



Fluffy Clouds

The sun shone over the Vale of Strange and multi-coloured bogeys flew out of a sky full of fluffy clouds. Close at hand, a man and a woman and two children picked their way between cute little bouncing heeble-greebs, smiling as they waved at the monsters all around.

"It isn't like that really of course."

Peter looked up from the picture in the book he was reading to see the pale face and piercing eyes of Amanda Chubb looking down at him.

"But then you'd know that, wouldn't you?" Amanda said. "You've been there yourself, haven't you?"

Peter grimaced.

Yes, he reflected, he had been to The Vale of Strange all right, all thanks to this girl Amanda. And thanks to Amanda they had both almost never come home.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, rather coldly.

Amanda glanced to either side. "As far as I can tell," she said, "this seems to be a public library. I've as much right to be here as anybody else. What are *you* doing here?"

"Reading about the Vale of Strange," said Peter. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Amanda shook her head disdainfully.

"You won't find out much about it from that book," she told him. "That's a government book. That's what they give the tourists. That book tells them the Vale of Strange is full of cute little monsters and fluffy clouds and perfectly safe for the whole family. But you and I know it's not really like that, don't we?"

Peter thought back to the time he and Amanda had spent in the vale: the bogeys swarming out of the sky to attack them, the sharp-

toothed heeble-greebs rolling out of the long grass to snap at their heels, and the jamjam plant which trapped him in its feelers and covered him all over in something which looked like strawberry jam but was more like acid. No, it wasn't like it said in the book.

"But this is the only book in the library about the vale," he protested. "They told me so."

"Well they would tell you that, wouldn't they?" said Amanda. "It doesn't mean to say it's true."

"But why would they lie?"

"The same reason people always lie. Because it suits them."

Peter rolled his eyes. Amanda had a habit of saying something that sounded clever but avoided telling you what you really wanted to know.

"What I was wanting to ask was—" he began in exasperation.

"Look, it's perfectly simple," said Amanda. "They told you they don't have any more books because you don't have a resident's permit. As far as they're concerned, you might as well be a tourist."

"A resident's permit," said Peter. "What's one of those?"

"It's to show that you live here in Peculiarshire of course."

"But I do live here," Peter protested. He lived at the shop nearby on Peculiar Hill with his Uncle Bob and Aunt Maggie, who had taken him in when his parents had been kidnapped by pirates and eaten by tigers. The overseers of children had decided that Peculiar Hill would be safer than his old home on crocodile-infested Evil Island but after his first weeks here, Peter wasn't so sure. With crocodiles, you knew where you were, but things were not so predictable here on Peculiar Hill. It was close to the Vale of Strange itself, so flying bogeys and sharp-toothed heeble-greebs were never far away and anything could turn strange at any moment. It took some getting used to.

Even so, this was young Peter's home for the time being.

"How do I get one of these resident's permits?" he asked.

"You haven't been living here long enough yet," said Amanda. "You've got to have lived here over a year, and even then, it helps if you know the right people. They've got to be convinced that you can be trusted, you see. That you won't blurt out the truth about the vale to the tourists."

"Oh," said Peter. This didn't sound encouraging.

Amanda grinned. "So there's not much chance of you ever getting one, is there? Not if you live here for fifty years."

Peter could see her point. He didn't like the way they did things here in Peculiarshire, encouraging tourists to come to the Vale of Strange without telling them what a dangerous place it was. He had tried to warn some already, which – in a roundabout way – was how he had come to visit the vale himself.

"Of course," said Amanda, "there's another way of finding out more about the Vale of Strange, isn't there?"

"Oh," said Peter. "What's that?"

Amanda gave a snort of exasperation. "It's pretty obvious really," she said. "Just go back there yourself."

"Oh no," said Peter. "I've already told you. I'm not going back."

"But it would be fun," said Amanda. "We could take some sandwiches again and eat them on those bubbling boulders. I could show you all the bits you haven't seen yet."

