

Praise for

YOUNG HOUDINI

The
Magician's Fire

'It's AMAZING! I just couldn't stop reading it, every bit of it is full of adventure and excitement. I loved it!'

Jaya, age 8

'*Young Houdini* is so adventurous. It is full of heroes and sinister villains. It is written so well that I can't put the book down.'

Eva, age 9

'I really enjoyed *Young Houdini: The Magician's Fire* as it combines magic, dare devil stunts and investigation stories into one. Billie, Harry and Arthur are fun, loveable characters which children will aspire to be like.'

Hamish, age 11

SIMON NICHOLSON

YOUNG
HOUDINI
The
Magician's Fire

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Copyright © Simon Nicholson 2015

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273474-7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

*To Olive, Eliza and Roxy
May they know no fear*

Author's Note

Harry Houdini was a magician and escape artist like no other. At the dawn of the twentieth century he travelled the globe, subjecting himself to spectacular and terrifying ordeals, the likes of which had simply never been seen before.

He escaped from nailed-shut crates thrown to the bottom of icy lakes. He writhed his way out of a straitjacket while dangling from a seventy-metre-high bridge. Lashed to the front of a loaded cannon, he sprung from the ropes just before the fuse detonated. Incarcerated by Europe's most ruthless police force in their cruellest prison, he mocked them by walking miraculously free. Nothing defeated him—and no one could explain his mysterious powers.

Who was Harry Houdini and how did he acquire such phenomenal skills? I couldn't stop thinking about what might have happened to him as a boy to turn him into such an extraordinary man.

All great stories have a great beginning. This is the story of Houdini: the boy magician.

Manhattan, 1886

Chapter 1

The train was coming. Harry could see the puffs of blackened steam rising over a row of broken-down houses. He could hear the clatter of the engine. Down by his feet vibrations were wobbling along the iron rails and the ragged hems of his trousers were wobbling too. *Won't be long now.* He stood there a little longer, his boot polish-stained fingers twitching, his eyes narrowing in the direction of the thundering roar.

He tugged a sturdy-looking padlock out of his jacket pocket and carried on chaining himself to the spot in the middle of the track.

'You've really lost it this time, Harry!'

'Harry! Are you absolutely sure about this?'

A boy and a girl stood just a few paces away. Billie, the girl, wore a ragged, glue-spattered factory smock, and she was casually leaning against a concrete stump, her head on one side, an eyebrow raised. *Typical, not*

even the tiniest bit impressed, thought Harry with a smile, glancing across at the boy, who was a far more satisfying sight. Arthur was completely beside himself with excitement, hopping from foot to foot, his neatly tailored tweed suit flapping, his hands racing through a copy of the *New York City Train Timetable*.

‘Do you really think this is a good idea, Harry? My calculations have turned out right, you see.’ Stitches popped in the tweed suit and the younger boy’s tie swirled as he flung an arm towards the puffs of smoke. ‘That’s the 15:24 from Grand Central. Which by my estimate is due to hit this exact spot . . .’ He tugged a fob-watch from his waistcoat, dangled it in front of his face, and stared at it with eyes the size of half-dollar coins. ‘In exactly two minutes, twenty-seven seconds’ time!’

‘So we have to hurry, Artie!’ Harry looped a chain around his left leg, pulled it up round his head, and adjusted it so that it was at a jaunty angle. He heard his voice echo around, still full of the accent of his far-away Hungarian home, so different from his friend’s English tones. ‘Good job on the calculations but I’m not even properly manacled yet! Another chain, Billie?’

‘One of the real heavy ones? Or perhaps something a little lighter, *sir?*’ Another grin, and Billie pushed off

the concrete stump, reached into the sack at her feet, and yanked out a clinking length of iron. ‘I managed to find you a nice selection, heavy ones, light ones, that sort of thing . . .’ Her voice bounced along with drawls and twangs as she swung the chain about a bit. ‘Any other deadly situations you’d like me and Artie to rustle up for you? Dangle you by a rope off Brooklyn Bridge? Or smuggle you into the lion’s cage at the City Zoo, maybe? We’re getting pretty good now, I’m sure we could fix it . . .’

‘You’d do a great job, both of you, but can we talk about it later?’ Harry wrapped the chain around his middle, making sure that it too was at a jaunty angle. ‘Let’s just concentrate on the Great Train—’

‘The Great Train Escape, I know.’ Billie’s left eyebrow lifted a little higher. ‘Hey Artie, seeing as we’re busy with trains today, did I ever tell you about my own brush with one? The Louisiana Express Hay Wagon Ride, that’s what I call it, and it was pretty rough—’

‘There’s no time, Billie!’ Harry slid the padlock through the links.

