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The Mystery of Uncle Bob

When Peter reached the shop, he found Aunt Maggie feeding the mules.

“Where is Uncle Bob?” he asked. “Is he hiding inside?”

“No, he isn’t,” said Aunt Maggie. “Why should your uncle be hiding? What has he been getting up to this time?”

“I don’t know,” said Peter, “but he’s been chased from the big old house by a large crowd of Australians. Are you sure he’s not here?”

“You’re welcome to have a look,” said Aunt Maggie, sounding bemused. “There are plenty of places to hide now the Searcher’s cleared them all out, though I don’t expect he’s squeezed himself down the side of the sofa. Hello, what’s that noise? Can you hear geese?”

Peter could hear geese all right. The commotion was coming from further up the hill. He stepped out into the road to look and quickly had to step back again. This avoided a painful collision with numerous fleeing Australians, who were swiftly followed by a larger number of furious watch-geese, waddling along with their wings spread and screeching their indignation. One of the birds stretched out its neck and pecked an Australian on the head. He turned and tried to take aim at the goose with his gun but lost his balance and fell. He did his best to get up again, but Aunt Maggie stepped in and knocked him down with a vigorous swipe from her bogey pole.

“Trying to shoot a defenceless animal, were you?” she cried. “You should be ashamed of yourself!”

When the spectacle had passed on its way, except for Aunt Maggie’s concussed Australian who had laid himself down to recover in a litter bin, Peter cautiously stepped out into the road again. Looking down the hill, he could see the departing gaggle of geese and Australians, but looking in the other direction, everything seemed to be clear. There were only a few late-coming shoppers who were checking to see that the geese were all gone. He had

hoped to catch sight of Uncle Bob, perhaps peering out of some hiding place in a doorway or alley. But there was no sign of his uncle. *Where could he have got to*, Peter wondered?

Going inside, he followed Aunt Maggie into the kitchen where she put on a kettle to boil.

“Now then, Peter,” she said, “I’ve just seen lots of little men chased down Peculiar Hill by a herd of geese from the Strange Hotel. Am I right in thinking you’re going to tell me this has something to do with Uncle Bob?”

“Yes, Aunt Maggie,” said Peter.

“Right then,” said Aunt Maggie, pouring out the tea. “Do you want to tell me what’s been going on then please? Then I can make an informed decision on whether or not to panic.”

Peter told her what he knew: all about Mala and her father and Percival Crow. He told her about the planned expedition, Crow’s grasping attachment to the angulator, and the sudden pursuit of Uncle Bob by the mob of Australians.

To his surprise, he found Aunt Maggie had some information of her own to add.

“I think I know this Percival Crow,” she said. “He was a local man, but he moved away many years ago. What I remember most is his face. He looked like one of those fish they keep in a special part of the aquarium because it scares the children.”

“That sounds like him,” Peter agreed.

“He always had airs and graces, did that fellow,” Aunt Maggie continued. “He thought he was better than the likes of the rest of us. He moved away to make a name for himself far from Peculiarshire. So now he’s come back, has he? I wonder why.”

It seemed to Peter that this was a very important question. Apparently, he had come back to assist Mr. Flipper’s expedition into the vale, but Peter couldn’t help but suspect there might be other, secret reasons too. His desire for secrecy, even to the extent of landscaping the grounds of the house with hills, suggested there was something he wanted to hide. As for the sudden, inexplicable pursuit of Uncle Bob...

An idea came to him, and he blurted it out to his aunt.

“We should ask about Uncle Bob at the Strange Hotel,” he said. “The Australians must have been up there

to set off the watch-geese, so maybe Uncle Bob's been up there too."

"Yes, I suppose that's worth a try," said Aunt Maggie. "And if nothing comes of that, I shall have to start panicking, I suppose, though I usually prefer to get that out of the way in the mornings."

But then, as she spoke, a flurry of wings deposited a colourful bird on her shoulder. It strutted about and started pecking at her ear.

"Ah, good," she exclaimed. "Mr. Chubb has sent his homing parrot. Maybe you're right, Peter. Maybe he's got news about Uncle Bob."

"Uncle Bob," the parrot repeated, mimicking Aunt Maggie's voice.

"That parrot has a stupid voice," said Aunt Maggie. "Now what does this say?" She untied a note from a collar around the pigeon's neck. "Ah good," she said as she read. "You were right, Peter. Mr. Chubb says your uncle is up at the Strange Hotel."

"Good," said Peter. "Shall I go up there now and see him?"

"Yes," said Aunt Maggie, reading on, "but there's a bit

of a complication, I'm afraid."

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De-sweeping

“I have to say,” said Uncle Bob, “I hadn’t realised that the creatures in the Vale of Strange were so friendly, especially the cute little heeble-greebs. And those bogeys aren’t vicious at all. I can’t think why we’ve been making so much fuss about the place. I’m going to get rid of our unge and glop as soon as I get home.”

