

THE MARBLE CURSE

RICHARD VINCENT



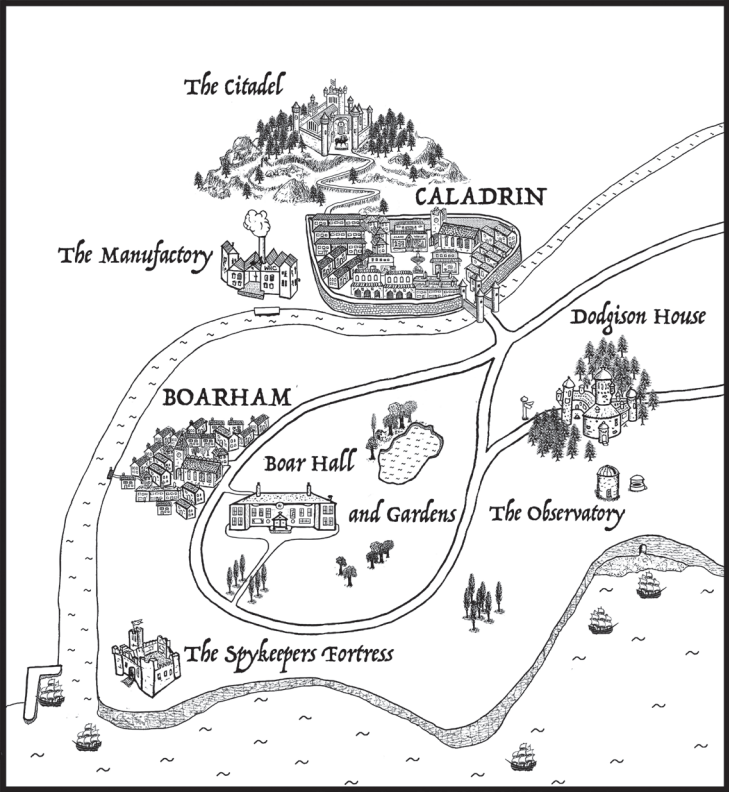
Reformation
Lightning

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JOE'S GADGETS

Short name	Full name	What it does
CREAM	Cat Re-Entry Alarm Monitor	Shrieks when Copurnnicus, Joe's cat, returns through the back door.
DAD	Digital Audio Detector	Finds and analyses sounds that people cannot hear.
EAR	Energy Alert Responder	Senses every type of invisible force field: electrical, magnetic, radiation...
none	Omniscope	Gives a clear view of everything from microscopic particles to distant planets. Can interpret images.
OAK	Outside Adventure Kit	Contains Joe's collection of his best gadgets in a water-proof pouch.
PEST	Pan-Electromagnetic Spectrum Torch	Shines X-rays, light, radio waves, and high-energy lasers. Voice controlled.
RAT	Remote Audio Transmitter	Enables listening at keyholes using a radio microphone with a separate ear-bud receiver.



MAP OF CALADRIN AND BOARHAM

CHAPTER 1

UNEXPECTED PRESENTS

Staring out of his window, Joe Raven was controlling his latest invention. As it flew over his garden, he checked its solar-electric shell, eye cameras and jet-propelled legs. He had been an inventor since he was three, starting with a secret trapdoor in his kitchen table to make his peas disappear without eating them. Now, aged eleven, wiry and with dark copper hair, he was famous as a master of small gadgets that had extraordinary power.

To bring his ideas to life he had made his bedroom into a 'Creatory'. It was impossibly full. Screens and machines, clips and chips, glues and screws, cool tools and hot irons all had their place – not to mention the 277 well-labelled boxes of essential supplies. The walls

were covered with shelved bottles and jars, mostly labelled 'Poison'. He still slept there, though the only space left for sleep was between the rafters under his floor that he reached through a sliding panel with voice control.

At the same time, his sister, Beth, was giving a speech to her bedroom mirror. She was two years older than Joe and more solid. Her chocolate-brown hair, when not pinned up, fell in shallow curls to her shoulders. Books covered her floor as well as filling her shelves. They also struggled for space on top of her wardrobe. One shelf was set aside for her trophies. The shield of a Junior Master Bowman of FAST – the Field Archery Society of Trembleton – was displayed in the centre. In drama, her other great pastime, she was three-time winner of the SPIT Cup for her Solo Performance in Theatre. Now she was practising for her next leading role.

Beth usually kept well away from Joe's Creatory, but her mirror reflected the impossible sight of a mysterious flying animal. Curiosity drove her to brave a visit. Slowly, she opened his door. The air was sharp. It made her breathing hurt, and it was changing colour. A flame was burning dangerously on a windowsill.

'Joe, there's purple smoke in here and the curtain is going to catch fire!' she shouted.

'It's the iodine. Turn the gas out, please. I'm making a landing.'

She covered her mouth and nose, blinked hard, and killed the flame. 'I've just seen an odd flying creature outside,' she said after her throat had recovered.

No response.

‘Another marvel of Trembleton’s nimble-fingered inventor?’

‘... er... Yes.’ Joe’s brain stayed bolted to a screen while he commanded his flight-control app to prepare for landing. ‘Touch-down. That’s it! A brilliant maiden flight of the first-ever Spy-tortoise!’

‘A flying tortoise that’s a spy? Do you think someone might notice it in the air?’

‘It sneaks around on the ground most of the time. Flying is for a quick getaway.’

‘Of course... Did it spy anything?’

‘An old cardboard box under the tree.’

‘An old cardboard box? Surely not! A threat to humankind, right on our doorstep?’

‘Well, it wasn’t there ten minutes ago—’

‘Perhaps it was dropped by Father on the way to his office.’