‘Sure there’s time! So, I was desperate for a ride and so I hung out on a bridge near a goods station, waiting. When the train rattled underneath with a load of wagons of hay, I just jumped down! Nearly broke a leg!’ Billie reached behind her back, pulled round the little

ukulele she kept strapped there, and started strumming a tune. ‘But that’s what it’s like on the road, you’ve got to grab any chance you can. So there I was, riding all the way to Arkansas, strumming my uke and—’

‘Billie! Not now! Everyone’s waiting. Look!’

Harry snapped the padlock shut and managed to jerk his head towards the rabble of about fifteen people lined up along the top of the bank on the far side of the tracks, framed against the blue September sky. Passers-by, shopkeepers, and even a couple of washer-women—Billie and Arthur had spent nearly an hour drumming them up by racing around the surrounding streets, and every one of them seemed gripped by what was going on, their gazes fixed in his direction. *They’ll stare even harder now*, Harry thought, as he plucked the key from the padlock and sent it flying through the air. It vanished into a patch of thorny bushes some distance away.

‘You’ve really done it now.’ Billie’s ukulele playing stopped. Even she was looking impressed, staring after the key.

‘Exactly!’ Harry jerked his head towards the crowd. ‘That’s what everyone’s thinking!’

‘Yes, but you really *have* done it!’ Arthur was a high-speed hopping, page-flicking, watch-wagging blur. ‘We’ll never be able to find it in all those thorns!’

‘It’s all part of the act.’ Harry breathed deeply, and stared at the padlock as hard as he could. ‘Look, I shouldn’t really be talking—I’m meant to be pretending to have magical powers.’

He carried on doing just that. The clattering roar was louder now, the rails were vibrating faster, his ragged trouser-hems were flapping faster too, but he didn’t bother about any of those things. Instead, he carried on staring at the chains with that deliberately mysterious gaze. He even tugged the padlock up to his mouth and muttered to it. *See a boy free himself through the speaking of ancient charms*, that was what Billie and Arthur had told the crowd—and, from the excited gasps he could hear drifting from the bank, it sounded like his audience was well on the way to believing it too. He kept muttering to the padlock, deliberately using phrases of Hungarian, knowing that the unfamiliar words would sound particularly mysterious to the listening crowd. He muttered even louder, and made his eyes roll about, pretending to lose himself completely in a magical trance, even as he detected faint odours of oil and soot, curling up his nose . . .

‘The train! The train!’

Harry’s eyes stopped rolling. They flicked towards the crowd. Every one of those fifteen heads had swiveled to the left because the train had shot out from

behind the houses and was curving steadily around the track. Arms pointed, faces turned white. The engine, a hurtling bulk of iron, was still several hundred yards away, but steam shrieked from it as it clanged along the rails, and it was gathering speed. Harry watched it. The odours of oil and soot weren't just curling up his nose now, they were snaking down into his mouth, flavouring the spit trickling down his throat. *Time to get a move on.* But he couldn't resist squeezing in just a bit more bug-eyed magical staring at the chains.

'Harry! You've left it too late!'

A yell from Arthur as he raced for the thorny bushes. Billie was pulling off a well-rehearsed swoon, tottering about with the back of a hand against her forehead. *Nicely done*, thought Harry, as he watched Billie collapse onto the gravel; meanwhile Artie arrived at the bush and started rooting about as if all was lost. *All part of the act.* Still, they had been right earlier—there *wasn't* any way they could find the key and run back to set him free before the train hit. The thought made the chains holding him in place feel particularly heavy. Under his threadbare shirt, he felt a drop of sweat glide down between his shoulder blades. *Yes, time to get a move on . . .*

'Stop the train!'

'Somebody DO something!'

Screams from the crowd. One of the washerwomen had dropped her basket, the clothes inside tumbling down the bank, but no one seemed to have noticed. *Utterly gripped.* More drops of sweat were gathering now, on his forehead, his neck, under his arms, and Harry could feel strange little twitches quivering through his body. *Good*—every twitch, every drop of sweat would help him concentrate on the trick that lay ahead.

