

# A SCRAP OF MOSS AND MAGICK



HELEN PARRY

A SCRAP  
OF MOSS AND  
MAGICK



David Fickling Books

A Scrap of Moss & Magick  
is a  
DAVID FICKLING BOOK  
First published in Great Britain by  
David Fickling Books,  
31 Beaumont Street,  
Oxford, OX1 2NP  
[www.davidficklingbooks.com](http://www.davidficklingbooks.com)

EU Rep: Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd.,  
Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin D02 P593, Ireland.  
[www.arccompliance.com](http://www.arccompliance.com)

Text © Helen Parry, 2026  
Cover and inside illustrations by Melissa Castrillón

978-1-78845-413-1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The right of Helen Parry to be identified as the author  
of this work has been asserted in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or  
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Papers used by David Fickling Books are from well-  
managed forests and other responsible sources.



DAVID FICKLING BOOKS Reg. No. 8340307

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11.5/15.5 pt Goudy Old Style by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, Ltd., Elcograf, S.p.A..

*For Anne and Elwira, with all my love*





# Chapter 1

‘Please, my lord.’ Mrs Weskit clasps her hands tight. ‘Mrs Braithwaite’s a good soul. She doesn’t deserve . . . imps.’

I hold my breath.

The Master taps out a little pattern on the mantelpiece. ‘You know I never leave the Hall these days. And I fear my magickal powers have not yet recovered. Still, imps. Hmm.’

‘Braithwaite’s is the only shop in three villages,’ says Mrs Weskit. ‘Where else’ll I get candied lemon peel for your favourite fruit cake?’

‘My lord, you beat the Bone Horse of Durham!’ I say. ‘And a whole clan of goblins! What’s a bundle of old imps to you?’

The Master laughs. ‘Oh, you know I’ll do anything for cake, Weskit. Tell Obadiah to bring the carriage round immediately.’

We follow him down the passage to his still room, which he unlocks with an iron key. He slips inside. Even I ent

allowed in there. He's back in the twinkle of a bat's eye, a small bag in hand. And then we're off, along the Long Gallery and down the stairs. Mrs Weskit and me scurry to keep up.

'May I come too?' I whisper. Aye 'tis cheeky I know but I ent never seen the Master in his glory days as the Lord High Magician. I'd love to watch him making magick to defend the innocent, like as he did in all the tales he's told me.

Mrs Weskit's got that 'no you may not Thirza' look on her face, but the Master says, 'Very well. I might need some help, eh?' and whirls out the door and down to the carriage.

'Do be careful, Thirza,' says Mrs Weskit. 'Imps are more tricky than you might think.'

I don't pay her much mind and skip along after the Master. So excited!

The carriage hood is down as we bowl along the avenue at a fair old clip. The August sun smiles on my face and the scent of lime blossom is sweet to my nose. Through the gateposts and off down the road to Ruthyn village, alongside the pebbly river and through the green woods. Obadiah breaks into song, and the Master has to call out to him three times to spare us and stop. At the bridge to the village, Obadiah draws up the reins and I hop out and leave a pasty on the troll's stone.

There ent much to tell about Ruthyn village; it's a muddy, patched-up, tumbledown kind of place huddled around a mouldy stone church. There's a crowd on the village green. I reckon every villager is there. Old Ma Braithwaite is prowling

up and down, scaryfying the geese and village ladies. When she lays eyes on the Master, she goes all grovelly.

‘My lord, how kind! I pray you can help me. I just stepped out for a dish of tea with Mrs Sowersby and when I come back the place was a-swarm with imps! They barred the door on me! I dread to think what they’re up to!’

I look over at her shop. It’s rumbling and belching, shaking and roaring. Through the bow front window I see shadows flickering about inside.

The Master climbs down from the carriage, neatly avoiding a clump of horse poo. ‘How came they to get in, Mrs Braithwaite?’

She fiddles with her shawl. ‘I vexed Billy Wyk, so I did,’ she says sheepish.

I clap my hand to my mouth. Billy Wyk is King of the Imps, you don’t cross him.

‘Times is hard so I took berries from his elder tree to make jam,’ she goes on.