"Yes," said Peter, "but it won't seem so much like fun if we both get killed by bogeys or eaten by a jamjam plant."

"You always look on the black side," Amanda protested. "We didn't get killed last time, now did we?"

"Only because of Mr. Grimble's exploding carrots."

"And my unctuous splodger," said Amanda, "and, though it pains me to say it, your bazooka full of heeble-greebs."

"We were lucky," said Peter. "We may not be so lucky next time."

"But—"

"Read my lips," said Peter. "I'm not going back there."

"Hmm." Amanda sat down at the desk beside Peter and rested her head in her hands. "Am I supposed to take that as a 'no' then?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I mean *no*. I mean—"

"So, tell me something," Amanda asked, "if you don't want to go back to the vale, why are you so keen on reading about it?"

"That's none of your business," said Peter.

"Do you want to know more about the vale so you can pass it all on to the tourists? To make sure they're properly scared? Is that it?"

"No," said Peter. "Not really."

"Well, what is it then?"

"It's like I said, it's none of your business."

"But I could make it my business," Amanda told him.

"How do you mean?"

"We could do a deal," said Amanda. "I've come here to get out a book for my mother, some kind of cookbook using vegetable juice, but I've also got an additional library ticket..."

Peter slowly brightened. "You mean...?"

"I mean I can use my resident's permit to get out a decent book on the Vale of Strange."

"Would you? Would you really?"

"But there's an *if*," said Amanda.

Peter had a sudden sinking feeling. "Oh yes, and what's that?"

"I'll get the book," said Amanda, "if you tell me why you want it."

Strange Sounds in the Broom Cupboard

Peter thought about what Amanda had said. He wasn't at all sure if he could trust her, but he definitely wanted that book.

"All right," he said eventually. "It's a deal. If you get the book out, I'll tell you why I want it. But you'll have to get it out before I tell you. Don't do a lifkin on me."

He was thinking back to one of the creatures they had met in the Vale of Strange, a wiry, two-legged furry thing called a lifkin which had almost got them both killed by sticking very rigidly to an agreement.

Amanda gave a funny kind of smile. "It's all right. I won't do a lifkin, I promise. But I'd better find my mother's book first. Won't be a moment." She got to her feet and went across to the cookery shelves, leaving Peter to leaf through the government book on the vale.

The next page had a picture of a smiling child holding a heeble-greeb in his bare hands. Heeble-greebs were round little creatures which rolled out of the long grass and bit you in the legs with their sharp little teeth – unless you were wearing sturdy boots, which everyone who lived in Peculiarshire always did all of the time (just in case). You would no sooner pick a heeble-greeb up without wearing sturdy gloves than you would pick up a beehive without wearing a beekeeper's suit.

Peter shook his head. Whoever had drawn that picture had obviously never encountered a real heeble-greeb. This book was nonsense. As Amanda had said, it was just a government book to attract tourists to the vale, to fool them into thinking the place was safe.

"That didn't take long," said Peter when Amanda returned with two large books. The top one had a picture on the cover of smiling people sitting in a circle eating vegetables.

"This one was easy to find," said Amanda. "My mother described it precisely. She doesn't want to read it and she certainly doesn't want to make the food. But she hopes that some health might rub off on her if she stares long enough at the cover."

"Wow," said Peter. "Is that how it works in Peculiarshire?"

"No," said Amanda, "but don't tell her that. And this other book was easy to find as well," she continued. "I've taken it out before. It's the best guide to the vale in my opinion."

This one was a big red book with a picture on the cover of a fierce flying bogey baring its teeth.

Peter nodded. This was more like it.

"Pass it over," he said.

"No," said Amanda, wrapping her arms around the book protectively.

Peter narrowed his eyes. "Are you doing a lifkin after all?"

"No," said Amanda. "The deal was that you would tell me why you wanted it. You haven't told me yet. No explanation, no book."

