

MALAMANDER



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WALKER
BOOKS

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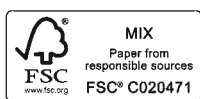
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EERIE-ON-SEA

YOU'VE PROBABLY BEEN TO EERIE-ON-SEA,
without ever knowing it.

When you came, it would have been summer. There would have been ice cream and deckchairs and a seagull that pinched your chips. You probably poked about in the rock pools with your mum, while your dad found that funny shell. Remember? And I bet that when you got in the car to drive home, you looked up at the words CHEERIE-on-SEA – written in light-bulb letters over the pier – and got ready to forget all about your day at the seaside.

It's that kind of place.

In the summer.

But you should try being here when the first winter storms blow in, when the letters “C” and “H” blow off the pier, as they always do in November. When sea mist drifts up the streets like vast ghostly tentacles, and saltwater spray rattles the windows of the Grand Nautilus Hotel. Few people visit Eerie-on-Sea then. Even the locals keep off the beach when darkness falls and the wind howls around Maw Rocks and the wreck of the battleship *Leviathan*, where even now some swear they have seen the unctuous malamander creep.

But you probably don't believe in the malamander. You maybe think there's no way a fish-man can be real. And that's fine. Stick to your ice cream and deckchairs. This story probably isn't for you anyway. In fact, do yourself a favour and stop reading now. Close this book and lock it in an old tin box. Wrap the box in a heavy chain and throw it off the pier. Forget you ever heard of Eerie-on-Sea. Go back to your normal life – grow up, get married, start a family. And when your children can walk, take them for a day at the seaside too. In the summer, of course. Stroll on the beach, and find a funny shell of your own. Reach down and pick it up. Only, it's stuck to something...

Stuck to an old tin box.

The lock has been torn off and the chain is gone. Can the sea do that? You open the box, and find ...

... that it's empty.

Nothing but barnacles and seaweed, and something else. Something like ... *slime*?

You hear a sound behind you – a sound like footsteps, coming closer. Like slimy, flippery footsteps *coming closer*.

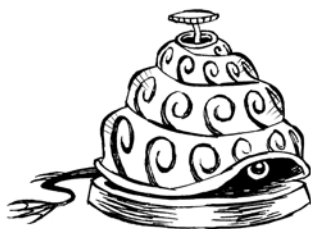
You turn around.

What do you see?

Really?

Well, maybe this story *is* for you, after all.





THE GRAND NAUTILUS HOTEL

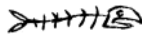
MY NAME'S HERBERT LEMON, by the way. But most people call me Herbie. I'm the Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel, as you can see from my cap. Someone once told me that most hotels don't have a Lost-and-Founder, but that can't be right. What do they do with all the lost stuff then? And how do the people who've lost it get it back?

I'm a bit young for such an important job, I suppose, but Lady Kraken herself – the owner of the hotel – gave it to me. Even Mr Mollusc, the hotel manager, can't argue with that. He'd like to, of course – he hates anything in the hotel that doesn't make money. If he'd had his way, the Lost-and-Foundery would have been shut down as

soon as he became manager, and my little cubbyhole in the reception lobby boarded up for good. And if that had happened, I'd never have met the girl.

The girl I found scrambling through my window.

The girl who said, "Hide me!"



"Hide me!"

I look her up and down. Well, mostly up, because she's got herself stuck on the window latch, and the cellar windows are near the ceiling. If she's a burglar, she's not a very good one.

"Please!"

I get her unstuck, although that means nearly being squashed as she tumbles inside. It's snowing, so a whole lot of winter comes in through the window too.

We get to our feet and now I'm face to face with her: a girl in a ratty pullover with a woolly bobble hat over a mass of curly hair. She looks like she's about to speak, but stops at the sound of raised voices up above. Raised voices that are getting closer. The girl opens her eyes wide with panic.

"In here!" I whisper, and pull her over to a large travel trunk that's been in the Lost-and-Foundery, unclaimed,

for decades. Before she can say anything, I shove her inside and close the lid.