‘Unwise, Mrs Braithwaite.’ The Master sets off towards the shop and I with him. At the threshold he stops and takes a silver protection charm from his bag. He clips the charm onto his collar and gives the bag to me, like as I’m his actual assistant.

A crash, and an iron kettle smashes through the window and lands at the Master’s feet. The Master stops a moment, then straightens his cravat. ‘Let’s see about this door.’

He puts his palm against the door and closes his eyes. ‘Ah, it’s like that, is it?’ Then he says some words of magick, very quiet, and then he lifts the latch and pushes the door open.

Stood right behind him, I can see swift movements in the shop, like as smoke clearing from a gun barrel.

Silence.

I take a-hold of the Master's coat-tails, just in case the floor's slippery. It ent 'cause I'm frit. We step into the musty dimness.

Behind us, Mrs Braithwaite growls, 'Look at the mess they made!'

I wouldn't know, myself. The shop's as higgledy-piggledy as ever: heaps of baskets by the wooden counter, shelves cram-full of packets and boxes and jars, sacks of flour and sugar to trip you, stacks of brooms and rakes to tumble on you, pots and pans hanging from the ceiling like as great iron bats.

Best never to move quick in Braithwaite's.

Mrs B. pushes past us. 'Wee wretches. At least they're gone now.'

A rustle. A gust of hidden laughter. I hold the Master's coat tighter.

Like as lamps lighting up, yellow eyes open all around us, peeping out of buckets and casks, from behind jars and boxes and bolts of cloth.

Click! Click! Claws on the wooden counter. Out from behind the weights and scales prances a little black imp: Billy Wyk. He is swathed in white lace, bright ribbons are tied to his twirly tail and spangles are stuck to his pointy ears.

'My best Belgian lace!' roars Mrs B.

'Oooh!' mock spiteful voices all around us.

Billy Wyk takes an egg from the bowl beside him and throws it. *Spletch!* It hits Old Ma Braithwaite full in the chest and golden slime runs down her front. The imps cackle.

Billy Wyk reaches for another egg.

But Mrs B.'s blood's up. She seizes a ladle and thwacks him head over heels into the scales.

A chitter of rage sweeps through the shop. I drop the bag and hide myself lickety-split behind the Master. He'd best do something quick-sharp.

And then a storm of things batters us: a hail of raisins and spoons and tea cups and onions. A clog smacks the Master in the head and he staggers away from me. Straight off, an egg slams into my face and a bundle of candles into my belly. I crawl behind a sack of rice as packets of tea and bags of cocoa burst around me. My ears ring with the imps' screeching.

I wipe the egg from my eyes.

Bellowing like as a charging bull, Old Ma Braithwaite bats aside flying pots and pans with her ladle. Imps seethe over a sack of flour, heave it onto the counter and swing it at her. Bam! As the white fog clears, she's on the floor, coated so thick in flour she's like as a ghost. The imps cheer and dive at her, biting and scratching. She screams.

I ought to help her, but I'm frit they'll hurt me too. This ent what I thought it'd be! Ent wonderful and breathtaking at all. Suppose the Master can't stop them? Maybe he ent got enough magick back yet?

The Master's on his feet again, eyes closed and chanting. Blood trickles down Mrs Braithwaite's neck. An imp pulls the spectacles off her nose and tosses them aside.

I ent done nowt against the imps, maybe they won't hurt me.

I crawl out. A pair of scissors stabs into the floor right by my hand. I reach for Mrs Braithwaite, scarce can see her now under the black swarm of imps, but my fingers close on her arm. I pull. She's too heavy. An imp turns and sees me. It bares its sharp teeth and springs. I cringe as it digs its claws into my scalp and twists my hair.

And then – silence. The pain stops. The imp falls from me.

Mrs Braithwaite shakes the imps off her and they drop to the floor sweet as peel from an apple. Her face and neck are gouged and dripping blood, bright red on the white flour. She groans and feels around for her specs.

And the imps – the imps are stock still. They can't move hand nor foot. Their eyes blaze.

The Master's still chanting, louder now. Sweat pours off his face and he's all a-tremble, but his voice is clear.

The flour sack, empty now, begins to sway. It raises its open end up, and swings it round. Like as a snake, it slides across the floor, seeking something. It reaches an imp, lowers its open end and sucks the imp into its dark gullet. The imp can't move, can't scream.

