

# WONDER 207

from

*Erastus Galer's Cabinet of Wonders:*

*(Being the Boyhood Adventures of the World's Greatest Collector*

*of Stuffed Pirates and Other Curiosities)*

by Christopher Hadley

‘And the pea was sent to the Royal Museum, where it is still on display,  
unless someone has stolen it.’

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Princess and the Pea*

COME IN! COME IN! Don't dawdle child! There's nothing to be frightened of in here. A stuffed pirate isn't going to hurt you – he's quite dead. I have the world's finest collection of dead pirates and most of them are perfectly harmless.

Get out of my way! Stand over there, but mind you keep your grubby fingers off the drawers: we don't want anything *escaping* now, do we?

I collected many of these wonderful things when I was your age. Long ago and even longer ago than that. In those days all boys and girls collected sticks, or tin soldiers, or famous old smells; fairy loaves, nightmares, black spots and blowpipes; finger bones, thumb rings, or fumet. (You don't know what fumet is? Look it up in a dictionary you featherbrain!). I once met a particularly horrid little girl who collected every size and shape of human ear. Hmmm. I had a few myself. Oh, yes, there they are, on the wall over there. They were given to me by the Great Inca himself one day on the shore of Lake Titicaca...Oh, but you wouldn't be interested in that story.

I suppose I'd better let you open one of those drawers and have a look inside. Hurry up and pick one or I'll change my mind. You children are so slow! That one there? Wonder 207? Don't be so hasty! You children are always in such a hurry. Are you sure? Perhaps you'd prefer this bigger drawer. No? Well what are you waiting for? Open it then, but be careful. I SAID GENTLY. You clumsy child. A plague on you and all children! Snippety snip! I should cut off your fingers for my bits-of-boys-and-girls collection, but I already have a full set *and some swapsies*. There's a spare thumb in a jar over there, next to the pickled imp. Is that a plum with the thumb? Can't imagine why. I'll swap it for one of King Alfred's burnt cakes. You don't have one? How bothersome!

Number 207 it is then. What is it? What do you mean you don't know? Children today are such puddingheads. Look lively, bring the drawer over to the window so I can see. Oh, it's a pea. I don't remember collecting legumes – vegetables shaped like the Queens of England – but never legumes. How boring! A small hard grey pea. I told you to try another drawer but you wouldn't listen you little know-it-all.

Hah! Wait a minute, of course, it's *The Pea*. How could I forget! It's *The Pea* the Queen of Denmark put under all those mattresses and featherbeds – to test if some bedraggled girl was a *real* princess. The poor girl was so frightfully royal and delicate that *The Pea* turned her black and blue overnight.

I expect you're wondering how I got hold of it. I could tell you a story-and-a-half about that, but I don't suppose you modern children have the patience to listen to stories. Hmm. Let me think. Yes, it *was* quite an adventure. First, there were the man-eating bison and the pie that poisoned the Nizam of Mangoo, then Granny's moustaches and the dead armies of the Gold and Silver Knots. At some point I was thrown into the castle dungeons with Django. Hmm. But how *did* I get my hands on *The Pea*? Oh, that's right, I stole it from the Royal Museum in Copenhagen...

## Chapter I

I stole *The Pea* to keep it from the master swordsman who was chasing me up the stairs of an improbably tall tower one evening in the school holidays of 1840. The swordsman was the sinister Count Flaag von Post, Peasant-Finder General of Orf, and the finest athlete of the age. Round and round the crumbling stone steps I flew, trying to stay ahead of his cruel blade, but he was gaining on me fast and the stitch in my side was tightening with every breath. It wasn't a fair race: this man had once shattered the world stair-climbing record when he ran up and down the Leaning Tower of Pisa in under a minute. As I reached the last step and burst through a wooden hatch onto a narrow walkway I was so out of breath I was suffocating, but there was no time to rest. A sword-stroke hissed past my left ear, a second sliced effortlessly through a stone plinth, toppling the bust of a Roman Emperor into the night. I wanted to be sick.

