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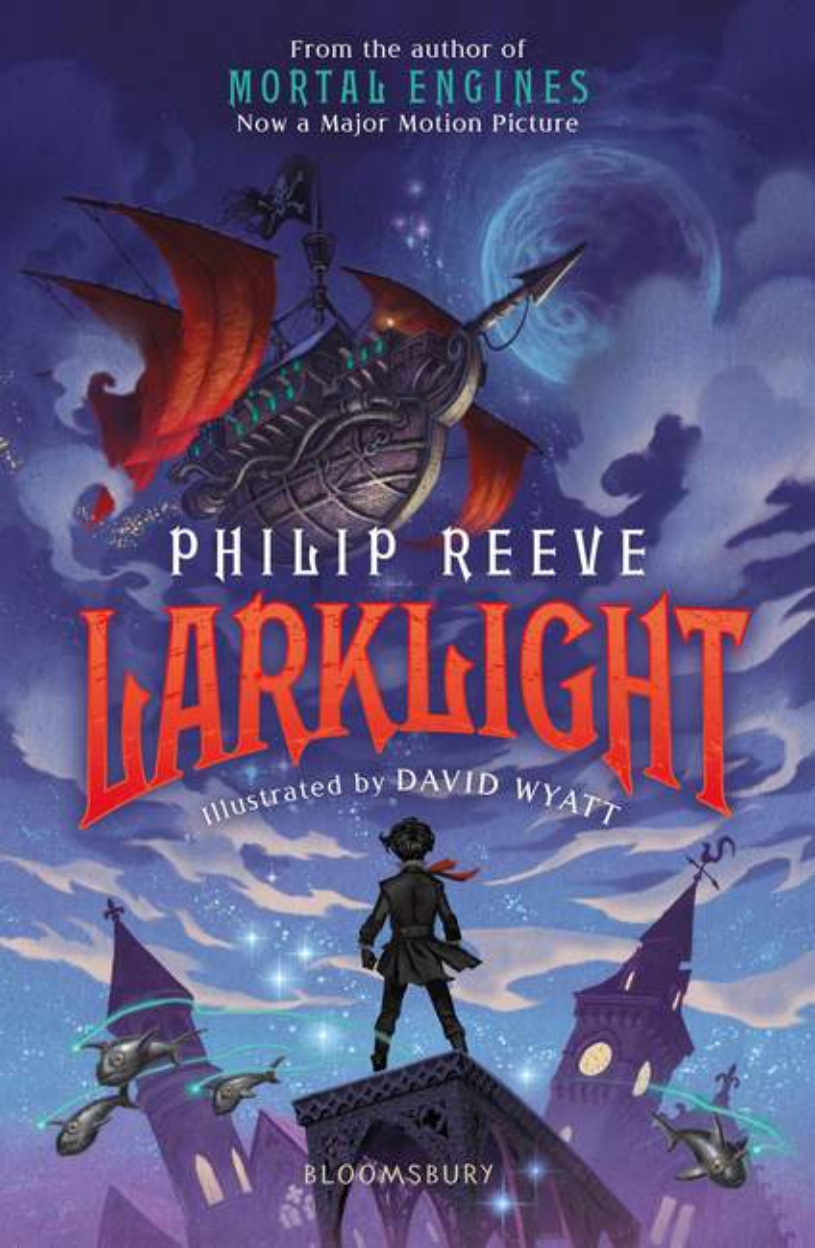
MORTAL ENGINES
Now a Major Motion Picture



PHILIP REEVE

LARKLIGHT

Illustrated by DAVID WYATT

BLOOMSBURY

LARKLIGHT

or

The REVENGE of the WHITE SPIDERS!

or

To SATURN'S RINGS and BACK!

A Rousing Tale of Dauntless Pluck in the Farthest Reaches of Space

As Chronicl'd by Art Mumby, Esq.,

with the Aid of

PHILIP REEVE

& Decorated Throughout by

DAVID WYATT

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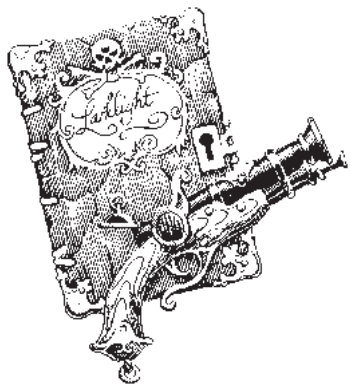
The pages of this volume are impregnated with Snagsby's Patent Folio-dubbin
to preserve them against the depradations of space moth and paper bats.

CHAPTER ONE



IN WHICH WE RECEIVE NOTICE OF AN IMPENDING VISITOR.

Later, while I was facing the Potter Moth, or fleeing for my life from the First Ones, or helping man a cannon aboard Jack Havock's brig *Sophronia*, I would often think back to the way my life used to be, and to that last afternoon at Larklight, before all our misfortunes began.

It was a perfectly ordinary afternoon, filled with the

usual sounds of Larklight's grumbling air pipes and hissing gas mantles, and with the usual smells of dust and mildew and boiled cabbage – smells which were so familiar to us that we no longer even noticed them. Oh, and I was having an argument with my sister, Myrtle. That was perfectly ordinary too.

