Name: _____ Date: _____

# The Clerk of Hollowmere

Reading level 15 · 1780 words

Perpetua Dace had worked at the Tidewater Records Office for three years, and in that time she had left her desk only to fetch another ledger, to eat her sandwich at precisely one o'clock, and, once, to be sick in the stairwell after a particularly hopeless misfiling by a colleague. She was fourteen, and punctilious, and she corrected the spelling on the Office's own sign every spring, in pencil, where nobody would notice, and she had never once been farther from the town of Saltgate than the end of its longest pier. So when seven elderly strangers in very good coats came through the door on a wet Tuesday and set a small purse of silver on her blotter, she supposed that they had come to the wrong counter.

"We have been told," said the tallest, a lean old man with silver hair and a charming smile and the vigilant eyes of a heron, "that you are the best clerk in Saltgate, Miss Dace." "I am the only clerk in Saltgate under forty," said Perpetua, "so the information is not reliable." He laughed with evident delight, and sat on the edge of her desk, which she disliked more than she could say, and she folded her hands in her lap, which was what she did instead of screaming. Behind him the other six had arranged themselves around the office with the ease of people who had been in a great many rooms that were not theirs. "Captain Hargreave Voss," he said, "of the Guild of Quiet Hands, now retired, and seven of us are left, and we have a catalogue that we cannot read, and you may name your fee."

It was the Guild's catalogue, the Captain explained, the whole record of its dealings for two hundred years, and it lay in a vault under the drowned city of Hollowmere. Everybody in Saltgate knew the story of Hollowmere: the great harbor town that had slipped beneath the bay in a single winter, four generations ago, and whose roofs showed above the water for a few hours only at the lowest spring tides. The catalogue was in the Guild's own Index hand, and no one living could read it, and the vault doors were locked with riddles that were not really riddles at all. "They are filing questions," said Mrs. Odalind Rue, a small, indomitable old woman in a feathered hat, who had said nothing until then, "and we are thieves, my dear, and we do not file." She said it with a certain wistfulness, as one mentions a foreign language that one has always intended to learn.

Perpetua should have said no, and she said it twice, in fact, first to the Captain and then, in a firm voice, to herself. But she had also, in her heart, a small, mortifying, irrepressible, scholarly longing to see a catalogue that nobody else could read, and the Captain, who seemed to know it, took a single page out of his pocket. It was covered in brown, crabbed, beautiful handwriting, and he laid it in front of her. Nothing in her whole orderly life had prepared her for how much she wanted to touch it. It was an index, the most elaborate,

devious, sumptuous index that she had ever seen, and she looked at it for a full minute without breathing. "Four silver pieces," said Perpetua Dace, "and my own pencil."

They went down at the lowest tide of the year, in the pallid hour before dawn, in a flat-bottomed skiff that smelled of herring and tarred rope, and the bay lay as still and black as a plate of ink. Hollowmere rose out of it piece by piece, first the weathervane of a clock tower, then the slate backs of whole streets, encrusted with weed and mussels, then a great domed roof of verdigris copper, glistening with seawater, which was, Captain Voss said, the old Registry. "The vault lies below it," said Mrs. Rue, "and we have until the tide turns, because after that the doors will not open again for a year." Perpetua clutched her pencil and maintained an anxious silence, for the first time in her life afraid to correct anybody.

The Registry was frigid and dim and smelled of a hundred years of seawater, and in the great hall, among the drifted weed, a figure was waiting at a tall desk. It was a very gaunt old gentleman in a black gown, whose face, when he turned, was as pallid and smooth as a candle. "Good morning," said the Registrar of the Drowned City, "and I regret that I am obliged to ask whether you have an appointment." There was a long, stricken pause. "I have an appointment," said Perpetua, who could not bear to be disorderly, and held up the Captain's page, and the Registrar bowed. To the astonishment of all the thieves, who had expected a good deal of climbing and a certain amount of shouting, he stood aside with a murmured apology for the damp.

The first door was iron, bound with brass, and it bore a single line of engraved capitals. ENTER BY THE NAME OF THE THING YOU SEEK, NOT BY THE NAME YOU CALL IT. The seven thieves, who were connoisseurs of locks, stared at it, and Captain Voss tried the words Treasure, Gold, and, after a thoughtful moment, Please, and nothing moved. But Perpetua, who knew perfectly well how a catalogue was made, was running her finger down the page. "It is a subject index," she said, "and in a subject index nobody files a thing under what it is called in the street. They file it under its heading, and what you seek is the Reserve, which is the formal term, entered under R, for Reserve, Treasury, see also." She spoke the word, and the iron door swung open.