“Your head next Galer, unless I have that pea,” whispered the Count in my ear. I darted left around the onion-shaped dome atop the tower, ducking and jumping to avoid the thrusts and slashes of the blade. It was hopeless. I tried not to cry. What would One-Leg Django do now? I thought of him in the dungeons of Orf, awaiting my return, and forced my legs to keep moving for the sake of my friend. If only I could make it to the high bridge that linked the two towers of the Royal Museum, I'd still have a chance to get away.

We were so high about the city that I was running through wisps of cloud; running so fast and breathing so hard that I didn't have any energy left to be afraid of the sword, but then the clouds parted

and I cried out in terror as I nearly ran off the edge of the world. The wind whistled up at me and I gulped it in. The moonlight revealed the remains of the ancient bridge. The middle had collapsed, probably long ago, into the thousand-foot drop just inches from my toes. There was no escape.

“Nowhere to go?” asked the Count, his words freezing in the cold air like shards of ice – sharp as the sword tip pressed into my back. Turning to face him, I edged backwards. He towered over me. The moonlight twinkled in the brass buttons on his black tunic. Pointing his sword at my neck, he mockingly swung it to the left and to the right.

His grey left eye twitched and for a fleeting moment I saw myself reflected in it, except in the reflection I was holding my severed head under my arm. I shivered and quickly looked away. It was the same vision I'd seen when I first looked into that terrible eye seven days earlier.

“Frightened boy?” he said curling his lip. “What a nice exhibit you'll make for the museum. I can see the label now: ‘The Headless Peasant Boy Who Tried to Steal *The Pea*. Donated to the museum by his Incomparableness Von Post’.”

I shrank back; he strode forward. I tried to control my breathing, sensing the vast plummet behind me, and the weak masonry of the bridge beneath my feet. At any moment it was going to fail under our weight. Von Post sensed it too and was suddenly less sure of himself. He needed *The Pea* and couldn't risk it being lost or crushed if I fell to my doom.

“Stand still tubby!” he ordered, nastily. “The bridge won't hold *your* weight.” Swiftly, he sheathed his sword, pulled his white gloves tight at the wrist, and made a grab for me. That did it: with a great cracking sound, the last remnants of the bridge gave way.

Frantically, I twisted in mid-air and tried to hurl myself across the divide but my old French frock coat, heavy with hidden pockets, weighed me down. I started to follow the broken stones down into the night. The moon illuminated the city and sea far below. They were a secret code – the buildings and ships like a strange unknown alphabet, the people like punctuation marks. Everything had happened so quickly and the tower was so tall that the bust of the Roman Emperor still hadn't hit the ground. For an instant, the moonbeams seemed solid as if I might slide to safety on them, and then the light was gone, blotted out

by the long and pointy shape of Flaag von Post hurdling over my head. He landed gracefully on the parapet of the opposite tower with me dangling by my coat collar at the end of his outstretched arm.

I felt sick with fear, but didn't want Von Post to see. "That was quite a leap," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Maybe even another world record."

"No doubt. And I saved your life t'boot, so show your thanks and hand over *The Pea*."

I put my hands in my coat pocket and felt the hard wrinkled shape of *The Pea*. Hmmm. It would be a shame not to add it to my collection of curiosities but I had to get rid of it. Von Post guessed what I was thinking.

"Careful boy. Drop that pea, and I'll throw you after it."

"A plague on you and all bullies!" I snapped. His eyes narrowed in anger, then one opened wide. I couldn't help looking into it and saw myself reflected again, not hanging from his arm, but spiralling helplessly through the air. This time I didn't look away and he shook me angrily; shook me so hard that I slid right out of my coat and dropped into the night. His eyes widened in surprised. Instinctively, I clawed at the hem, not to save myself but to save my precious coat and all the things in its pockets. I held on by my fingertips. One second, two seconds, three seconds, and then my grip failed and all was lost.

Terror struck me dumb as I tried to scream, but then I looked down and felt oddly calm as I tumbled towards the city below. Every second closer to the ground I caught glimpses of a little more detail: the cloud of dust as the bust of the Roman Emperor finally hit the ground; a sharp-eyed boy pointing at me from the crow's nest of his ship on the river. I swallowed hard and somersaulted on the wind. Less than 10 seconds to impact. There was plenty of time to ponder the events of the last week; plenty of time to blame Django for getting me into such a mess. I flapped desperately at the air with one hand, trying to fly, but the other was closed tight – still clutching *The Pea*.