He lifted the padlock to his mouth again and muttered a bit more of that spell. He surrounded the padlock with his hands so no one would see the tiny bulge in his upper lip as his tongue curled up inside. Harry closed his eyes and felt his tongue deftly fetch down the little bent nail that was lodged there and nudge it around until it was gripped between his teeth. The bent end poked out of the corner of his mouth and he shot it into the padlock's keyhole.

Concentrate.

Harry tilted his head. He had carefully bent the nail so it fitted the padlock perfectly. He had practised endless times, first with his hands, then with his mouth. But he still felt his jaw shudder slightly as it shifted so that the nail angled upwards. His brain throbbed with the clatter of iron wheels, the shriek of steam. *Concentrate, concentrate.* He stared straight at the

train, just a hundred yards away now, as he carried on picking the lock. And then the nail slipped.

Unexpectedly, the padlock had jerked to the left, tugging the nail from his teeth. For a couple of seconds, the little length of metal balanced precariously on his lower lip. He felt his whole body turn cold as he tried, with his tongue, to fetch it back. His vision blurred and he realized that his eyes had crossed, struggling to hold the nail in view as it balanced such a short distance away. His tongue strained, the twitches raced through every part of him.

Concentrate.

The nail was back between his teeth. He shot it back into the lock again, his jaw re-angling. He checked the train, which had jammed on its brakes but was hurtling forward anyway, an iron blur, just forty yards away. *Thirty, twenty.* The brakes screeched but all he could hear was, from deep inside the padlock, the stretching of tiny springs, the grind of tiny levers.

Then, echoing out of the keyhole, a click.

The clasp sprang open. The chains, heavy and cold, slithered away from him. One of them snagged on his left elbow but he shook it off, shaking off the other chains too, sending them flying away from the track. He looked up and saw the train's vast front, racing up to him. His legs, he had to admit, were a little

less steady than usual, but he managed to spring into the air, just in time, and thudded onto the gravel next to the tracks.

He tucked the nail back inside his lip. Briefly, he remembered that troubling moment when it had dangled so precariously, and took in a shaky breath. But then he jumped up, brushing the dust from his clothes. He stumbled away from the track, his ragged clothes billowing in the thundering breeze of the train's wagons as they clattered past, picking up speed again. Ahead of him was the crowd. Everyone was clapping, cheering, waving hats in the air, throwing coins in his direction; Harry stopped walking and stood there for some time, watching the coins land. The train was gone now, but he still stood there. His vision blurred, and for a while he stopped thinking of anything apart from his still-pounding heart, his still-trembling body. Then he felt something jab him in his side.

'Harry? We are *here*, you know?'

It was Billie. She was standing next to him, laughing, and it was her elbow that was doing the jabbing, quite hard. Harry blinked, and then looked round at Arthur, who was on his other side, a smile on his face too.

'Sorry.' Harry blinked again, and felt his face grow warm. 'Sometimes takes me a bit of time to come round . . .'

‘Don’t worry, we’re used to it.’ Billie rolled her eyes.

‘Thanks.’ Harry held out his hands. ‘So anyway—let’s give them what they want, shall we?’

He waited for his friends to grab his hands. Then, together with them, he performed the move that he had practised more than any other.

A slow, elegant bow.

Chapter 2

Harry ran across the park. Light was just starting to fade from the sky, and the last wisps of soot and engine oil had cleared from his clothes. His boots thudded over the cool grass and a wooden shoeshine box swung from his shoulder, rattling with the cans and brushes inside. Flipping open the box's lid, he checked one of its compartments and snapped the lid shut again. Leaping over a railing, he took a short-cut through a flower bed, ran across another stretch of grass and joined Billie, hiding behind a rhododendron bush.

'Is it ready, Harry?'

'Sure is!'

'Exactly the way we ordered it? Every last detail?'

'Every last one! Good thing the train trick went down so well just now, we'd never have had enough otherwise.' He tugged out the lining of his trouser

pocket, empty of coins. ‘That’s got to be the craziest trick yet, yeah?’

‘You bet, Harry, no doubt about it.’ Billie peered back through the bush. ‘He’s still in there, by the way. Hasn’t come out since we said goodbye.’

Harry joined her peering through the twigs and leaves. A short distance away, a brilliant white building towered beside the park, its windows shining, marble steps running up to its front door. Harry checked the windows, inspecting them for any sign of movement inside. But, as usual, the whole house was eerily still.

‘So how did you find out, Billie?’ Harry turned back. ‘That it’s his birthday, I mean.’

‘Mentioned it to me a couple of months ago. “The seventeenth September”, he said, and that’s today.’

