

The Fortune-Telling Book

Boiling hot tea splashed over my white shirt. I pulled out my handkerchief and tried to rescue my outfit, but I only made a bigger mess. I popped out of the window to investigate the culprit behind the startle.

“Whoa!” The coachman tried to subdue the horses, but they continued to tramp the chain of puddles that marked London no matter the season, refusing to advance.

“Why are we stopping?”

“Sir, there is another coach in front of us who stopped, and I see a crowd of at least twenty blocking their path.”

One look at my pocket watch, and I got off my transportation, but I paid the man his due. I was less than a block away, so I might as well walk.

The throng did block the archway completely. There were all kinds of folks: fat-bellied merchants whose eyes gleamed at a coin’s clink; boys and girls bound for school; farmers clutching their suppers’ roosters by the necks. This menagerie encircled something of interest—something that set up its base under the arch for a reason.

Out of curiosity and an eagerness to gain passage through this congestion, I approached the group.

They smelled the bills in my pocket before they laid eyes on me. Not wanting trouble, they immediately spread out and gave me a five-foot radius. The inner ring, however, didn’t budge.

By now, I’ve forgotten about my seminar class at the courthouse. Instead, I craved to learn the source that tempted farmers to idle in the prime season of harvest and students to risk the wrath of their headmasters.

I heard an authoritative voice distinctly over the peasants' shifting feet, shuddering breaths, and rustling tunics. "Next! What will be your fate, old man? One pound in the hat first, please."

I found a gap between two spectators and wedged my way in. The layer of dust that transferred upon my sleeves made me squirm, as did the stench of unwashed bodies packed in proximity, but I finally clapped my eyes on who caused this commotion.

He was a grotesque dwarf, like a gargoyle removed from the walls, but posing in a magenta tailcoat three sizes too big. In the back, a poster identified him as Mr. Rayfield, owner of *The Fortune-Telling Book*. I could not tear my gaze away from neither his globular eyes nor his hooked nose—both of which elicited a strong desire in me to take to my heels—until I heard him speak again.

Mr. Rayfield enunciated better than most orators at Westminster. "Pick a number!"

"One, two..." The old man fidgeted. After exhausting all ten fingers, he glanced up hopelessly and mumbled a syllable.

"Eight." Mr. Rayfield repeated.

The book—which looked no different from a monastery's Bible, gilded with gold and encrusted with egg-sized rubies—was consulted next. The dwarf gingerly flipped it open and turned the pages one at a time, stopping at page three to smooth out any creases.

"Page eight," he announced. "Out of the thirty lines on this page, which do you choose?"

The man went through his two hands again. "Eight?"

"Why not?" Mr. Rayfield counted with his fat fingers. "Eight. Are you ready to learn your fate, whatever it is?"

"Yes," he croaked.

Mr. Rayfield refolded his collars, which were standing straight on either side of his tree stump of a neck. "Mister, if you become more generous with your current wealth, you are going to see the biggest harvest you have ever seen yet, and your sons will also prosper this season."

"Thank you! Bless you, sir!" The old man seized the dwarf's gloves, bringing them to his chapped lips.

Mr. Rayfield thrust his hands back inside his pockets.

"Oh, my apologies! Here is another sterling to show my appreciation."

"Your generosity bespeaks your admirable fortune, Mister." The dwarf opened his palms again.

The queer sensation I felt when I first laid eyes on Mr. Rayfield returned.

"My turn!" The girl in front of me inserted herself between the fortune-teller and the former client. "How can I learn about my future?"

"Aren't you eager?" Mr. Rayfield beckoned her forward. "Have you asked your mama for a coin before you came?"

"I did!"

The dwarf patted her thrice, and if not for her burning curiosity, she would have swatted him away. "What is your name, sweetheart?" he asked. "You look like Margaret. Or is it Elizabeth?"

"Lizzie."

"Of course."

"Mister." I imagine she must find it tough to speak to a man the same height as her. "What should I do?"

“I was just about to get to that. You see, little Liz, this magical fortune-telling book is a capricious creature. Sometimes, you must have different approaches to counter its unpredictability. Randomness improves its accuracy, and I am a very fair businessman, you see; I will ensure that you receive a special prophecy.”

She nodded, but really she should've been shaking her head to indicate her perplexity at all those big words.

“Don't be scared as I guide your hand to the side of the book. I see your eyes widen as you feel the ridges; isn't that wonderful? Let's do it again, from the beginning—to the end. Now, again, and this time, stop at a random spot.”

Lizzie's stiff arm picked a stop as soon as possible.

“Step away,” he commanded, scrutinizing the page's contents. “I have it for you, little Liz!” That outburst made me frown, for I thought there were multiple lines on a single page. “You will marry an earl's heir, and you shall become a great lady who attends parties, manages an estate, and...visits other ladies.”

The people murmured their envy, but the girl flushed apple-red.

“No!” Her shriek rang with the archway's natural sound effects. “I don't want to be some stupid lady and marry some stupid boy!”

“But, little Liz, surely—”

“No, no, no!” She stomped her feet. “That can't be my future! I wanted to become a pirate and have a great many adventures—” With that, she could no longer hold back her tears, so she dashed out of the circle.

“That really can't be helped.” Mr. Rayfield shrugged. “Next.”

The crowd took their turns at the front. Since I had no intention to seek his service, I backed away as the throng began to thin. However, I remained behind the arch's pillars, as I did intend to discover the source of my unease. Yet as each client went on, I could find no fault in the dwarf's suave conduct.

"You are up, boy," I heard him bellow. "Last one for the day.

I peeked from my hideout and saw a little beggar. The boy was barefoot. He didn't even have a hat or gloves at this time of the year.

He dropped to his knees. "I beg of you, sir, tell me how long it will be until I find my fortune, be that a place to stay or a buried treasure." He talked eloquently for a street-dweller.

"Boy, what I do is not charity."

"I apologize, here." He got up and placed a coin at the dwarf's feet.

"Thank you. I'll see what I can do about your future." Like before, the dwarf snatched the coin so eagerly, as if fearing that it would be swallowed by the ground. "Please come nearer, and I'll have you read from one of these prophetic lines. Don't be vexed by your confusion, for this is not written in a language of this earth. Closer, boy, so that you can see—"

"What nonsense is this?" The beggar demanded. The next second, he seized the book from Mr. Rayfield to better read the words.

"Oh, how cruelly you mistreat a short man." Mr. Rayfield hopped after the boy, for the dwarf's left foot was lame. "Give it back, or I'll call the sheriffs on you."

"Oh, please do." Having conducted a thorough inspection of the book's contents, the boy tossed it into the water. "You ought to thank me for doing you that favor, for I can use that book to sue you for your swindling acts."

"What swindling?"

“The rich decorations you acquired for the cover were certainly a minor investment because you knew how much money you could drain from the poor. To patch up a cookbook and call it a fortune-telling guide, do you have no shame?”

“Wait” —This was the first time I heard the dwarf falter— “You can read, boy?”

“Not as much as I would like,” the youngster retorted, “but enough to determine that *Add three cloves of garlic* is no prophecy.”

I heard a string of curses as Mr. Rayfield rolled up his poster, gathered up his belongings, and reeled out from under the archway. The boy watched him leave, knowing that he probably would not return. I told myself that I would come tomorrow to meet this young man and offer him assistance to send him to school, but for now, I have a late seminar to catch.