“Yes, yes, now just be quiet, Bob,” said Mr. Chubb. “You can sort all that out later. Just close your eyes for now and get your strength back.”

“Why is my head in a cooking pot?” asked Uncle Bob.

“It isn’t a cooking pot, it’s a de-sweeper,” said Mr. Chubb. “I’ll explain about it later. Just you rest for now. I’ll play you some nice relaxing dolphin noises.”

“Hmm,” said Uncle Bob. “I didn’t see any dolphins in the Vale of Strange, just bogeys and heeble-greebs and

fluffy clouds and...” His voice grew slowly quiet and he began to snore noisily.

“Good,” said Mr. Chubb. “The de-sweep has a much greater chance of success if the subject is relaxed.”

“Do you think it will work?” asked Peter.

“I hope so,” said Mr. Chubb. “He’s not fit to be out on his own at the moment. He’ll be stroking bogeys and hugging heeble-greebs and no good ever came of that.”

They were in the lounge at the Strange Hotel. Uncle Bob was laid out on a couch with a large metal helmet on his head. Multicoloured wires splayed from the helmet to a nearby machine with a host of dials and switches. The machine produced an ominous background hum.

“Can you go over what happened again?” asked Peter.

“I was upstairs doing some paperwork when I heard the geese screeching up on the roof,” said Mr. Chubb. “They go off several times a day but not as noisy as that. It seemed obvious something was seriously wrong, so I went to have a look. That’s when I saw your Uncle Bob come running up the driveway, yelling for help at the top of his voice with those little men behind him.”

“Australians,” said Peter.

“It looked like a serious incident,” Mr. Chubb continued, “so I waited till Bob was through the front door and then released the geese. I’m pleased to say it worked like a dream. The Australians took one look at the geese and turned and fled. I guess they aren’t familiar with poultry back where they come from. It must have been quite a shock.”

“But then Uncle Bob—” prompted Peter.

“That’s where it didn’t go so well,” said Mr. Chubb. “I don’t get many tourists at this time of year of course, but I had two or three this morning so I switched the Sweeper on for them. The trouble is, because I get out of the habit off-season, I forgot to switch it off again afterwards. Your uncle would normally have checked the light wasn’t on, of course, as he came through the door, but I suppose being chased by all those Australians, he was in a bit of a panic so he didn’t think to look.”

“So my uncle’s brain got swept as he came through the door,” said Peter.

“That’s the sorry story, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Chubb. “Which is how he came to be the way he is. His brain got swept the same as we do for the tourists, clearing his

recent memory and replacing it with a happy experience of the Vale of Strange. Fortunately, we have this de-sweeper machine for use in such emergencies. If all goes well, it will restore the swept memories and take away the false recollections.”

“Is it always successful?” Peter asked.

“Not always,” said Mr. Chubb. “We’ll just have to hope for the best. And it’s a slow process, I’m afraid. It’s best if he stays here overnight. We should know how it’s going some time tomorrow.”

“Will he be safe here?” asked Peter. “What if they set the Australians on him again?”

“The geese are starting to wander back,” said Mr. Chubb. “I’ll send out Bletch to round up the stragglers. I can’t see those Australians coming back while those birds are around.”

“The trouble is, we don’t know why those Australians were chasing Uncle Bob, not unless he gets his memory back.”

“Well, like I say, if all goes well, we should know by tomorrow. We can’t do much more now.”

Peter nodded. His uncle was still asleep with his metal

helmet on. The strange machine attached to it reminded him of the angulator and he found himself wondering if whatever dispute had led to the chase had something to do with that.

Speaking of which, where *was* the angulator? Had Percival Crow refused to give it back to Uncle Bob? Had that been the root of the argument? Had Uncle Bob complained, and was that why Crow had set the Australians on him? To chase him off, to show him who was boss? Was that what had happened? He remembered Crow's expression of hunger when he saw the device for the first time. But why exactly did he want it so much?

With all these ideas and questions, Peter felt like his brain was going to explode. He really needed someone to talk things through with.

"Is Amanda home?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Chubb, "but she's busy now I'm afraid. She's reading her mother a bedtime story. She'll be tied up for a while."

"Oh, I see," Peter said disconsolately. Suddenly, he felt very alone. There was so much to try to sort out. He really needed to speak to Amanda or failing that to Uncle Bob,

but Amanda wasn't available and neither was Uncle Bob in his right mind. He would just have to try to think things through as best he could for himself.

So he said goodbye to Mr. Chubb and wandered back down Peculiar Hill, wondering what to do next.

As he reached Aunt Maggie's shop, he noticed two tiny figures lingering in the shadows of a nearby alleyway. It seemed like two of the Australians were keeping a watch on the shop. When they saw Peter, one of them lifted his hat in greeting.

'Politblob,' he said, faintly across the street. Then he disappeared, moving further back into shadow.