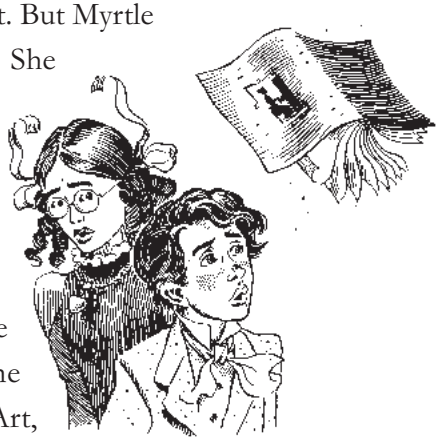
I wanted to go out on to the balcony to watch the delivery boat arrive, but Myrtle was too busy playing the piano. She had been trying to teach herself how, using a large, floppy, greyish book entitled *A Young Gentlewoman's Pianoforte Primer*, and she had been practising the same piece from it over and over again, for months. It was called 'Birdsong at Eventide', and it went, 'Ting *pling* ting pling *ting,* ting tong, ting tong, ting tonggg clonk, bother!' At least, that is how it went when Myrtle played it. Myrtle said that she was a young lady now and would need accomplishments if she were one day to shine in good society, but I didn't think the pianoforte would ever be one of them. I tried telling her so, but she just slammed shut the lid of the instrument and called me a little beast.

'Oh, do come, Myrtle,' I said. 'I thought you liked to watch the delivery arrive.'

She laughed her bitter, world-weary laugh, which she

had been practising of late in the bathtub. It was supposed to sound grown-up. 'There is little enough else to do here!' she said. 'I declare Larklight must be the dullest spot in all Creation! If only we lived in England, like a civilised family, there might be balls and levees to attend! I should go about in society, and young gentlemen would offer to dance with me. Even in Bombay or Calcutta or one of the American colonies there would be visiting and so forth. But stuck here in this bleak, outlandish place . . . Oh, *why* must we live at Larklight?'

I tried reminding her that Larklight was our mother's house, and had been in Mother's family for absolute ages. Mother had loved the old place, and after she died, Father had not had the heart to leave it. But Myrtle would not listen to reason. She flung aside *The Young Gentlewoman's Pianoforte Primer*, which floated slowly up to the ceiling and hung there, rustling a little, like a disappointed bat.



'Now look!' she cried. 'The gravity generator has gone wrong again! Find a servant, Art,

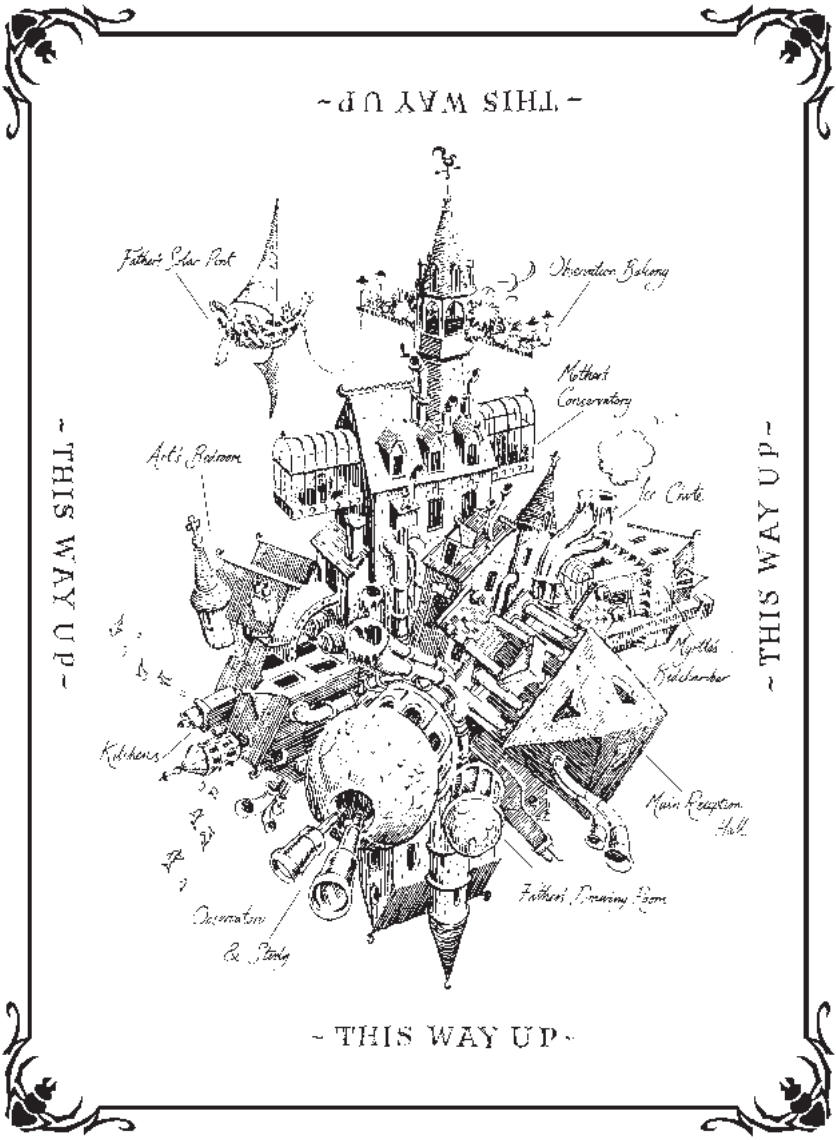
and send them down to the boiler room to mend it.'

