother’s* ingenious designs in my office, where she can await my return . . .’