Then the sack snuffles around for more imps. It swallows up them that lie around Mrs Braithwaite, but it doesn't touch her. It slithers up the counter to Billy Wyk and gulps him down, ribbons and all. Then it swings its great gaping mouth around, searching.

'It ent – it ent hurting them, is it?' I croak. The way as

the sack moves, silent and greedy, makes the hairs on my neck stand right up.

‘Don’t care if it does,’ says Mrs Braithwaite.

The Master doesn’t answer, he’s fixed on his spell. When the sack comes for the imp beside me, I wriggle away from it.

At last all imps are gone. ‘Thirza, tie up the sack,’ says the Master. His voice is faint. I take up the scissors and cut a length of twine, but I can’t. I can’t bear to go near that sack. Mrs B. huffs. She takes the twine off me and ties it tight round the sack’s neck.

The Master lets his arms fall. He droops. Right off the sack bubbles away as the imps writhe inside, wailing. I help the Master outside and to a chair on the green, and Mrs Braithwaite limps along after us. Then Dr Atonde’s washing Mrs Braithwaite’s face and Tom Potter and Jack Thwaite drag out the sack of imps.

The Master wipes his face with a silk hanky and refreshes himself with a glass of brandy that Mr Sowersby brings him. Then he calls out to the imps, ‘What shall I do with this sack? Shall I throw it in the river? Shall I leave it in the forest for the next hungry creature that passes?’

‘No! No!’ cry the imps.

‘What will you give me?’

The imps whisper among themselves. ‘We has a magick bone whistle,’ calls out Billy Wyk. ‘It is rare and fine. We will gives you that.’

‘What does it do?’

‘We doesn’t knows. We’s frit of it. We founds it buried at Belstone Crag, on the moors.’

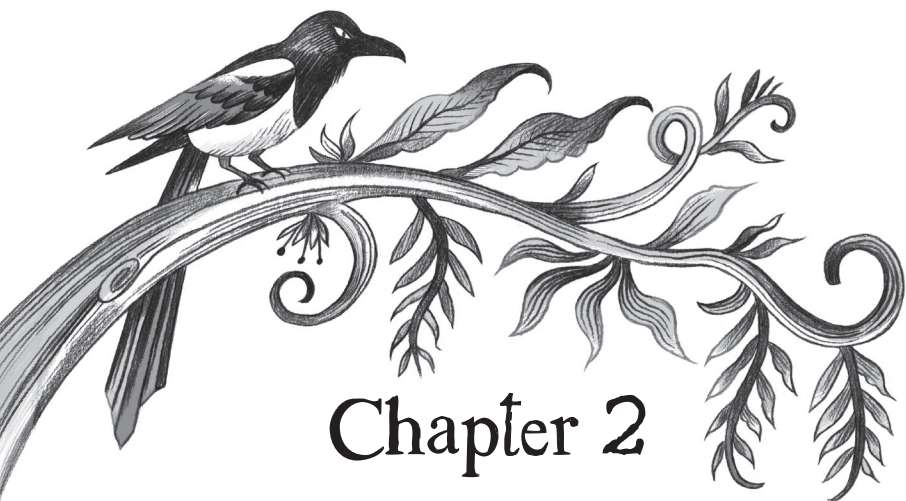
The Master considers. 'I have read of bone whistles,' he says to me. 'They are ancient and quite rare.' He calls to the imps, 'Very well. Will you now clean and mend Mrs Braithwaite's shop? And promise never again to set foot in this village unless invited.'

Grumbling. 'We promises.'

And that's that. Everybody except the imps is happy. I last see them, as our carriage draws away, scrubbing the shop doorstep and sweeping up the glass.

The Master twirls the bone whistle in his fingers. 'Perhaps I was too merciful. Those imps are a menace.' He's the colour of milk, and wheezing, but he's merry.

'Still, I defeated them, Thirza!' He smiles. 'Despite everything, my magick is returning. This is just the beginning of great things.'



## Chapter 2

Autumn's come, and the nights draw in. The poor Master's out of bed now and restored to health after vanquishing them imps. He and me are playing cribbage.