In the end, she came with me to the balcony after all. I knew she would. She liked to see the delivery boat come in from Port George as much as I did, she had just grown too ladylike to admit it.

We climbed the long staircase to the balcony door, and paused there to put on our rubberised capes (to preserve us against the space damp) and slip on our lead-lined galoshes. The gravity was definitely a little patchy that afternoon, and wouldn't it have been a tragedy if one of us lost our footing and went whirling off into the boundless aether, never to be found (unless it were Myrtle, of course, in which case there would be great rejoicing and a half-holiday declared, etc., but ho hum)? When we were quite ready we unfastened the door and stepped outside. Space frost, which had formed thickly around the door seal, went drifting off in a bright, thinning cloud, and when it had cleared we could see the familiar view. The Moon filled the whole sky above us like a vast crescent lanthorn shining in the blackness of the high aether, and beyond it, a little off to one side, twinkled the small blue eye of the Earth.

There is a picture of Larklight overleaf, with a few points of interest marked. As you will see, it is a very old house. Nobody seems to know who built it, nor which way up it is supposed to go, but Mother used to claim it had been constructed by an ancestor of hers during the early 1700s, just a few years after Sir Isaac Newton's great discoveries had made the Conquest of Space possible. Over the century and a half since then bits and pieces have been added to it, and another of Mother's forebears had tried to improve it somewhat during the last age by adding some porticoes and things in the Classical taste, but it remains a shapeless, ramshackle, drafty, lonely sort of house, and a terribly long way from anywhere, spinning along on its remote orbit out in the deeps beyond the Moon.

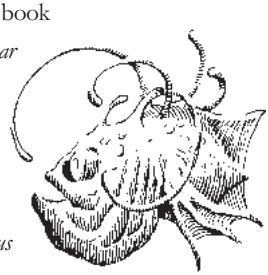
It was peaceful up there on the balcony; the immense silence of the open aether seemed more silent still after a whole day spent listening to 'Birdsong at Eventide'. In pots along the balustrade there still grew some of the delicate crystalline space flowers which our dear mother used to collect. I remembered how, when I was three or four, there used to be a pot of them upon my nursery window sill, and

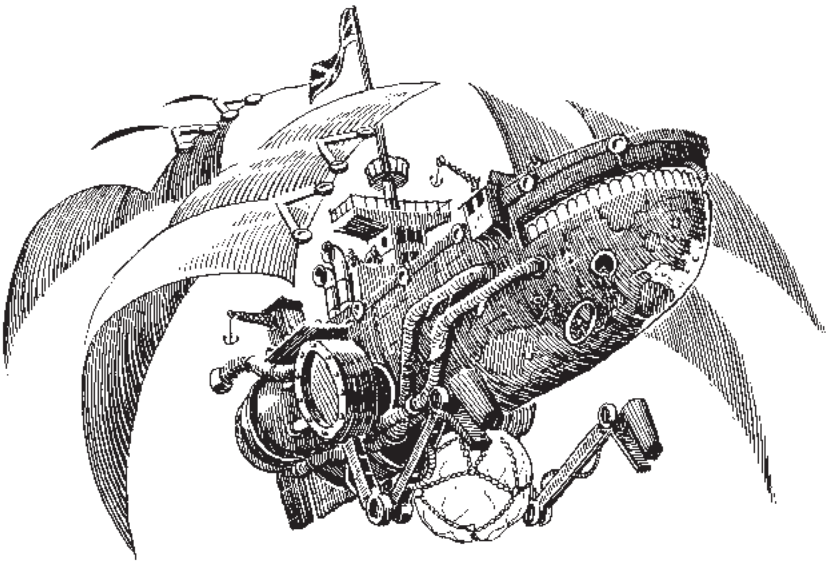

~THIS WAY UP~
Father's Star Post
Observation Balcony
Mother's Conservatory
Art's Bedroom
Ice Circle
Myths Kitchenette
Kitchens
Main Reception Hall
Father's Drawing Room
Observation & Study
~THIS WAY UP~
~THIS WAY UP~
~THIS WAY UP~

how they would lull me to sleep each night with their strange, wordless songs. But Mother was dead, lost aboard the packet *Semele* back in 1848 while on her way to visit an aged relative in Cambridgeshire. Neither Father nor Myrtle nor I had her skill in growing and tending the singing flowers, and over the years, one by one, their voices had fallen silent.

To distract myself from such melancholy thoughts, I snatched up a long-handled net from the basket outside the door and started trying to catch one of the fish which kept flapping past.* I hoped I might land one that would turn

* Father says these space fish are not really fish, but rather Aetheric Icthyomorphs. But they do look awfully like fish, except that some of their fins have grown into wings. Father has spent years and years watching them, because he says that only by studying every detail of Creation can we truly begin to appreciate the Infinite Love and Wisdom of God. Father's name is Edward Mumby, and he is the author of a useful book called *Some Undescribed Icthyomorphs of the Trans-Lunar Aether*. We have several hundred copies of it stacked up neatly in the guest wing, should you be interested in reading one. Father has even had a fish named after him by one of his colleagues in the Royal Xenological Institute. It is called *Icthyomorphus mumbii*, and here is Mr Wyatt's drawing of it.