## Chapter 2

When you choose to spend your summer holidays with someone like One-Leg Django you have to expect the odd afternoon being chased by an angry swordsman, and the occasional evening plummeting to your death from the top of a tower. Life threatening adventures were his speciality. This particular adventure began the morning I received a secret message saying that Django was in trouble.

Back then Count Flaag von Post was just someone I occasionally read about in the sports-pages of the newspapers, and I'd never even heard of The Pea. It was the last day of term and I'd been cataloguing my collection of voodoo dolls when the morning mail coach clattered over the cobbles outside. Most of the boys hurried down to the quad, but I was too busy counting the number of nails hammered into a particularly ugly doll to pay any attention to them – until a paper dart landed right in the middle of the little figures, scattering them all over the dormitory floor. A spotty boy from the third form grinned at me and ran away as I snatched up the dart and unfolded it. It was a letter from my Guardian Mr John Naps of Greece. All it said was that he regretted he wouldn't see me over the summer as he had to rescue Mr Babbage and his Special Calculating Engine No.8 from Zakazia. He signed off by asking if I had started any new collections.

“Have you thought about collecting those new fangled postage labels?” He wrote. “You could start with the one on this letter?”

Stamp collecting! What a strange idea. In the summer of 1840 it was rather difficult to make much of stamp collection since there was only *one* stamp to collect, the world's first stamp: everyone was calling it the Penny Black.

I turned over the letter. There it was, on the back, next to the address.

*Master Erastus Galer,*

*Austins,*

*Little Madup*

*Wareshire*

Something was not quite right about it. But what was it? It had the same lettering as other Penny Blacks, "POSTAGE" at the top, and "ONE PENNY" at the bottom. The same squiggly pattern ran around the edge, and there in the middle was the young Queen Victoria's head (God bless her!). Her face was in profile, facing left, her hair was tied up at the back of her crown and around her neck she wore a delicate necklace of jewels. But something was wrong. I hurried over to one of the other boys who'd received a letter that morning and grabbed it out of his hands.

"Hey! Galer, what do you think you're doing?" He shouted.

Just as I thought. I handed back the letter and grabbed another, then another, throwing the letters back to their owners as soon as I'd checked the stamps. Everyone was shouting after me as I raced downstairs to the kitchen.

It was the necklace. The Queen didn't have a necklace on any other Penny Black, and now I could see that it was no ordinary necklace. It was the necklace One-leg Django and I had personally returned to the young Queen when we solved the mystery of the missing Crown Jewels two years earlier. It was a sign. That's why the letter was so short, Mr John Naps of Greece must have sent me a secret message.

In the school kitchen, Cook's kettle was rattling and whining on the range. Perfect! I moved the letter carefully through the cloud of steam, the heat should show up any message written in invisible ink. There

was nothing there. What about the stamp itself? Then I noticed that the steam had melted the gum on the back of the Penny Black. Carefully, I peeled it away from the letter and slipped into one of my pockets.

Where the stamp had been stuck to the paper were words written in a tiny, spidery script. I took my magnifying glass out of one of my pockets and read the message.

“Django in Orf, cakeless at Granny’s house. Expect Tugay. Read Black Book.”

I was trying to work out what it all meant when I heard a noise behind me.

I span around. Squeezing through the doorway towards me, was a man the size of a grizzly bear, with a tangled black beard and a strong rectangular face so crisscrossed with duelling scars that it resembled an old chopping board. Around his waist, was a crimson sash stuffed with knives and a set of pistols. I smiled and looked back at the secret message. “Expect Tugay.”

Well here was Tugay, my Guardian’s Cossack coachman.

Now I’d finished inventing stamp collecting, it was time for another life threatening adventure.

