

First published in this edition in 2012  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
Bloomsbury House,  
74-77 Great Russell Street,  
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

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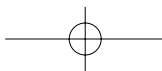
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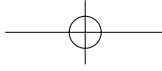
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ISBN 978-0-571-28407-8



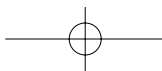
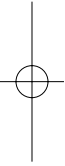
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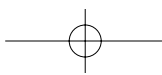
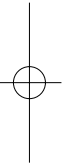
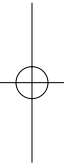
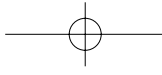




For Mom, who took me to the Stratford  
Shakespeare Festival when I was a kid

And for Daniel, Louise, and Christine, my loyal first  
readers and friends

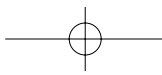
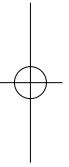
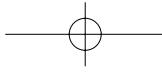




ACT I

# THE 'LITTLE' COUNTESS





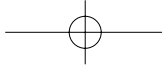


## THE BOY IN THE WOODEN CHEST

Years ago, in the Archduchy of Waldland, on a night when the wind was strong and the waves were high, a boy washed ashore in a small wooden chest. The chest took refuge in a nest of boulders at the foot of a cliff. It swayed there for hours as the surf crashed on either side, threatening to sweep it away to be gobbled by the deep.

The boy in the chest was a babe, scarce a year old. He wore a white linen cap and nightshirt, and was bundled tight in a fine woollen blanket. The sound of the waves was a comfort to him after the screams he'd heard before the chest had been sealed. Now, as the surf threatened to destroy him, the infant dreamt he was rocking in his crib.

Meanwhile, up the coast, a stumpy man of lumps

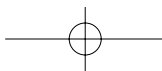


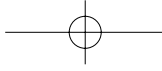
and bumps stuck his shovel in the sand and cursed to heaven. It was the grave robber, Knobbe the Bent.

Knobbe plied his trade in County Schwanenberg, in the archduchy's eastern reaches. Tonight, the raging wind had promised a shipwreck – two or three, God willing – so Knobbe had scrambled down the steep cliff path to the beach, hoping to plunder the bodies of the drowned. For hours, he'd prowled the coast, checking the spots where the tide deposited its gifts. He'd found nothing. Not a single corpse. Not even a skeleton dislodged from the seabed, its bony hands still covered in rings.

Knobbe cursed and scratched behind his ear, dislodging a beetle from his matted hair. He began the trek home to his cave, but at the foot of the cliff path he stopped. What was that sparkling in the moonlight? His heart danced up his throat. It was an oak chest, bobbing in a cluster of boulders, the sides inlaid with teak, the lid studded with jewels!

The grave robber dragged the chest to higher ground and prised off the lock with his shovel. Inside, he saw a rich woollen blanket wrapped around some hidden prize. He unspooled the wrapping, hoping to find treasure – perhaps a carved ostrich egg or an ivory horn encrusted with gold. Instead, he came face to face with the baby.





Knobbe screamed in shock and tossed the baby in the air. It landed on the sand and started to wail.

‘Shut your yap,’ the grave robber yelled. ‘It’s me what should be crying.’

He consoled himself with small mercies. The blanket would keep him warm; the jewels on the chest could be pawned; and the chest itself could be used to stash loot. The baby was another matter. Maybe it could fetch a reward?

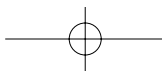
Moonlight rippled off the waves and the wet limestone cliffs, revealing a carved crest on the inside of the lid: an eagle’s head spewed lightning bolts above two unicorns dancing on a bed of wreaths. Zephyrs blew from the left. The sun shone from the right. A few Latin words scooped the bottom.

Knobbe grunted. The crest was not from the Archduchy of Waldland. The boy was from far away. There would be no reward. Best to leave him on the sand where he lay, then. After all, what good was a baby?

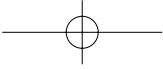
The grave robber made a knapsack with the blanket, put the chest inside, and swung it over his shoulder. ‘Farewell,’ he said to the infant.

The boy had stopped crying. He looked up at Knobbe with big solemn eyes.

‘Don’t play your baby tricks on me,’ Knobbe







warned. ‘Your sort are all alike. Sneaky little schemers, out to make a fellow weak.’

The infant crawled towards him.

‘Don’t come crawling to me, neither. If you want to beg, beg to them what locked you in that box and tossed you into the sea.’

The infant continued his advance.

Knobbe retreated. ‘Stay back! I’ll take my shovel to you!’


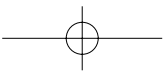

The infant gurgled.

‘So I’m funny, am I? Good night to you then!’ Knobbe hawked a great gob, turned on his heel, and began the long climb home.

Halfway up the cliff, he stopped, leant against the rock face, thumped the ribs over his heart, and gasped for air. What would become of him when the years piled a weight on his shoulders more crushing than stone?

It was then that a thought emerged, as a ghost ship out of the fog – a thought that caused the grave robber to look down at the tiny creature who’d wriggled his way to the base of the path.


*In no time, the brat will be walking, talking, Knobbe thought. He could be my lookout. A few years more, he’ll be able to dig and tunnel and cart my gear. Then, in my old age, he can tend me.*



He'd have to raise the lad, but what of that? A strip of weasel or rat meat would do for feed.

Knobbe descended the cliff. The infant was laughing in wonder, now, at the glittering crabs that skittered from the rocks and sand holes to the sea.

'You, boy, you're mine,' the grave robber said. 'From this day forth, you're to obey me. Your name shall be Hans, a name as simple and unimportant as you yourself. Understood?'



He hoisted the baby up by its armpits. On its right shoulder was a little birthmark shaped like an eagle. Damaged goods, oh well, who was he to complain? Knobbe plopped the boy into the chest, and hauled him up the cliff to his cave. He had himself a son. And the infant Hans had found a new life as the grave robber's apprentice.