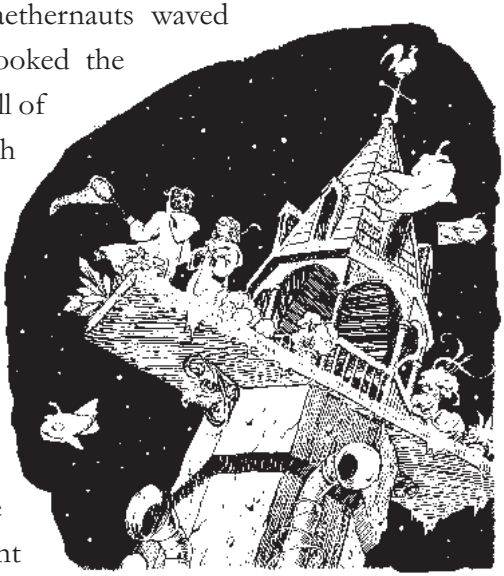




out to be of a Species Unknown to Science, and would interest Father. Alas, all I managed to net was a common or garden red whizzer (*Pseudomullus vulgaris*) as usual. Shoals of them often lurk about among Larklight's forest of chimney pots, seeking shelter there from prowling grab-sharks. I wanted to keep mine for supper, but Myrtle made me throw it back.

'Look!' cried Myrtle, all of a sudden, and there was the delivery boat, far closer to Larklight than I had expected. It was a dark green boat, and from a distance it looked rather like a fish itself, except that it had a large bulge at the stern where the alchemical engines were housed. It edged up to

our jetty with a few beats of its wings and quick, nervous twitches of its steering fins, moving much as the fish do. The crew were Ionians – we could not see much of them, wrapped up as they were inside tarpaulin aether-suits and tinted goggles, but you can always tell an Ionian: they are stocky little fellows with four arms. I said it would be fun to ask them in and hear what yarns they had to tell of life upon the aether, but Myrtle said primly, 'Certainly not, Arthur; they look terribly common. Why, they are not even human, let alone English.' So I contented myself with waving, and the aethernauts waved back as they unhooked the great blue-white ball of comet ice which hung in their ship's cargo-claws and manoeuvred it into the mouth of the ice chute. We could feel the vibrations all the way up on the balcony as it went



rumbling down into the ice house at the heart of Larklight.

Because the aether is not rich enough for us to breathe for very long, those of us who make our homes in the Heavens have come to rely on regular deliveries of ice, which our servants feed into special machines that extract the oxygen and pump it about inside our houses and our ships. (It also provides us with fresh water and cold stores, where meat and vegetables may be kept.) Our delivery boat brings us ice about once every three months, along with hampers of dried meat and fruit, tinned goods, preserves, and the flour and eggs and suchlike which our automatic cook uses to bake our bread and biscuits. Usually there are letters and journals aboard too.

As the boat pulled away that afternoon I raced Myrtle down the stairways to the jetty, and I won – huzzah! I opened one of the food hampers and burrowed within. Myrtle chided me for being greedy, but changed her tone quickly enough when I uncovered a jar of dried apricots. We each ate a few, and then, together, we tore open the brown paper parcel which the Ionians had left there for us, in which was bundled up all the mail forwarded to us from the Central Lunar Post Office at Port George.

There was not very much. A seed cake from our great-

aunt Euphemia in Devonshire, a letter for Father, some recent editions of the London *Times* and a month-old *Illustrated London News*. The latter Myrtle snatched from me before I could catch any more than a glimpse of the engraving on the front cover, which appeared to show a giant greenhouse.

'Oh, what pretty dresses!' my sister mewed, leafing through, and stopping now and then to go all soppy over a portrait of Lady Somebody-or-other of Whatsit in a new ball gown. 'Oh, how I wish I could see London, even if it were only for one day! Look, Art! The Queen and Prince Albert are arranging a Grand Exhibition where produce from all over the Empire is to be displayed. It sounds highly illuminating. "There are to be exhibits from all over Britain, as well as from the American colonies and Her Majesty's Extraterrestrial Possessions, Mars, Jupiter and the Moon . . ."'

'Pish,' I told her. 'We do not rule Jupiter, only a handful of its satellites.'

Myrtle did not appear to have heard me. She was too busy imagining herself in a frilly frock, curtseying to the Queen. '"The Exhibition is to be held in a Crystal Palace,"' she read. '"This vast structure has been engineered by Sir

Waverley Rain* himself, and was built in his manufactories on the moons of Mars. It consists of an iron frame within which are set thousands of gigantic panes of glass crystal, specially grown in Rain & Co.'s crystal fields at the Martian North Pole." Oh, Art, how I would love to go!'

I left her daydreaming and ran off up the winding stairways to take Father his letter. Servants were clattering about in the dining room and the kitchen, preparing dinner, and the smoke from their funnels made me sneeze as I hurried past them. Father had never been able to find human servants who were prepared to come all the way out to Larklight to look after us, so we made do with a batch of mechanical ones which we had ordered from Rain & Co. They were quite a good model, but they were getting rather

* Sir Waverley Rain is our greatest industrialist, and one of the wealthiest men in the Solar System. He started out as a humble cog-buffer in the spaceship yards of Liverpool, but his natural genius soon asserted itself and he made his first fortune by devising Rain's Patent Auto-Urchin, a mechanical boy who could be sent up chimneys too tall or poisonous for real orphans to sweep. He now owns vast manufactories upon the Martian moons, producing automatic servants and labourers of every type, and also engages in many other engineering ventures. He is terribly reclusive and seldom leaves his secluded house, The Beeches, Mars.

old, and some of them smoked terribly when their furnaces had just been stoked. (Their hands overheated too. Myrtle was forever complaining of scorch marks on the household linen.)