"Oh, all right," said Peter. "I want to find out more about the vale so I can work out a way to stop it happening."

"Stop what happening?"

"What happens to the tourists, the way they're fooled into coming to the Vale of Strange. The way they're told it's safe when it isn't."

Amanda raised her eyes to the ceiling and gave a pronounced sigh.

"You're not still going on about that, are you?" she said. "Still trying to save the world."

"But it isn't right," said Peter.

"I think you may have mentioned your opinion before," said Amanda, "but you know there's no way round it. The tourists have

to come to the vale to counteract the strangeness. Otherwise the strangeness would spread all over Peculiarshire and beyond. Even the places the tourists come from would be affected. They wouldn't like it either. It's really best for everyone the way it works."

"But the tourists get killed in the Vale of Strange. They get killed by the monsters."

"Only some of them."

"Some's too many as far as I'm concerned."

"So what would you do? Just let the strangeness spread?"

"I'm not convinced that would be so bad," said Peter. "But even so, I bet there's other ways to stop the strangeness spreading. We just have to think of them."

"We?" said Amanda. "I'm not wasting my brainpower on that. You can work it out for yourself. People have thought about it before, you know. They've tried things. But they haven't found anything that works."

This was news to Peter. "Oh? What have they tried?"

"All sorts of things," said Amanda. "They used helicopters to spread green algae to soak up the strangeness, but the algae just got strange as well. It spread all over Peculiarshire and made strange popping noises that kept people awake at night. There was an awful lot of bother and the mayor got very embarrassed and had to resign."

"What else did they try?"

"There was the giant vacuum cleaner and the lake of chicken soup and the monster-size high pressure hose. The district got windswept and flooded and knee deep in broth but was still just as strange as ever. They got through an awful lot of mayors that year, I can tell you."

Peter started to feel sad. He wondered if Amanda was right and it was hopeless after all. But he wasn't going to give up so easily.

"I'm still going to try and come up with something," he said.

"All right, suit yourself, but they've been through it all before. Nothing controls strangeness the way we humans do."

"At least I have the book now. At least I'm in with a chance."

"Er, yes," said Amanda suddenly putting her arms round the book and hugging it to her again.

Peter did not like the look of this. "Give me the book please, Amanda."

"Actually, I think I'll just hold on to it a little longer if you don't mind."

Peter's cheeks burned. "Come on, Amanda. We had a deal."

"That's right," said Amanda. "I said I would get out a good book on the vale if you told me what you wanted it for."

"Yes..."

"I said I would get the book out. I didn't say anything about giving it to you."

Peter was furious. "You *have* done a lifkin," he protested. "You promised you wouldn't."

"I haven't done a lifkin," said Amanda, looking very pleased with herself. "I've done an Amanda. It's the same thing but with more style."

Peter was not amused.

"I don't see how this helps you," he said. "You said you didn't want to work this problem about the strangeness out for yourself, but now you've stopped me having the book, you're going to have to."

"No," said Amanda. "*You* can work on the problem. But when you need to know something about the vale, tell me what it is and I'll look it up and read it out to you."

Peter was puzzled. "And that helps you how exactly?"

"It's a bit of fun," said Amanda. "Until I think of another game."

"I could almost think you enjoyed my company," said Peter.

Amanda seemed to turn a little pink. "Don't flatter yourself," she told him dismissively.

Chinggggg... Chinggggg...

Their attention was drawn to the library clock as it chimed two.

Amanda looked a little relieved at the interruption, but Peter leapt to his feet in a panic.

"Oh no," he exclaimed. "I'm supposed to be meeting Uncle Bob at the shop at two o'clock. I'm supposed to be helping him with some work."

"We'd better leave then," Amanda replied. "Can you take my mother's book? It isn't fair if I have to carry both of them."

Peter gave a splutter. "What a cheek. You've only got both books because—"

"Do what I say," said Amanda, "or I'll take your precious Vale of Strange book back to the desk and say I don't want it after all."

