

THE DANGEROUS
BUSINESS OF BEING
TRILBY MOFFAT

KATE TEMPLE

LOTHIAN
Children's Books

PROLOGUE

Every situation is worse when your room is on fire. Curling up with a nice book is worse . . . when your room is on fire. Eating cake in bed is worse . . . when your room is on fire. Dreaming about patting a silky-haired poodle named Rudrick McAloon is ruined . . . when your room is on fire. And this was exactly the dream Trilby Moffat was having when the smell of smoke hit her nose like a baby with a rubber fish.

Being a quick-witted girl with a terrific sense of smell and fast legs, Trilby sat bolt upright and leapt for the door without a second thought. She bounced back. The handle

was hot. Scalding hot. So hot you could cook an egg on it (if you had time, and a spare egg).

‘It’s hot,’ she exclaimed as dark smoke slithered in from the gap above the door.

‘It’s a fire. Fire is hot,’ said a man in a top hat who had appeared unexpectedly. Trilby let out a sharp shriek. The man rolled his eyes. He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a long thin wooden pipe and lit its bowl. The scent of burning cartwheels and sandalwood filled the air.

‘This cat-and-mouse game of ours is now over,’ he said, taking three quick puffs.

Trilby gulped. The thing about being scared is this: it’s impossible to be scared about two things at once. For example, if you are terrified of heights, the best way to get over it is to jump in a hot air balloon with a tiger snake. You’ll soon forget about your fear of heights, although you may well end up with a crippling fear of tiger snakes.

The man in the hat blew a cloud of pale pink smoke across the room. Trilby was more afraid of him than the fire licking the door. Her heart pounded, her skin prickled. She bit her lip and took a deep breath.

‘Excuse me, but are you going to try and murder me, again?’

‘Murder? How ungrateful children can be, and after all I’ve done for you.’ The man sighed before continuing, ‘Today is your lucky day. I’m giving you a promotion.’

‘A promotion from what?’

‘Being burnt to a crisp,’ said the man flatly. ‘Come along, the game is up, and you lost.’

Trilby was not so sure – she still had the key, and she would not hand it over so easily.



CHAPTER 1

RAIN GENTLY (7)

Yes, yes. You're full of questions. You always are. Who is Trilby Moffat? Why was the man wearing a top hat? Do babies really hit people with rubber fish? I know your sort. But I'm not here to give you the answers to all your little questions. This is not a bedtime story. I am not writing this down for your entertainment. This is a *legal* document. If you know anything at all about the law (which I do), you will know that notation is everything. Once something is written down, it becomes evidence . . . and evidence can be a very dangerous thing in the right hands.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Things must progress in an orderly manner. We will not waste time with irrelevant details. So, I won't bother telling you that Trilby Moffat is a reasonably nice girl. I won't mention that her favourite food is sour jelly worms, and her favourite pastimes include drawing cicadas, reading detective novels and solving crossword puzzles. There's no need for you to know that she has hair the colour of burnt straw and eyes the colour of a green tree frog.

Now that I've refused to give you the basics, we can continue. Good for you. This is what you *need* to know. On the first Wednesday of June, there were three stories on the front page of the *Daily Gazette*:

1. A cat named Bruce Schnitzel had been rescued from a drain.
2. Drizzle and light wind were forecast for the rest of the week.
3. A mystery illness was making people speak ancient languages and bake unusual cakes.

This news, on the surface, seemed vaguely amusing. Not the cat rescue – that's no laughing matter – and anyone who finds drizzle entertaining is clearly deranged. But this business with the cakes was strangely comical . . . unless it was happening to you. Then it was hideous.

It had all started six months before. Nothing much at first, just a few odd stories in the back pages of the local news. Perfectly boring people who had never

done anything remarkable in their lives but sit on a sofa and press buttons on a television remote suddenly began answering the phone in Latin, ordering pizza in Sanskrit and weaving hats of a style no one had seen for thousands of years. Strange, certainly, but hardly a medical emergency.

One 54-year-old accountant woke up in the middle of the night, built a plough out of bike parts and began farming his next-door neighbour's front lawn while singing a Viking song. 'Stop digging up my lawn, you lunkhead!' his neighbour had been reported yelling at 2 am. But the accountant had just shaken his fist and replied, 'Theyga! Doon-gah! Doon-gah!' which later turned out to be Viking for 'Shut up, you nosy fool!'