I found Father in his observatory, almost hidden by the masses of tubes and tanks and ducts and telescopes and the teetering stacks of books. In the big vivarium at the centre of the room a few rare icthyomorphs were drifting about

with their mouths open, inhaling particles of space moss. A fearsome grab-shark was spread open on the dissection table like a book while Father made a careful drawing of its innards. Behind him, through the observatory's big, round windows, I could see one white horn of the Moon.

'Ah, Art,' he said, looking up from his work and blinking at me in his vague, bewildered way, as if he had forgotten that I existed. Poor Father; he had never quite emerged from that cloud of sadness which enveloped us all when we heard of Mother's death. I was still sad sometimes, when I remembered her and thought about how I never was to see her again. But I was often happy too, especially when I was clambering about the roofs of Larklight or creating adventures for my lead soldiers and model aether-ships. As for Myrtle, she was concentrating too hard upon becoming a young lady to be sad all the time. But Father had given way to a sort of settled melancholy. He sought comfort in his studies and paid little attention to anything else. Why, I believe he might have forgotten to eat if Myrtle had not sent me out on to the landing to beat the dinner-gong each evening and rouse him from his contemplation of the lesser icthyomorphs.

He blinked again, as if he were struggling to remember

how one went about being a father. Then it came to him: he smiled his old, kind, twinkly-eyed smile at me, and set down his pencils, reaching out to tousle my hair.

'Well, what news from the great world beyond this little planetoid of ours?' he asked.

I told him about the seed cake ('How kind of your great-aunt Euphemia,' he said). Then I gave him the letter. He tore open the envelope, frowning slightly as he studied the enclosure. 'How intriguing. A Mr Webster, who is travelling in this quarter of the Heavens, wishes to call upon us. He will be arriving on the morning of the sixteenth. I take it that he is a scientific gentleman, like myself. See, he writes on the notepaper of the Royal Xenological Institute . . .'

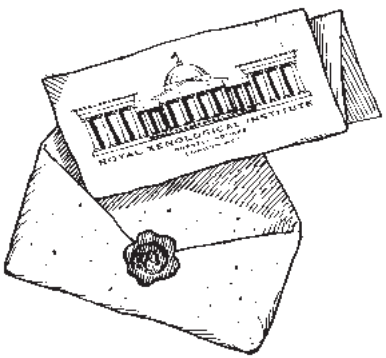
Now the Royal Xenological Institute is a parcel of very learned coves whose job it is to study all the different flora and fauna of our Solar Realm. They have premises in Russell Square, London, where the fellows and professors work, but they are in constant correspondence with amateur botanists and natural philosophers throughout the aether. Father quite often received letters from them asking his opinion on rare aspects of Icthyomorphous Biology, or informing him of a new discovery, and very dry, dusty,

dismal old gentlemen they sounded. Father, however, was quite delighted at the news of Mr Webster's intentions.

'I do not recognise the name,' he said, holding the letter up to the light and reading it again, as if he hoped that might tell him more about its author. 'I wonder if he has an interest in the lesser icthyomorphs?'

I couldn't think of any other reason why anyone should want to visit Larklight, but I did not say so, for I had no wish to hurt Father's feelings. Instead, I ran off to find Myrtle and tell her the news. For although Father seemed unaware of it, I knew that the sixteenth was tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO



IN WHICH MYRTLE DOES A LITTLE LIGHT DUSTING, AND OUR AWFUL ADVENTURES COMMENCE.

What a whirlwind of cleaning and dusting, of waxing and buffing, of scrubbing and scouring and straightening overtook Larklight! We were not used to visitors, living out there as we did 'in the back of the black'. Indeed, in all my years (and I was very nearly twelve) I could not recall anyone ever troubling themselves to come and visit us before.

Myrtle was greatly excited. She wanted to know everything about this Mr Webster. Was he a very important gentleman? Was he young and handsome? What were his family connexions? Was he, perhaps, related to the Berkshire Websters? She even fetched down our dusty old copy of *Burke's Peerage* from the top shelf of Father's library, hoping to discover that Mr Webster was heir to a dukedom or a baronetcy, but a paper bat had eaten up all the entries between Vinnicombe and Whortleberry, so that was no help.

'He must be *someone*,' she said firmly. 'Why, the Royal Xenological Institute does not hand out its official notepaper to just *anybody*. We must make certain that Larklight is ready to receive this Mr Webster.'

She ordered the poor old servants to set to work and clean the whole house from top to bottom (not that Larklight

really has either). When she saw that they were not up to the job, she took charge herself. She tidied away everything that could be tidied. She straightened the chairs and plumped the sofa cushions and made up a bed in the guest room. She polished the looking-glass and dusted the gas mantles, and cleaned the ornate frame of the portrait of Mother which hangs in the drawing room.* Then she made me go down to the heart of the house and switch off the gravity generator.