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Steam was the new wonder of the age, not only did it remove stamps from letters, but it could carry you across the seas at great speeds. We took the new steamliner to France that morning and by early afternoon we were bumping along the ancient highways of Europe in a coach and four, while I lunched on venison pies and lemonade. Tugay was not the best of company. He was so much taller than other people that he could only make himself heard by yodelling to them. Long ago he had given up talking, but that first night of the journey, as night fell, I could hear him outside, singing to the horses of far-away mountains, and I snuggled down amongst the Yak skin blankets and fell asleep to the sad sound of his lullaby. It was the last good night’s sleep I would get for days.

At dusk the following evening, we turned onto the long forest track east and began winding our way through endless woodland – straightaway something didn’t feel right and about these closely-packed trees and what they concealed. We were being watched. Heavy shadows moved quickly amongst the trunks

and every now and again I thought I saw eyes blinking at me. This was the Great Wood that separated Orf from the rest of Europe. Travellers who had braved this journey before us had written of Night Bears, Man-eating Bison, Green Wolves, Black Shucks and worse creatures who cannot be called by their true names. As we drove on in the grey light, the track got narrower, and the trees got closer and ever more shapes seemed to be gathering behind those great trunks.

In those days, people rarely travelled in the dark even along safe roads, but there were no safe stopping places in the Great Wood. As darkness fell each night, Tugay silently lit lanterns to light the way and frighten the owners of the red eyes watching from the tree line, but I knew from my school lessons that there was always the risk the orange glow of the lights would attract the bison. They were drawn like moths to things shiny and orange. Even though Tugay was used to negotiating the dangerous mountain passes of his homeland, the road was so bad he had to slow the horses to a walk and we inched carefully through the dark. I was in dread of what would happen if we hit a rock or tree stump and had to stop in that terrible place. I drew up the shutters and held on tightly to my blunderbuss, sleeping only fitfully with the wild motion of the carriage, feeling every rut and root, hearing Tugay soothe the frightened horses with strange songs, ever aware of the cold, and the dark and the eyes following us.

It was a dangerous journey, but Django was in trouble and Django was, after all, my best friend in the whole world. Most summers we were inseparable. (Never more so than when we were *literally* inseparable – tied together upside down beneath a hot air balloon, roped back-to-back between the humps of a runaway camel, or handcuffed to a tandem as we pedalled for our lives.)

If you were thinking that someone called *One-leg* must have struggled to pedal a tandem even at a leisurely pace, rest assured that Django had two perfectly good legs. He acquired his travelling-name when he fell in with the Shadow-Foots of India and copied their habit of holding one foot above their heads as shade from the noonday sun. (*They* really did have only one leg and one very large foot which they hopped about on quite successfully) Django was called many other names over the years, but Django-You-Loon and A-Plague-on-You Django never stuck, so if you want to look him up in the *Dictionary of Famous Madmen* you'll find him under "O" for One-leg.

The secret message had said that Django was “cakeless” whatever that meant. Maybe all would be revealed by the book I had to read. It was a heavy black book, with the words *The Black Book* embossed on the cover. Inside, the full title read: *The Black Book of the Golden Knot, Being a History of the House of the Archdukes Otto, Complete with an Ingenious Account of the Many Cunning and Merciless Methods Used to Crush Their Enemies, 980-1787*. It was not the sort of book to help me sleep soundly at night. Not far into those pages, I learnt what happened to anyone foolish enough to cross the Ottos of the Golden Knot. My dreams would be forever haunted by the fate of Count Grolski the Unlucky. In 1313, he forgot to buy the 13<sup>th</sup> of Otto XIII's 13 children a 13<sup>th</sup> birthday present. His punishment was to eat only carrots for 13 months until his skin turned shiny and orange. Then he was driven 13 miles into the Archduke's hunting forest and abandoned to its 13 man-eating bison.

I slammed the book shut. From those original 13 bison had descended the thousands who I could now hear calling to each in their ghostly rumbles. The coach rattled on through the night, sheathed in the shiny orange glow of the Cossack Tugay's lanterns. I shivered and promised myself I wouldn't read any more of that terrible book. Now, the creatures seemed to be getting bolder and closer. That night, I lost count of how many times I awoke suddenly from a bad dream and nearly fired my blunderbuss at imaginary fiends crawling out of the trees.