For those unlucky enough to be infected, it only got worse. What started with an ability to read a dead language or whistle a forgotten tune soon began to take over their lives. Parents packed school lunchboxes with olden-day treats like bleeding eel or sparrow's feet, plumbers began building aqueducts for customers who just wanted their toilets unblocked and one infected teacher wrote her students' class reports entirely in Egyptian hieroglyphs. It wasn't all fun and antique boardgames.

The more people cooked forgotten cakes and spoke ancient languages, the more they slept. At first, it was a yawn here and there. Then a nap or three at inappropriate times, like in the middle of a job interview or while shopping in the frozen aisle of the supermarket.

Then it grew into a tiredness that couldn't be shaken. They started going to bed earlier and earlier. They slept in and took naps at work and mid-morning snoozes on public benches. Down they went, sleeping like overfed cats until all this dozing became one endless siesta. Eventually, they barely woke up at all, and then not at all. Hospitals and homes were quietly filling with these sleeping and confused souls – deep in a dream and lost in time. No one knew why it was happening. Or why people were being infected. No doctor could explain it, no scientist. And no one knew when it would stop.

Now all this information has not been told to you for your entertainment. Entertainment is your problem. If you want to chew on ice-cream and play shuffleboard with a friend named Harlequin Twix, that's your business. But this information is important. It is called *context*. When it comes to the law, context is both everything and also nothing. Here's an example: if I told you I ripped a man limb from limb using only my teeth, that would be *against* the law. If I told you I was a thylacine (a fabulous but extinct creature with a body like a dog, stripes like a tiger and jaws like a shark), then it would be perfectly legal and just bad luck for the dead man. Context is just facts you haven't met yet. It has the power to change everything (or nothing).

In the case of a young girl named Trilby Moffat, context changed everything. It is because of this strange illness that Trilby Moffat and her mother, Arwen Moffat,

came to be sitting on a train. Behind them were a number of things they would never see again, including a comfortable apartment, a school, a regular job and all the people they considered friends. Between them was one small suitcase and a secret promise. In front of them: a mystery relative, an unusual inheritance, an opportunity that would never be repeated and a man who would try to kill Trilby . . . more than once.

The train rattled through the drizzle towards the middle of nowhere. Trilby wore jeans and a red jacket with round wooden buttons. She glanced over at her mother anxiously. Arwen was sleeping. She had been asleep for most of this long trip, which was a very good thing, because for the short time she had been awake she had attempted to plait the beard of the man seated in front of her. Arwen had woken that morning with the impressive ability to create ancient Egyptian hairstyles. She had already knitted her own hair into hundreds of twirly braids, and had even made a start on Trilby's, but the moment they'd sat down, Arwen had set her sights on the long beard of the man sharing their compartment. The man had been as tolerant as he could be of Arwen reaching out and twisting at the hairs on his chinny-chin-chin – no doubt he felt sorry for her. Clearly another poor unfortunate struck down with Dream Sickness. Arwen had fallen asleep by the second stop and the man had used this opportunity to move as far away as possible. No one had taken his seat and Trilby spent the next

four hours rattling along, watching the buildings turn into fields and the fields turn into more fields, as Arwen slept, slumped across three seats. It was a long trip, but Trilby was not bored. She had packed a few things into a small bag, some coloured pencils and a dog-eared puzzle book with a torn cover. Inside was an excellent crossword. She had just solved the clue for 'great' (it was 'peachy keen') and was just about to crack the next clue when she was interrupted by the Ticket Inspector. She was a tall woman with short blonde hair and a speckled face, and biscuit crumbs on her chest.

'Tickets,' said the Ticket Inspector.

Trilby reached into her bag and pulled out two tickets. The Ticket Inspector studied them before clipping.

'End of the line, then?'

'Yes,' replied Trilby.

The Ticket Inspector tilted her head and looked at Arwen. 'Is that your mum?'

Arwen was sprawled out like a large baby, her eyes darting about under closed lids, deep in a dream.

'We had a complaint that someone's been pulling beards,' said the Ticket Inspector, pointing at Arwen. 'Her.'

'My mother's not well.'

'Hmm. Dream Sickness, I bet.'

Trilby nodded.

'How long has she had it?' asked the Ticket Inspector.

'It started a few months ago, but she gets worse every day. This morning, she woke up plaiting everything, but

at least she's not trying to make a flamingo-tongue pie anymore.'

The Ticket Inspector sighed and nodded sadly. 'My uncle has Dream Sickness. He was one of the first to come down with the wretched thing. We couldn't work out what was wrong with him at first, but then he built a step pyramid out of sandstone on a traffic island.'