I had never quite liked the heart of Larklight. When you got right down inside, away from the windows and the living quarters, it was rather sombre and spooky. Odd winds blew at you from nowhere, and sometimes strange noises issued from dusty, disused rooms. The tiles on the floors formed patterns that were too complicated to make

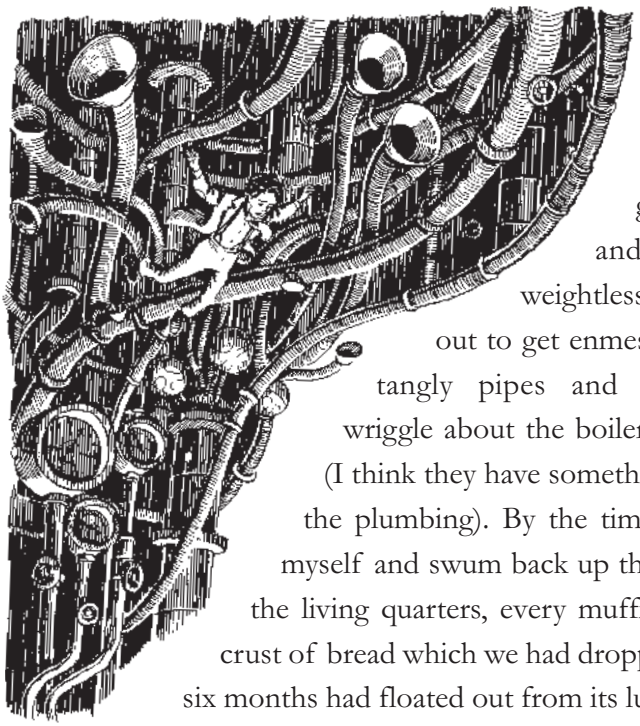
* The portrait shows Mother looking very young and beautiful, just as she must have appeared to Father when she attended the lecture he was giving at the Working Men's Institute at Cambridge in the autumn of 1832. The lecture was entitled *Some Recent Theories on the Origins of the Planets*, and I'm afraid Father made rather a hash of it, because he was put off by the charming lady sitting in the front row, who kept smiling as if his words amused her. But later she sought him out and apologised, and introduced herself as Miss Emily Smith of Ely, whose work on song flowers Father had long admired. By Christmastide they were engaged, and the following spring they were married.

out, and seemed to change when you weren't looking. It all felt very old, somehow, as if thousands of years of time had soaked into those dank stone walls. Which was impossible, of course, for it is less than two centuries since human beings ventured into space.

The gravity generator was housed in the very centre of the house, in a chamber which we called the boiler room. It was not a proper gravity generator, alas, such as are made in dear old England by Arbuthnot & Co. or Trevithicks. Ours was a thing of antique and unearthly design, all wheels and levers and flutes and cones and giant, spinning spheres, and honestly you would not believe that a house the size of Larklight could require such an enormous and complicated machine just in order to keep everybody's feet upon the carpets. It kept going wrong too, and great portions of it seemed to do nothing at all, but sat unmoving, covered in the dust of ages. I always presumed that one of Mother's forebears must have bought it from a Jovian scrap dealer, and I daresay they paid him too much for it.

I reached out and turned the adjustor dial until the arrow pointed to zero BSG.*

* *abbr.* British Standard Gravity



The generator hissed and sighed and grumbled, and I became weightless and floated out to get enmeshed in all the tangly pipes and ducts which wriggle about the boiler-room ceiling (I think they have something to do with the plumbing). By the time I had freed myself and swum back up the stairwells to the living quarters, every muffin crumb and crust of bread which we had dropped those past six months had floated out from its lurking place in the rugs and carpets and the obscurer corners of the wainscoting. Entering the dining room was like flying through a hailstorm of stale toast. But it was all part of Myrtle's master plan. Holding down her billowing crinoline with one hand, she flapped her way over to the big hutch in the corner of the pantry and let loose the hoverhogs.

Hoverhogs come from the great gas-world Jupiter, where they scoot about in the upper atmosphere and suck up insects and airborne plants. But they seem to be just as much at home in Larklight, where they scoot about our living quarters and snuffle up drifting crumbs and bits of fluff. They look rather like pigs, except that they are mauve, and about the size of hot-water bottles, and instead of legs they have flippers, which they use to steer. They propel themselves through the air by a method which Myrtle says I am not to mention because it is simply too crude, so I won't, but if you study the accompanying picture carefully I think you will see what it is.

The rotten-eggs smell of the hoverhogs' exhalations was still hanging in the air when I awoke next morning. My bedroom felt cold, but then it usually does, because that side of the house turns away from the Sun during the night hours. For a while I snuggled down under my counterpane and tried not to

think about getting up. Then I remembered. Today was the day when Mr Webster was to arrive! I leapt from my bed and tried to propel myself through mid-air to the wash-stand in the corner, forgetting that I had switched the gravity generator back on before I turned in.

As I lay there on the floor, dazed by my fall, I happened to glance up at the windows. My bedroom curtains are a bit holey where the space moths have nibbled them, and through the holes I could usually see the inky blackness of the aether. But this particular morning the blackness had been replaced by a dull, greyish white.

I opened the curtains and looked out at nothing at all.

I had heard of fog, and read about it in Sir Walter Scott, etc., but I had never heard of fog in space. I heaved the window open and stretched out my hand to touch it. It was springy and slightly sticky to the touch. I could not push my fingers through it. I was sure that the fog Sir Walter Scott wrote about was not like that.

Suspecting that something odd had happened, I pulled on my clothes as quickly as I could and went hurrying up the stair to Myrtle's room. She was awake, and just about to break the ice on her washstand with a toffee hammer when I burst in on her. Her curtains are in better shape than mine

(she darns the holes), so she had not yet noticed the mysterious fog. When I told her about it she said, 'Oh, what rot; whoever heard of fog in space?' Then, 'And can't you knock, you little beast?'