A revolting smell of decay suddenly made Beth sneeze. ‘What putrefaction is this?’ She pointed to a round glass dish lying by Joe’s jars.

‘Bioluminescent bacteria. They glow in the dark. I thought you might like them as a nightlight.’

‘Oh no, young Sir, though ‘tis a kindly offering. But sickly germs next to my pillow? A truly frightening prospect for a young lady with a sensitive disposition – and for a mother for whom even the *word* “germ” ignites horror and a desperate search for disinfectant.’

‘Your loss,’ said Joe, used to Beth’s outbursts of drama.

‘But I remain deeply grateful.’

‘Shall I—’

A screeching ‘Meow!’ came from downstairs – the CREAM, Joe’s Cat Re-Entry Alarm Monitor.

‘That’s Copurrnicus. I’ll go,’ he said.

As soon as the back door opened, a fluffy ginger cat flashed past him into the kitchen. Usually he would have chased it, but he stopped to look at the package his Spy-tortoise had spotted under the tree. About three times bigger than a shoe box, it was tied up with rough string held by red sealing wax. He picked it up. It was as light as a balloon. He shook it. Nothing rattled, squeaked or splashed. Odd. How had it got there? His father definitely wouldn’t have dropped it and the garden had no outside gate. He studied the grass: no footprints, no marks. No one was hiding in the tree. He looked at it again and discovered a small, handwritten label. What he saw made him run to the kitchen where Beth was reading and his mother, as usual, was talking to nobody in particular.

He burst in with, ‘Look! This was under the tree. My Spy-tortoise found it. It’s addressed to me and Beth, and it’s marked urgent!’

‘Do be careful!’ said his mother, straightaway spraying clouds of ‘Instant Sterility Plus’ and hurriedly covering the table with a thick cloth.

‘No jokes?’ said Beth, coughing through the spray.

‘No jokes,’ said Joe. ‘Really.’

‘A gift from the gods, then – well, the poor ones, anyway. Let’s open it.’

Beth cut the string and lifted the cardboard lid.

Four pairs of eyes strained to see what was inside. Copurrnicus was watching from Joe's shoulder.

'Lots of old newspaper,' said Beth as she threw the first layer onto the floor.

Joe couldn't resist pulling out a few handfuls as well, and it was he who first caught sight of a hidden object: a curved piece of silver.

'Found something!' said Joe. 'Over to you.'

When Beth had finished the unpacking, she lifted out a silver bird about the size of a pigeon. Its eyes were pale blue and had the strange effect of looking straight at you wherever you went. For a moment everyone was quiet, even their mother. The beauty of the bird was so striking that silence was the only possible response. Beth was the first to say what the others were thinking: 'It's incredible! Totally, really beautiful.'

Joe said nothing, but he was fascinated by the bird's appearance. He also noticed that, when she held it up for all to see, Beth's face glowed. Reflected daylight from the window? There was no way that light could be coming from the bird itself, was there?

'How gorgeous, darling! What a *marvellous* gift!' said her mother, finding her voice again. 'I have never seen anything like it. Let's put it on the cupboard to catch the sun.'

Beth, enchanted by the bird, was in no hurry to put it anywhere. 'It's silver,' she said, 'but I can see rainbow colours move across it like a wave.' Then, without altogether believing it: 'Sometimes I can see right through it.'

‘I know how that’s done,’ said Joe. ‘It’s a shiny metal with microscopic lines to make a diffraction grating. That would cause colours that move. And you can see through metal if it’s very thin.’

She stroked it. ‘It feels warm, like it’s covered with real feathers,’ added Beth in surprise.

‘It must...’ said Joe, ‘...have another layer on top... etched in a different way...’ He was finding it difficult to think how that could happen. ‘Or...’ His voice faded.

Beth, absorbed by the gentle feel and shimmering beauty of her present, let Joe’s theories float past without comment.

‘Who sent it?’ asked Mother. ‘I can’t think of anyone we know who breeds pigeons, especially silver ones. Aunt Flo’s husband, Dennis, dabbled in that sort of thing once, but he died ages ago. He had severe Bird Fancier’s Lung. Quite unusual. She never kept any animals after that. As I was saying to Mrs Dimworthy, birds are—’

‘Let’s look in the box again,’ interrupted Joe. ‘It was addressed to me as well.’

Beth rested the bird on the silver, branch-shaped stand that came with it and tipped the box upside down. More paper poured into the paws of the playful Copurnicus, then two other objects fell out: something flat and brown that slipped onto the floor, and an envelope with Beth’s name on it.

Quick-eyed Joe dived under the table. There he spotted a newspaper with the headline ‘*The King’s Madness – Latest*’. It reminded him of when his class

at school gave their teacher a set of pens filled with disappearing ink. Mr King went screaming bonkers after writing reports all day only to find he was left with a pile of blank pages. What else was there to find?

Beth opened her envelope and took out a card. On the front was a drawing of her bird, though it was flying through clouds rather than sitting on its stand. She read it out loud:

Dear Beth,

Can you and Joe rescue us? We are under a curse.
No one knows where it comes from and no one
can unbind it.

Together, you have what we need.
If you are willing to help, change into a servant
beyond the clock.

I hope you like the silver bird. He's called
Thyriopolis.

I will explain when we meet.
Please come!
Granelda

'Who's Granelda?' asked Beth. 'And what does all *that* mean? It sounds terrible! And why has she sent me a silver bird?'

'I really don't know,' said Mother. 'I thought *you* might have an answer – she seems to know you. You did have a Great Aunt Ethel once, but she never learnt to write, so it can't be her. Then again, our second cousin, Bert – the one with the red hair—'