On the third day in the Great Wood we came across the first of the remote woodland villages that lay along the forest road. The inhabitants were almost as wild and dangerous as the animals in the forest itself. They hid from us amongst the trees and called to one another with harsh sounds that were more animal than human. Along the path into the main clearing, the dried heads of creatures that I couldn't identify hung from branches and strange graffiti was carved into all the tree trunks. Tugay strode ahead through a circle of rough boulders tipped end-on-end, and stained red as blood. In the mountain regions he came from, he was used to dealing with people who were suspicious of strangers from the world outside and he beckoned me to follow him, gesturing at my many pockets. He wanted me to offer gifts to the natives. Reluctantly, I gave up a twig from the oldest tree in England, a tomahawk, a witch stone, a device for chopping the top off a boiled egg, and the Penny Black from my Guardian's letter – setting each object

down on the ground in front of the largest hut before stepping back to wait. It worked, villagers dressed in animals skins with hats fashioned from tree bark, emerged from holes and from behind trees. They inspected our offerings sullenly and before long Tugay had arranged for us to stay in the village for the remainder of the morning while the horses were fed and rested.

Much the same thing happened at all the villages where we stopped and to my dismay I soon had nothing left in my pockets. But I cheered up when I realised that each of these remote villages had its own unique language, that the strange animal noises the people made were in fact words. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for reasons that will be obvious to many boys and girls, I collected words that appeared in Dr Samuel Johnson's great *Dictionary of the 23 Most Important Words*, and on this journey alone I was able to collect *Bloblipped*, *Blockhead* and *Blood* in 15 languages previously unknown to science.

Back on the road what else was there to do than stare at the dark trees, eat pies and read *The Black Book*? Page by page I lived through Otto XV's Endless War, which ended when the Knights of the Silver Knot escaped the Siege of Orf on a bridge knitted by their Grannies. (A footnote explained that it was called the Endless War because many believed that The Battle of the Plains was still being fought at night-fall between two armies of the dead.)

That infernal black book became my only and constant companion. At least it took my mind off the animals that now seemed to be tracking us, calling ahead to other creatures with horrible whoops – bidding their time. Tugay kept them at bay with his whip and his pistols. He was a crack shot, but once or twice, Black Shucks tried to attack the horses and fearful that a pistol shot might hit a horse, the mighty Cossack had to leap from his seat and wrestle with the evil creatures on the forest floor.

On the last day of the journey I read about Otto XXI's hunt for the lost Cake of Caroo and Ottoline II's obsession with discovering how to make gold out of cheese. On the last evening, wrapped in blankets against the cold, fearful of the heavy panting outside that sounded as if something very big was running alongside the coach. I learnt that Otto XXIX had extracted a terrible revenge against the House of St-reznik when they had dared to question the true nobility of the Ottos. But what was that revenge? Did I really want to know? I hesitated before slowly turning the page to find out. Across two pages, a large cop-

perplate engraving showed a great feast. My eye was drawn to the centre of the picture where the heads of all the Streznik family were sticking through a giant pastry crust! They had been baked in a pie. From that day forth, Otto XXIX had declared that only those of noble birth were allowed to eat pies, puddings and cakes within the Archduchy of Orf. Now I understood. So, that's why Django was 'Cakeless in Orf'.

I drifted into nightmares peopled by Grolskis and Ottos and Strezniks: eyes blinked beneath the golden crusts of pies, eyes flashed red in the forest like the sudden flash of a gun's muzzle, Django's eyes peered at me through the window. BANG! I awoke in terror. We had stopped. Sunlight streamed through the broken window and through holes in the roof of the coach! Someone had fired a gun. I looked down at the blunderbuss in my hands. *I* had fired a gun! And I'd shot my best friend Django.

To be continued

Thank you for your interest in **WONDER 207**, from *Erastus Galer's Cabinet of Wonders*. If you'd like to find out what happens next then please visit [www.erastusgaler.com](http://www.erastusgaler.com) and tell me what you like about the story so far. I'll send you the next chapter absolutely free, and I'll let you know as soon as **WONDER 207** is in the shops.

If you are a publisher or a literary agent and would like to find out more about my plans for *Erastus Galer and his Cabinet of Wonders*, please contact me at [feedback@erastusgaler.com](mailto:feedback@erastusgaler.com)