The voices are right up at my cubbyhole now – the whining, wheedling sound of Mr Mollusc trying to deal with someone difficult. I grab a few lost bags, brollies and bits, dump them on top of the trunk and hope they look as if they’ve been there for years. Then the bell on my counter, the one people ring when they want my attention, starts *ting-ting-ting*-ing like crazy. I straighten my cap, run up the steps to my cubbyhole and turn on my how-may-I-help-you? face, as if nothing strange has just happened at all.

Mr Mollusc is the first person I see, trying to smooth his hair over his bald patch.

“I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding,” he’s spluttering to someone. “If you would just allow me to make enquiries...”

The someone he is talking to is unlike anyone I’ve ever seen before. It’s a man in a long black sailor’s coat that’s sodden with water. He looms over the desk like a crooked monolith, his face a dismal crag, his eyes hidden beneath the peak of a ruined captain’s cap. With one stiff finger he is jabbing the button of my bell like he’s stabbing it with a knife. He stops when I arrive

and leans in even further, covering me in shadow.

“Where...?” he says, in a voice that sounds like two slabs of wet granite being scraped together. “Girl. Where?”

“Ahem,” I say, clearing my throat and putting on the posh voice Mr Mollusc expects me to use with guests. “To whom may you be referring, sir?”

The man’s mouth, which is nothing more than a wide upside-down “V” in his dripping bone-yellow beard, opens with a hiss. I notice there is seaweed in that beard, and more tangled around his tarnished brass buttons. He smells like something bad is about to happen.

“WHERE?”

I gulp. Well, I can’t help it, can I? I’m just a lost-property attendant. I’m not trained for this.

“My dear sir,” purrs the voice of Mr Mollusc, “I’m sure we can sort this out. What exactly have you lost?”

The man pulls himself back out of my cubbyhole, and towers over Mr Mollusc. He draws his right hand, which has been hidden till now, out of his coat. Mr Mollusc shrinks back when he sees that where the man’s hand should be is a large iron boathook, ending in a long gleaming spike.

“Girl,” the man says.

Now one thing I will say about old Mollusc is that he knows which battles to fight. In this case, since there's no way he can beat this great hulking intruder, he decides to join him instead. He turns on me.

"Herbert Lemon! Have you got a girl down there?"

Now they're *both* looming in at me.

I shake my head. My how-may-I-help-you? face dissolves, so I try an innocent grin instead.

"No," I manage to say in a squeaky voice. I hate it when my voice does that. "No girls are hiding down here. None at all."

And that's when there's a soft thud down in the basement behind me. It sounds exactly like someone who is hiding in a travel trunk trying to make themselves more comfortable.

Oops.

The bearded sailor opens his mouth in a moan of triumph, his dark eyes flash beneath his cap. He yanks open the door to my cubbyhole and shoves me against the wall as he pushes past. He squeezes down the steps to the cellar, filling the tunnel, his back crooked as he stoops beneath the low ceiling.

I hurry after him. This isn't me being brave, by the way, this is just me not knowing what else to do.

The sailor is standing in the middle of the room, filling the space. I see him look at the patch of melted snow beneath the open cellar window. I see him turn his head to follow the wet footprints that lead straight to the travel trunk. The bags and brollies I dumped on it have fallen off. By now there might as well be a big flashing sign over that trunk that says, “YOO-HOO! SHE’S IN HERE!”

Mr Mollusc, rushing down to join the party, sees all this too, and goes crimson with rage.

“Herbert Lemon! Why, I ought to...!”

But what he ought to I don’t find out, because of what the sailor-with-a-spike-for-a-hand does next. He raises his spike and brings it down with a sickening thud, driving it deep into the lid of the chest. He wrenches it out and then swings again, and again. The lid of the trunk splits and sunders with each blow, splinters of wood raining down all around. The trunk itself begins to disintegrate. The man tears the rest of it open with the help of his one good hand to reveal ...

... nothing!

Well, not quite nothing. There’s a very surprised-looking spider sitting amongst the wreckage. And a woolly bobble hat. I watch the spider scurry away and

wish I could join it. Now all there is to look at is the hat. It is very definitely the brightly coloured hat the girl was wearing. But of the girl herself there is no sign.