‘But how come he didn’t say anything earlier? The train, that’s all he wanted to talk about!’

‘He loves our tricks, doesn’t he? Probably grateful we were doing one—must have helped take his mind off it. Still, his mind’ll be back on it now. Wait, there he is!’

Harry peered again. Billie was right—the front door was opening, and Arthur was stepping out. And she was right about something else too—Arthur’s mind was clearly no longer on anything to do with their tricks. The younger boy’s movements were slow

and his head was lowered as he trod down the steps, wandered down the sidewalk, and crossed the street into the park. Harry even heard a faint sigh drifting through the air. He glanced at Billie, who nodded, and, just as Arthur reached the bush, they strolled out.

‘Hi Artie!’

‘Billie? Harry?’ Artie stopped, and blinked at them. ‘I thought you were both working this evening.’

‘Turns out I’m not due at the factory just yet.’ Billie adjusted her cap, which was every bit as glue-spattered as her smock. ‘And you’re not planning to shine any shoes for the next couple of hours or so either, are you Harry?’

‘Thought I’d leave it a while,’ said Harry, shrugging.

‘Oh.’ Arthur looked puzzled. ‘Well, I’m not doing anything very exciting, I’m afraid. Just going for a quick walk round the park. Before . . .’ He stared back at the house. ‘Going back inside again.’

‘We’ll go for a walk with you, Artie.’ Billie tugged his arm. ‘Come on.’

They set off across the park. Billie reached for her ukulele, strung across her back as usual, but seemed to change her mind, and Harry knew why. She, like him, had seen the first signs of that familiar kink forming on their friend’s forehead. At the same time, Arthur’s left

hand was reaching down to his jacket pocket, drawing out a little ribbon of paper with letters and dots running along it. Harry kept walking, and tried to think of what to say.

‘Heading off to Chicago, is he?’ Billie got there first. ‘Like you expected?’

‘First thing tomorrow.’ Arthur ran a finger along the dots. ‘He sent this message through from his office yesterday, telling the servants. The machine in the hallway hammered it out, along with the usual stuff about stocks and shares. Servants read it and left it in the wastepaper bin, as usual.’

‘I just don’t get it.’ Billie put her hand on Arthur’s shoulder. ‘He’s only just got back from a trip to . . . where was it again?’

‘Washington,’ said Arthur. ‘He was gone three weeks.’

‘I mean, one thing to spend all your time in an office in the city where you actually live—but travelling all over the country?’ Billie shook her head.

‘He’s got meetings, hasn’t he? That’s what it’s like if you come to America to set up a brand new bank.’ Arthur frowned. ‘It’s been this way ever since we moved to New York, and that’s eight months now. Mind you, he totally ignored me in London too. As long as I can remember, he’s been just the same. Work comes

first, a nice expensive house comes second, and having a bunch of servants who do exactly what he wants is important too.' He swung back towards the house. 'Me, I'm just expected to tag along.'

His eyes narrowed. Harry swung round too, and saw why. As daylight faded, lamps were being lit inside the grand front room of the brilliant white building. Inside, stood the figure of Lord Trilby-Roberts, Arthur's father. Tall, stiff and wearing an immaculately tailored suit, the rich banker was standing perfectly straight and talking on a telephone, staring out through the window with an expression that, even at this distance, seemed cold and aloof. Around him, various servants busily gathered papers and files, no doubt in preparation for the trip to Chicago.

'So he's just going to leave you again?' Harry turned back. 'To hang around in that house?'

'Along with all his other stuff.' Artie kept staring at the window. 'Antique furniture, clocks from Switzerland, that sort of thing.'

'Good thing he installed the ticker-tape machine,' Billie said. 'Least that way you get warning of what he's planning.'

'I know,' said Arthur. 'I know.'

He reached back into his pocket and drew out another ribbon, gripping its end with particular force.

‘Actually, the machine hammered out another message this morning.’ His hand tightened until the knuckles were white. ‘Something I wasn’t expecting—today of all days.’

‘Really?’ Billie, peering at the ribbon, looked hopeful.

‘Found it crumpled up in the bin, just like the others. Do the servants really think I won’t find them?’

‘It was from your father in his office? To the servants back home?’

‘Of course.’

‘And it arrived today? The seventeenth of September?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it’s about you?’

‘Certainly is.’

‘So what is it? What does it say?’