'Oh dear. Is he still making pyramids?'

'No. He fell asleep after that. Hasn't woken up for months. Never gets up. Never eats. Never goes to the toilet. Just sleeps.'

'I'm sorry,' said Trilby. She wasn't actually sorry since it wasn't technically her fault, but Trilby Moffat was a reasonably nice girl and that's the sort of thing reasonably nice people say.

'He wasn't a very pleasant man, anyway,' added the Ticket Inspector. 'My aunt says the step pyramid was the best thing he ever did. Have you got someone to help you at the station, you know, if your mum doesn't wake up?'

'Not really. We're catching a taxi.'

'I'll give you a hand if she's not awake. Just shout.'

It was an offer Trilby was glad to have. By the time the train arrived at the last station, with the unimaginative name Last Stop Station, Arwen Moffat was still dreaming. Trilby rubbed her mother's shoulder and pushed her braided hair from her face.

'Mum, it's time to wake up. We're here.'

Arwen barely stirred.

‘Sack of barley, pinch of salt, honey . . . three dormice,’ grumbled Arwen softly.

‘I hope you’re not planning dinner, Mum. I’ve told you, I don’t eat dormice.’

Arwen rolled over. She was not waking up. Trilby looked out onto the platform, where the afternoon light was fading. At the end of the platform, she could see a tiny white stationhouse lit by dim lamps, with the empty countryside stretching out behind it. A handful of passengers were disappearing through the gates already. Beyond the platform, Trilby could make out a single solitary street, vacant except for one old black taxi, shining in the rain.

‘Come on,’ said Trilby, grabbing their suitcase with one hand and nudging her mother, who didn’t move, with the other. Fortunately, the Ticket Inspector had not forgotten her promise.

‘Still sleeping then, eh?’ she said, poking her head into the compartment. Trilby nodded. With one swift movement, the Ticket Inspector pulled Arwen’s floppy body to its feet. If you’ve ever had to move a dead body, you’ll know how hard it can be. Perhaps the Ticket Inspector had moved a dead body (or seven) in her time because she was very good at it . . . maybe too good.

Trilby stepped off the train behind them, carrying one lonely suitcase. The air turned cold and drizzly. Trilby felt a rush of heat to her face as a familiar sick feeling pulled at her. She wanted to cry. This place was totally

foreign. She was far away from everything she knew, and the one person she could trust was unconscious and being piggybacked by a stranger across a deserted station platform. But this was no time for crying. The time for crying is when watching sad movies, when you fall off your bike or when someone steals your guinea pig. This was none of those times; this was the time for getting in that black taxi. Trilby took a sharp gulp of cold air and waved at the taxi. It flashed its lights. The Ticket Inspector hobbled along, dragging Arwen, rain dripping off the shiny black peak of her cap. The door of the taxi opened and a shouty voice came out.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ snapped the taxi driver, taking one look at Arwen, who was wilted like old celery.

‘She’s just sleeping,’ replied Trilby, shocked. ‘She has Dream Sickness.’

The driver grunted. He was the suspicious type, never believing a word he read. He remained unconvinced by all the news reports of people falling into endless sleep. Hysteria, he called it – and perhaps that was easier than believing in these dangerous dreams. But a fare was a fare, and this was the only fare at the Last Stop Station.

‘Alright, but I’m not lifting her at the other end if she doesn’t wake up,’ said the driver. Trilby shuffled into the worn leather backseat. It smelled like mints and old shoes. The Ticket Inspector plonked Arwen beside her, shut the door and gave a sharp wave. Trilby thought she caught a glint of pity in the Ticket Inspector’s eye, or

maybe it was rain; you never can tell, and that's probably for the best.

'So, young girl and "sleeping" lady . . .' said the driver, making those annoying quotation marks with his hands as he said the word sleeping, 'where are we going then?'

'I have the address here . . .' Trilby rummaged around in her shoulder bag, pulled out a black notebook and checked the address. 'Nowhere Else Pier,' she said.

'Are you sure?' asked the driver in surprise.

'That's the address I have,' said Trilby. 'There's no street or house number.' Trilby doubled checked the pages of the book.

'That's because there's only one place there! Lost in Time Antiques,' said the driver.

'Oh. I guess that's where we're going, then.'

'In thirty years of driving this taxi, no one has ever asked me to take them to Nowhere Else Pier . . . and there's a very good reason for that,' said the driver, shaking his head.

'What's that?'

'It doesn't exist.'



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