"You just like to boss me around, don't you?" said Peter. "That's what it is."

"Be quiet and carry the book." Amanda strode towards the door, still hugging the Vale of Strange book closely. Peter was left with no choice but to pick up the cookery book and follow on behind, muttering angrily to himself.

Then Amanda stopped up short.

"What's that noise?"

There was indeed a strange clattering noise from nearby. They looked around, trying to identify where it was coming from.

"Look, I'd better get on," said Peter. "Uncle Bob's expecting me."

But now the clattering was accompanied by what seemed to be muffled cries for help.

"Someone's in trouble," Amanda said. "We ought to try to help them."

"But where's it coming from?"

"It's from in there. Look!"

She was pointing to a door marked 'Private' near the library entranceway.

"Come on," she said.

"You can't go in there, Amanda," said Peter. "It says—"

Amanda opened the door.

On the other side was a walk-in cupboard with a collection of brooms and ladders which seemed to be doing a dance.

Peter wondered if these were strange brooms and ladders. Inexplicable dancing was the sort of thing strange things did. But then some brooms fell forward out of the door, revealing a tall thin man with a long brown raincoat and a pair of binoculars round his neck.

He looked at the children in some confusion.

"Is this the library?" he asked.

"Yes," said Amanda. "Were you trapped in there for long?"

The man glanced back at the cupboard.

"No, not long," he said. "Only a matter of days, nothing really. I was once trapped in a toilet in the Amazon Basin for several weeks." He glowed as he spoke, as though this was a source of pride. "Anyway, I must be getting along. Don't let me keep you."

"All right, er, thank you," muttered Peter.

"Don't go thanking him," whispered Amanda. "He should have thanked us for letting him out. It was very rude of him not to."

"Oh, just one thing," said the man, who had been heading away but now turned back. "Would you be so good as to direct me to the section of the library on the Vale of Strange?"

"Ah," began Peter, "well—"

"It's over there," said Amanda, "next to geography."

"Ah yes," said the man, "I see it now." He headed off with confidence in the wrong direction.

"He's heading for the section on geometry," said Peter. "Shall I go and help him?"

"Why would you want to do that?" asked Amanda. "I thought you were all for keeping people away from the Vale of Strange."

"Well, yes," said Peter, "but he looks so lost."

"He'll be a lot more lost than that if he ever makes it as far as the vale," said Amanda. "I've seen a better sense of direction in a bottle of ketchup. Come on, I thought you were late."

"Perhaps we should have told him about the resident's permit," said Peter. "Then he can get some decent books on the vale and they'll scare him out of going."

They were leaving the library now and Amanda raised her eyes to the glowering Peculiarshire sky.

The library was a little way from the lower end of Peculiar Hill, at the edge of Peculiar Park with its edible climbing frames and especially crazy golf. They could vaguely hear the screeching of the flowers.

"You're always worrying about other people," Amanda said, "as if it's your job to save the world."

Well if I don't do it, nobody else will, thought Peter. People round there didn't seem to notice when things weren't organised properly, like inviting tourists to come to the vale instead of finding some other way to deal with the strangeness. Everyone seemed to leave it to Peter to sort things out.

"You don't need to worry about that man," said Amanda as they reached the foot of Peculiar Hill and began to climb. "I know he looks clueless but on further reflection, I think he can take care of himself."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because of what he does for a living," said Amanda,

Peter was nonplussed. "What does he do and how do you know anyway?"

"The chances are you'll find out soon enough," said Amanda dismissively. "Now what do you want me to read about in this book we borrowed?"

Peter felt annoyed. He didn't like it when Amanda kept things to herself, which she sometimes seemed to do just to feel superior. He

was about to argue but then he saw some heeble-greebs in the long grass at the side of the road. He was very relieved that he had his sturdy boots on.

“Look up heeble-greebs, advanced defence,” he told Amanda thoughtfully.

She gave a smile and a nod. “You’re starting to get the hang of living round here.”