‘It’s instructions to the servants about contacting another boarding school,’ said Arthur, and he crumpled the ribbon into a tiny hard ball. His eyes were curiously bright as his thumb and finger gripped the tiny paper ball. Harry wasn’t sure what to say at all and neither, from the look of her, was Billie.

‘Boarding school?’ She managed something, at last. ‘Sounds grim. Still, at least that’s taking *some* kind of interest in you . . .’

‘Not really. There are different sorts of boarding schools, for a start. The one Father has in mind is the sort of place you send someone if you specifically intend to take no interest in them whatsoever for as long as you possibly can. Hard for me to be even the tiniest distraction to him if I’ve been sent miles away.’ Arthur held up the ball of paper, and glared at it. ‘The school’s in Dayton, Ohio. So that’s 452 miles away, to be precise.’

‘So what are you going to do?’ Billie looked genuinely worried. ‘We don’t want you disappearing anywhere, Artie.’

‘Me neither. What, and not see the two people who *do* actually take an interest in me? I don’t think so.’ Artie flicked the ball furiously away. ‘I’ll use the normal tricks. I’ve foiled all the other attempts to send me away and I’ll foil this one too, don’t you worry. It’s just it’s a bit much, him doing this. On my . . . On my b . . .’

He stopped. He sat down on a bench, hard. The paper ball was bouncing down the path, and he stared after it, his hands shoved in his tweed trouser pockets. *As bad as we’ve ever seen him*, thought Harry, and he turned back to the white house again. The tall, rigid figure was still there, the telephone in his hand, his servants bustling obediently around him. Harry’s eyes narrowed, just as his friend’s had done. Then he turned back to Billie who, with a determined look on

her face, had plonked herself down on the bench, right next to Arthur.

‘Don’t worry, Artie.’ She thumped him on the shoulder. ‘We’ve got you a birthday treat. Pass the blindfold, Harry!’

‘Birthday—how d’you know it was my birthday? OOF!’

The blindfold was out of Harry’s shoeshine box. A perfectly clean rag, he had bought it specially, and he swiftly pulled it over Arthur’s eyes and knotted it round the back of his head. Arthur’s hands flailed as Billie hoisted him over her shoulder and staggered off across the park.

‘Where are you taking me? What’s going on—HEY! That tickles!’

‘You’ve always said you wanted to be a magician’s assistant!’ Harry ran on ahead. ‘Wearing the occasional blindfold’s part of it. Ready to row, Billie?’

He jumped into the little boat moored at the edge of the pond. Billie tottered up to it and Harry helped her in, catching Arthur and propping him on one of the seats. Billie leaped in, grabbed an oar, and Harry grabbed one too. Together, they started to row, picking up speed quickly and passing various ducks.

‘What IS going on?’ Arthur, still blindfolded, was laughing now.

‘You’re in the hands of an expert, birthday boy.’ Billie sculled to the left. ‘Not as if I haven’t blindfolded someone before. Tied her up too! The owner of my orphanage, down in New Orleans!’

‘You’ve told us this, Billie!’ Harry rowed faster.

‘Now that was a real rough business, and I’d only just got started then—the Knotted Sheet Dangle, that’s what I call it! Not only did I have to deal with the scariest owner of an orphanage there ever was, next I had to jump out the window and climb down a rope of knotted sheets, all the way down to the street below and—WATCH OUT!’

The boat thudded into the side. Harry threw the mooring rope, lassoed the mooring post, and helped Billie pull Arthur out. It was Harry’s turn to hoist the younger boy onto his shoulder now, and he stumbled out through the park gate and tottered onto a horse-drawn omnibus. He and Billie sat down, and for the next twenty minutes they clattered across Manhattan, watching the city shudder past the window, laughing at the odd looks the other passengers were giving them, two scruffy street kids with a blindfolded boy in a tweed suit squashed between them. The omnibus tilted to a halt, and together they hoisted up their friend and carried him out onto the street. On the other side, they saw their destination.

A small, rather grimy-looking diner.

They burst in through the door, the bell somersaulting above them. They carried Arthur to a table, propped him on a chair, and drew up chairs of their own. Harry nodded to a waitress, who rattled a little wooden trolley across. She picked up what was upon it and lowered it onto the table. At the same moment, Harry and Billie removed Arthur's blindfold.

'Happy Birthday, Artie!'

A cake. Chocolate icing spiralled on its sides. Cream oozed from its centre, spilling onto the plate, and three layers of sponge could be detected, each one sitting on a thick layer of yet more icing. Artie, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the light, took in all these details, but one seemed to affect him in particular: written on the cake's top in sugary sprinkles was his name, along with a skilfully iced picture of a stack of interesting-looking books.