The second door was harder, and the third harder still, and the thieves, who had a great deal of experience of locks, found themselves standing in a dank passage, sheepish and bareheaded, with their hats in their hands, watching a fourteen-year-old girl talk to a wall. The second asked for the second-to-last entry in the drawer of the year when the sea rose, and Perpetua worked out, aloud, which calendar the Guild had used, and found it. The third forbade any person to pass who had not first seen the page marked See Also. "Oh, a cross-reference," said Perpetua, in a voice of the purest, most unguarded tenderness, "and I have always loved a cross-reference." She followed it, three drawers along, and came back holding a tiny brass key.

The vault was a round room under the sea, lined with drawers to the ceiling, thousands and thousands of small brass drawers, each with a tag, and each tag with a name written on it in the same brown hand. Nobody spoke, and there was a smell of dry paper and cold stone, and a wan, greenish, aqueous light fell through a window of thick glass where the bay pressed against it like a great, dark animal. "Open one," whispered Mrs. Rue. Captain Voss, whose hands had begun to tremble, pulled out the nearest, and inside, on a bed of faded plum-colored velvet, lay a child's christening cup, and a card that read: Taken from the Ellery family, Saltgate, in the winter of the flood. Held for return.

They opened a second drawer, and a third, and a hundredth. A wedding ring, a watch, a fiddle with a cracked neck, a silver rattle, a ship in a bottle, a girl's brooch in the shape of a swallow, a pair of spectacles, a christening robe, a pocket compass whose needle still, after a century in the dark, trembled hopefully towards the north. Each lay on a card, and each card said, in the same hand, whose it was, and where it had been taken, and Held for return. "It is not a treasury," said Perpetua slowly. "It is a lost property office." She turned to the last page of the catalogue, which she had been too busy with the riddles to read, and the heading at the top said, in capitals, THE GUILD OF QUIET HANDS: A DEED OF TRUST. "Everything here was taken for safekeeping in the flood," she said, "to be handed back when a clerk could show whose it was."

"The thing is worth ten thousand in silver," said Captain Voss, softly. His charming smile had gone, and what was underneath it was neither charming nor benevolent. "The Guild is dead, Miss Dace, and we are old, and we are poor, and we did not come down here to run an errand for the descendants of people who never even asked." "You would not be running an errand," said Perpetua, whose voice was quavering in every syllable. "The deed allows a finder's fee, one tenth of the value of everything restored, to whoever restores it, and it is in clause nine." There was a silence, and Mrs. Rue gave a low whistle. "Clause nine," she said, "and I always did say you never read the small print, Hargreave."

The tide was turning, and they felt it first in the floor, a long shudder like some enormous beast reconsidering its patience, and the greenish light at the window went darker, and from far above came the groan of water gathering against the Registry doors. Captain Voss did not move, and for a long, terrible moment, Perpetua thought that he meant to take the catalogue and leave her, and she knew that she could not file her way out of it. Then Mrs. Rue took her by the elbow, and the old woman's hand was as strong as iron. "Come along, child," said Mrs. Rue, "and Hargreave, you will carry the boxes, because you are going to apologize for them, and you are going to do it up the stairs."

They came out into the first gray light of the morning with the water at their ankles, seven old thieves and one very young clerk, rumpled and salt-stiff and triumphant, carrying a hundred and eleven brass boxes in their coats. Behind them, the Registrar stood in the doorway of the drowned Registry and bowed, and for just a moment, Perpetua could have sworn that his pale

face was smiling. Captain Voss grumbled, and took his tenth, and carried the christening cup to the Ellerys himself. In Saltgate that winter, there was a new sign over a small door on Fish Street. It read THE OFFICE OF RETURNS, and underneath, in careful pencil, that nobody would notice for a year, Miss P. Dace, Registrar.

## Questions

**1. Why did the retired thieves need Perpetua?**

A. She could read the vault's old catalogue
B. She was good at climbing
C. She owned a boat

**2. How did Perpetua open the first door?**

A. She picked the lock
B. She answered it as a filing question
C. She asked the Registrar to unlock it

**3. What did the vault actually hold?**

A. Gold coins and rings
B. Goods taken from families, labeled so they could be returned
C. Empty chests

**4. Why did Perpetua refuse to let Captain Voss sell what was in the vault?**

A. She disliked Captain Voss
B. The catalogue said each item was held to be returned to its owner
C. The vault was empty

**5. In this story, a catalogue is**

A. a ship's rope
B. a list of what is kept and where
C. a kind of lantern

**6. What does Perpetua do at the end?**

A. She goes back to her desk and never leaves again
B. She sets up an office to return lost things
C. She sails away with the thieves

## Words to know

catalogue: list of items
registrar: record keeper
sumptuous: rich and grand
vault: strong room
retired: no longer working

# Answer key: The Clerk of Hollowmere

1. A. She could read the vault's old catalogue
2. B. She answered it as a filing question
3. B. Goods taken from families, labeled so they could be returned
4. B. The catalogue said each item was held to be returned to its owner
5. B. a list of what is kept and where
6. B. She sets up an office to return lost things