'I won!' I shriek. 'First time ever!'

The Master laughs. 'Confound it but you have!'

I throw down my cards. I leap up and dance around the darkening library. As I skip by the Master, he says, 'Catch!' and flicks a sweetmeat into the air. And as it curves down I catch it neat as a nuthatch in my gob.

Two triumphs in two minutes!

'Bravo!' The Master claps and I twirl around his chair.

'Thirza, my dear, would you sit down for a moment? There is something important I must tell you before my niece arrives this evening.'

I do as I'm bid. Now I mark that, behind his smile, he looks sad. My joy fizzles out.

'Thirza, you know how much I look forward to our time

together. Really, it brightens my day. But now that my niece is coming to live here, I am afraid – I’m afraid things will have to change. I need to befriend her, settle her into her new home. She is, after all, my flesh and blood. I’m sorry, but I shan’t be able to spend very much time with you for a while.’

Firelight slides across his face and the cards from our game of cribbage. It licks the shadows on the oak panelling behind his chair.

*Wish she weren’t coming.* I daren’t say it, so I fiddle with a peg in the cribbage board. My favourite part of the day, the scrap of time when I ent a servant or a child, but a person that reads and plays backgammon and talks about interesting stuff. It’s up in smoke now. And all ’cause of Miss Cecily Mermagen.

‘She needs me, my dear,’ says the Master, like as he’s read my mind anyways. He sips his port. ‘With my poor sister Adela in the lunatic asylum, she has nowhere else to go.’

‘Please, my lord,’ I croak out, my throat tight. Daft but I’m nigh on crying. ‘Why can’t we . . . Couldn’t we . . . just sometimes?’

Till now I’d been looking forward to Miss Cecily coming here.

The Master smiles at me and rubs his birdsnesty hair. ‘Oh, Thirza, possibly. I shall try. It’s a very delicate situation. My niece is dying.’

*Dying?* I gawp at him. The great house shifts and sighs around us.

‘The poor girl has a fatal illness. While she will appear

healthy at present, in perhaps three months she'll be dead. That is, unless *we* can save her, Thirza.'

He dips into the pocket of his robe and pulls out a fat paper packet. I lean nearer. He opens a corner of the packet to show me it's full of white powder.

'What's that, my lord?'

'Medicine. It will cure her.'

Relief. 'Oh well that's all right then, my lord. From what you said I thought she were a goner.'

'And the absolute instant she's cured, I'll pack her off to a nice academy for young ladies and we can resume our lovely afternoons together. So you see, it won't be for ever.'

This sounds grand. I feel kindly towards Miss Cecily Mermagen now. 'Imagine having to go around thinking you're about to cork it. Must be awful.'

The Master frowns. 'Actually, she doesn't know she is ill. And Thirza,' he gently takes my hand, 'we need to take care that she *never* finds out about *any* of it.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'My niece must not know, and nobody else may either. The other servants – well, you know what they are like.'

I nod, though I ent sure what he means.

'You do understand, Thirza, it would be cruel to tell a girl whose papa has just died that she too is mortally ill, do you not? And with a particularly nasty sickness.'

That's true. And so like my dear Master, always thinking of others. 'What is it, please, my lord? This illness?'

He says a word so long and difficult I can't grasp it. I ent never heard of it.

‘Wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy,’ he says. ‘The last few weeks are so agonizing the patient begs to die. So you see, it is best she does not know. She would be terrified.’

‘Did her pa too – did he have this . . . ?’

‘No, no. He died of diphtheria. Even on his own death-bed, he couldn’t bear to tell her that she was ill. However, he did confide in me, and I was able to procure the antidote.’

I don’t know what to say. One minute before I were so riled about Miss C. and now I feel nowt but pity.

‘So, here it is.’ He holds out the paper packet in a hand that quivers. ‘Slip it into her food or drink every morning and evening. A pinch will do for the first week, then double the dose. Keep it safe. Let no one see it.’

‘Aye, my lord.’ I stand straight. This is important.

‘Dear Thirza. I’ve instructed Mrs Weskit that you are to act as my niece’s personal maid. You will help her dress, bring her her meals, that sort of thing. How do you like that? I hope you will be friends too. She’s about your age.’