'But how did you afford this?' Arthur gasped.

'The money from the trick, silly,' Billie replied.

'But . . . that's Harry's money, really. He stood in front of th—'

'That's not how we do things, Artie, you know that,' Harry interrupted. 'You calculated the train time, didn't you? Billie found the chains, and both of you ran round drumming up that crowd . . .'

‘With no crowd, there wouldn’t *be* any money,’ agreed Billie, grabbing a spoon.

‘Exactly. So we split the cash three ways.’ Harry leaned forward and jabbed a finger on the tablecloth. ‘Anyway, who knows where I’d have got with my tricks if it hadn’t been for you encouraging me, Artie. Remember when you saw me trying to cross Sixth Avenue by leaping between speeding streetcars? Might have gone nowhere, that. Just some shoeshine boy, leaping about—no one else was noticing. But then you wandered up and told me all about that book you’d been reading in the library . . .’

‘*Fire Dances in the Amazon*,’ said Arthur, quietly.

‘Magicians there prove their skills by dancing through pits of fire! Why not do the same, flying through the showers of sparks from the streetcars?’ Harry turned to Billie, his finger still firm on the tablecloth. ‘Same goes for you, Billie. You saw me practising tightrope-walking along the back of that park bench . . .’

‘Waved my arms around, trying to make you lose balance.’ Billie smiled.

‘Like I say, at least you noticed. And you also had the idea of stringing a rope way up high between two trees, and getting me to walk along it while muttering spells and wiggling my arms free of no less than

twenty-five knots, helped me practise it over and over too, and *that* was how we drew our first crowd.’ The finger was hurting now from all the jabbing. ‘So anyway, that’s why we split stuff in three. And because it’s your birthday, Artie, me and Billie decided to spend our shares on something you’d like.’

‘So that just left your bit. And we decided to throw that in too, if that’s all right by you?’ Billie added.

‘Yes, of course . . .’ Arthur’s voice had gone very quiet indeed. ‘Thanks, folks . . .’

For some time, he said nothing more. He just sat there, staring at the cake. Harry, uncertain what to do next, didn’t move either. The silence went on for so long that the top layer of the cake, the icing melting beneath it, had begun to tilt to one side. Harry and Billie exchanged worried looks. Then, finally, Arthur reached out a hand, and picked up the knife.

‘Father can ignore me as much as he likes, and send as many messages about boarding schools too.’ He smiled. ‘The three of us—we’ve got some serious eating to do.’

The cake flew apart. Arthur cut the first slice, and then cut two more for Billie and Harry, and then kept on cutting more slices for all three of them, in between gobbling down what was on his plate. Spoons flashed, hands grabbed, bits of sponge bounced across the

table, and Harry saw one of the customers at a nearby table duck as a blob of icing hurtled by him. No more slices were left, just a few crumbs and smears of icing, and these were busily devoured as well, Billie even holding her plate up to her face and rotating it so that her tongue could lick up every last trace. At last, they were done, and they tilted back their chairs and wiped a few last smears from their mouths.

‘Deee-licious!’ said Billie.

‘The best cake I’ve ever tasted.’ Arthur nodded. ‘And it’s the best birthday I can remember as well.’

‘And that, Artie,’ said Harry, leaning back in his chair furthest of all. ‘Was well worth standing in front of a hurtling train for!’

He meant every word. He had meant the words earlier too. And he wasn’t the only one who felt that way, it seemed, because just then he felt his hand grow warm, and realized that Arthur had taken hold of it. The tweed-suited boy took hold of Billie’s hand too, and then Billie reached across and grabbed the only hand that remained on the table, Harry’s other one. The three of them sat there, the business of the diner clattering around them. No trace of sadness on Artie’s face now, it was smiling all over, and Billie was smiling as well, and Harry felt his own face break into a grin too . . .

His eyes flicked up to the diner's clock. Then to the grimy window. Through it, a familiar spindly shape could be seen, hovering by a lamp post.

'Your birthday treat's not over yet, Artie!' Harry scraped back his chair. 'It's only just beginning!'

'Really?' Arthur looked about, confused.

'I think *I* know what Harry's talking about.' Billie, turning, could clearly see the spindly shape too.

'Seen him? Seen who?' Arthur swivelled round in his seat, trying to see.

'Herbie,' said Harry. 'He came!'