I threw back the curtains triumphantly, and sure enough, Myrtle's window looked out upon the same ghostly, smoky whiteness as my own. The only difference was that her room had already revolved into the sunlight, and so the fog outside glowed with a pearly sheen. It looked very pretty, but as we stood admiring it something moved past beyond it, casting a great spiky shadow.

'Eeeeeeeeeeek!' exclaimed Myrtle, jumping backwards.

I felt a little like saying 'Eeeeeeeeek!' myself, but seeing Myrtle so afraid reminded me that I was British, and must be brave. I took out my penknife, which I always keep in my pocket, along with a clean handkerchief and a box of lucifers. Opening Myrtle's casement, I leaned out far enough to dig the blade into the fog. It was a little like cutting through a woollen rug. I sawed away at it while Myrtle hopped nervously from foot to foot in the room behind me, occasionally squeaking, 'Art, take care!' and 'What is happening?'

Eventually I managed to cut a triangular hole about

three inches across. I put the cut-out triangle of fog in my pocket and set my eye to the hole.

From Myrtle's window you can usually look down to the roof of my little turret bedroom, then down again, (or is it up?) to all the roofs and windows of the main living quarters. But I could not see any of them. The whole house was being wrapped up like an Egyptian mummy in thick white ropes and ravellings of the clingy fog substance. Creeping about upon these strands, plucking and weaving and spinning out yet more, were . . .

'Spiders!' I said, scrambling hastily back into the room.

'Oh, how horrid!' exclaimed Myrtle, who dislikes almost all types of creepy-crawly (although she does have a soft spot for cheesy-bugs). 'Art, you must dispose of them! Quickly, arm yourself with a well-furled newspaper . . .'

So saying, she thrust a rolled copy of the *Times* into my hand. I hadn't quite the heart to tell her that the spiders I had just glimpsed had bodies as large as elephants', and legs as long as trees.

'I am going to fetch Father,' I said manfully, closing the window tightly. 'You must stay here, Myrtle, and try to be brave.' Then I walked calmly out of her room, and ran pell-mell along the landing to my father's room. I thought I

could hear scrabbling noises coming from the roof above, which made me run faster. I was in such a state of funk by the time I reached Father's door that I almost neglected to knock before I opened it.

Father was already out of bed, standing at the web-fogged window in his nightshirt and dressing gown. 'Art,' he cried. 'Whatever is going on?'

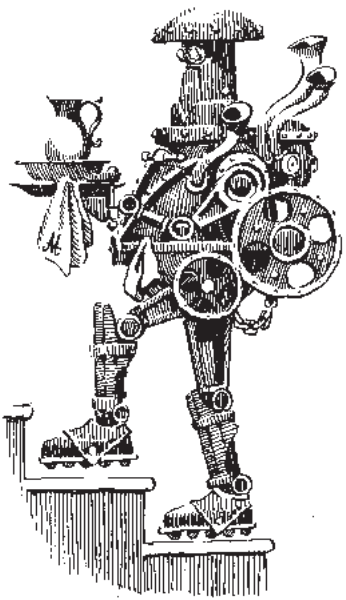
I was too out of breath to reply at once, and before I could find my voice I heard the front doorbell ring, and the stumping footsteps of an auto-servant going to answer it. 'They mustn't open it, Father!' I gasped.

'It's quite all right, Art,' Father promised, pushing past me and out on to the landing. 'I daresay it is only Mr Webster. He is rather earlier than expected. I presume this vapour outside was generated by his ship's chemical wedding; a mist from Alchemical Space, no doubt. Fascinating . . .'

'It's not mist, Father. It's *web*,' I wailed, but Father was already hurrying away along the landing to his dressing room. 'It's . . .'

A servant, the black-boilered auto-butler we called Raleigh, came stomping up the stairs and his mushroom-shaped tin head swung round to address me. 'A Mr Webster

to see your father, Master Arthur.'



I ran to join him at the top of the staircase, staring down into the hall. The front door was standing open. As I watched, an enormous, many-jointed leg reached in through it; then another. The legs were white, and looked as if they had been carved from polished bone.

'Father!' I shouted.

'Yes, yes, Arthur,' I heard him call from the dressing room. 'I shall be there in a moment. You must ask our visitor to wait in the withdrawing room. Perhaps he would like to join us for breakfast.'

Down in the hall, the monstrous spider squeezed its white, prickly ball of a body in through the door with a faint scraping sound. A cluster of black eyes glittered like wet grapes at the front end. Above them a shabby brown bowler hat was perched upon its spines. Beneath, hairy mouth-parts twitched and fidgeted. It tilted itself upwards,

and saw me staring down at it.

'The name's Webster,' it said, lifting its hat with one huge claw. 'I'm expected.'

It spoke in a rather common way and did not sound friendly. I looked down at the newspaper Myrtle had provided me with. It was a good, thick newspaper, but it didn't look as if it would have any effect at all on Mr Webster. I cast it aside, said to Raleigh, 'Throw him out!' and shouted again, 'Father!'