He catches my eye. ‘What is it, Thirza? Are you all right? There’s something. I know you. Is this too much for you?’

‘Nay, my lord. I’m glad to help.’ And I am. I hold out my hand and he presses the packet into it and pats my cheek. Then he heaves a great sigh.

The fire spits a coal onto the hearth rug. I don’t give it a thought, I seize the burning lump in my bare fingers and lob it back before it can singe the wool. The Master has turned away and doesn’t mark it.

‘Thank you, Thirza,’ says he. ‘You’re a brave, kind girl.’

I'm proud of you and I know I can trust you. Let's make her better, eh?

I leave and close the door after me and lean against it. I feel about ten foot tall, like as a proper grown-up.

What a responsibility! Saving a life! And me the only one trusted to do it!

I grip the smooth wee packet and push it right down in my pinny pocket. It's a serious business. Suppose I make a maff of it? Miss Cecily would die.

*A pinch, twice a day. Don't forget, Thirza.*

The air is stale and cold. I suck my scorched fingers. Then I hear Mrs Weskit's voice floating up the stairs and down the Long Gallery and into my lugholes: 'Thirza! Thirza! Where is that blessed girl?'

No moon or stars tonight, and the passage is black as a robber's heart. The wind moans and rattles at the casements as I scuttle down the Long Gallery. I cup my hands and grow a wee small ball of flame there to light my way. It's hot and I have to keep it hid, so I make haste to the staircase before it singes my palms. I ent worked out yet how to make cold fire, though I know the Master can do it. Can hardly ask him to help me though. Making magick's against the law for me like as any other girl. Mrs Weskit says as if the Master knew my secret, it'd put him in a tricky position. After all, he used to be in the government, and might be obliged to turn me over to the constables.

I know he'd try and protect me, but I do as Mrs W. says. I blow out the ball of flame and scurry down the stairs.

'Thirza! At last! Here.' Mrs Weskit catches a-hold of my

arm and yanks me into line beside Nell. ‘You’ve a smut on your cheek,’ she says, licking her hanky and rubbing at my face. ‘You all right?’

‘Aye, apart from your spit on me cheek,’ says I and grins at her.

Then I mark that the front door’s open. Through it I can see Shrike shining his lantern on a horse and coach, both bedecked with silver protection charms and strings of dried rowan berries to keep magickal creatures at bay. Davy Comstock, that drives the Ruthyn stagecoach, helps a lass clamber out of the coach. She’s clutching something big and black with both hands that bumps against her legs, and she won’t let go and give it to Mr Comstock.

I shiver. Lord knows it’s chill enough in this great place without all the icy air rushing in like that.

Mrs Weskit steps forward, beaming. ‘Come in, my dearie. Thank you, Davy. Now, I am the cook-housekeeper, Mrs Weskit. This is Mr Shrike, the butler. Obadiah and Pip, they’re the gardener and under-gardener. They’ll bring in your things. This is Nell, the kitchen maid, and this is Thirza, who’s to be your maid. I expect we seem a crowd, dearie.’

Miss Cecily Mermagen and I size each other up. She’s a smitch taller than me, but weedy in a black frock and cloak that hang off her. Reckoned she’d be prettier. Her face is pale and shadowed, she looks fair geffered, but not like as she’s about to pop her clogs.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ says I. Nary the smallest smile from her. Flustered, I bob a curtsy.

‘Thirza will show you to your rooms,’ says Mrs Weskit, ‘and bring you a light supper. You must be tired and hungry after such a long journey.’

‘Will I take that – erm – thing for you?’ I ask, pointing at the whatever-it-is she holds. Shape of a giant thimble, draped in black cloth.

She flinches, like as I’ve bit her. ‘No thank you. I shall carry him myself.’

Her voice is stiff and high, like as a squeaky door that ent used much. Still, mustn’t judge. Her pa’s just died and she’s been a good ten hours joltering about in that coach.

And of course she’s dying. Though she doesn’t know it, and I do.

So I pat my pocket and says to her, nice as pie, ‘Follow me then, miss.’ And I take the lamp that Mrs Weskit passes me and lead Miss Cecily Mermagen up the stairs of her new home.