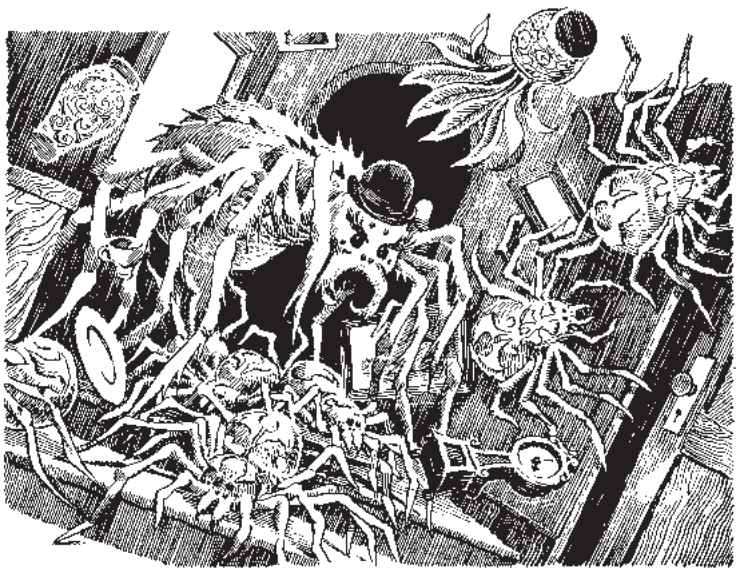
'Oh, blast these collar studs!' said Father's voice through the half-open dressing-room door.

I waited on the top stair and watched hopefully as Raleigh clumped back down, machinery grating and clanking inside him until the wax cylinder with the correct phrase on it dropped into place. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said, 'I'm afraid I must ask you to leave . . .'

Just then, the gravity failed. Had the generator gone wrong again, or had some sneaky spider crept down into the boiler room and switched the adjustor dial to zero? I clung to the banisters and watched helplessly as Raleigh bobbed into the air like a fat metal balloon. A blow from Mr Webster's clawed forefoot slammed him against the wall, and his head fell off and went tumbling slowly

through the air. Mr Webster heaved himself forwards into the hall, smashing the hatstand into a spray of up-tumbling splinters. His black eyes were still fixed on me, glittering with triumph. He said, 'Grab 'em all, lads.'

More of the white spiders, smaller than Mr Webster but still much, much too big, came pouring into the house. The lack of gravity did not trouble them, for they were just as happy to walk on the walls or ceiling as the floor. They scuttled through the archways of their master's legs towards the stairs. I flapped my way towards the dressing room, shouting for Father. He came floating out on to the landing,



bare-legged, with his shirt-tails billowing and his collar half on.

'I say!' he cried, staring past me at the leading spider, which had not troubled itself to climb the stairs but had come straight up the wall instead, its claws digging into the wallpaper. 'What a magnificent brute! And unknown to science, unless I'm much mistaken! Quickly, Art, fetch me a net and my very largest preserving jar . . .'

'Mr Webster is a *spider*!' I exclaimed. 'There are lots more spiders downstairs!'

'Now come, Art,' Father chided, adjusting his spectacles to peer up at the beast as it came creeping towards us across the ceiling. 'It is hardly a spider. There is some superficial resemblance, to be sure, but you will observe it has at least twelve legs, whereas our earthly *arachnidae* have only eight . . .'

That was as far as he got, for at that moment the creature flung itself down upon him. I kicked it a few times, but it barely noticed, and its only reaction was to lash out with one of those twelve legs, catching me a blow which sent me tumbling back along the landing to the top of the stairs. Other spiders were coming up; I could see their black shadows jerking, all spindly in the gaslight. I heard Father

shouting, 'Arthur, old chap, look to your sister! Keep Myrtle safe; I –' And then his voice was muffled into silence.

I looked back. The spider had lifted Father up inside the cage of its legs and was spinning him there like a bobbin, wrapping him from head to foot in those same white winding-sheets which had blinded Larklight's windows.

'Father!' I shouted, but there was nothing I could do, only obey his last command. I kicked and flapped and propelled myself back the way I had come, and the landing behind me was full of the skinny, dancing shadows of the spiders. Ahead, our hoverhogs blundered along in a chuffling scrum of pink bottoms and curly tails, squealing piteously. I suppose they had scented the invaders, and broken out of their hutch in a panic. They darted up an air duct, seeking safety in the shadows there, and I would have dearly loved to have hidden there too, but I had promised to save Myrtle, and so I swam onwards.

Outside the linen closet I saw two servants bobbing about, still struggling with the blankets which they must have been folding when the gravity went off. 'Spiders!' I shouted at them. 'Dust! Get rid of all those cobwebs!'

I knew they could not stop the invaders, but I hoped they might at least slow them down. As they obediently

extended their broom and feather duster attachments and turned out to face the spiders I grabbed hold of the picture rail and hauled myself along it to the door of Myrtle's room.

'Oh, *knock*, Art!' she cried. 'How many times must I tell you? It is not difficult!'

Just then a great crashing and clattering came echoing along the landing. I suppose it must have been the sound of the spiders overcoming the two servants I had sent to bar their way.

'Whatever is that dreadful din?' demanded Myrtle. 'I suppose you have noticed that the generator has failed again! And where is Father?'

It was then that I realised our father was most probably dead – that the spiders had eaten him, and would eat us too if we did not make our escape.

I took Myrtle's hand. 'We must make our way to the lifeboats,' I said, as I dragged her to the door. 'I am afraid that something rather disagreeable has happened.'