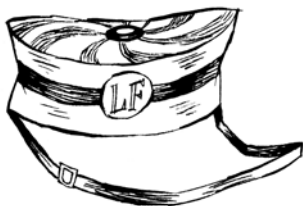
With a slow, deliberate motion, Boathook Man skewers the hat on the tip of his spike. He turns and holds it out to me, his face like a thundercloud. Somehow I find the courage not to squeak as I reach out and gently take the hat off him.

“Just some lost property,” I say. “It was, um, handed in this morning. I-I haven’t had a chance to label it yet, that’s all.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then Boathook Man roars – a great, wordless bellow of fury. He starts ransacking my cellar, sweeping his massive arms from side to side. I fall back on the stairs as bags, coats, hats, lost-thingummy-doodahs of every kind – including some that must have lain undisturbed down here since almost for ever – fly about as the man goes berserk trying to find the girl. But he finds no one.

She’s gone.





VIOLET PARMA

IT'S AFTERWARDS, and Boathook Man has left. Mr Mollusc has left too, but not without saying, "Just wait till Lady Kraken hears about this."

I pick up a piece of wreckage from the floor. It's part of the trunk. I'm going to miss that old thing – it's been here for as long as I can remember. Probably no one would have come back for it now, but still, I hate things to be lost permanently like that.

"Hello?" I say, as loudly as I dare, looking around. "Are you there?"

Silence.

I make my way to the window. I should close it – it's freezing in here now – but I decide to leave it open, just

a sliver. The snow outside has been replaced by a creeping sea mist, which glides past the window in upright wisps. Like ghosts.

She's well and truly gone, and who can blame her? But I put the woolly hat on the windowsill where it can be seen, just in case.

I start to tidy up, but it's a gloomy business seeing all the poor lost things flung around, and soon I slump down in my armchair in a grump. It's too late to do the job properly now anyway. I look at the little window of my wood burner, and see that my first log is flaming merrily. Part of the deal with being Lost-and-Founder at this place is that I get my own stove and a few logs a day. Mr Mollusc hates this, of course, but he has to lump it because that's how it was when Lady Kraken took over the hotel, and that's how it will always be, I guess. She says it's to make sure the lost things are dry and ready to be collected, as good as when they were found. And it means I'm pretty cosy down here over winter, and the fire in the little window is cheery, and relaxing, and...

"Are you going to sleep there all night?" says a voice, and I start awake.

The girl is sitting on the other side of the wood burner, the woolly hat in her hands. She raises an

eyebrow. I probably look ridiculous as I try to straighten my cap – the elastic has caught round my ear.

“How long have you been there?” I say, noticing that the cellar window is now tight shut.

The girl shrugs, and I get my first proper look at her. She has dark brown eyes in a light brown face, and a mass of curly hair, which is barely under control. She’s probably about the same age as me, so twelve-ish, though since my own age is pretty ishy, it’s hard to be sure. Her bright eyes are quick and amused as she watches me try to suss her out.

She’s wearing a too-big coat, and I recognize it as one of my lost things. Her shoes are her own, but they clearly aren’t any good for winter, and are wet through. I see that the fire has burned low, so I shove another log in.

“Are you a...?” I begin, but she shakes her head, so I try again. “What about a...?” But she just laughs.

“No, none of those,” she says. “I’m not a thief, and I’m certainly not a guest at this hotel.”

I probably look a bit confused, because she smiles.

“But I know who you are,” she says. “You’re Herbert Lemon, the famous Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel.”

“Famous?”

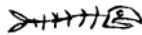
“Well, famous to me. I’ve come hundreds of miles just to see you, Herbert ...”

“Herbie,” I say, finally giving up with the cap and taking it off altogether.

“... because I think you are the only person in the world who can help me.”

“Really?” I say, scratching my head. “How come?”

“Because I’m lost,” she says. “And I’d like to be found.”



There are many strange stories about the Grand Nautilus Hotel, but there’s one in particular that I should tell you now. It happened twelve years ago, which is a few years before I came here myself, so I’m not exactly a witness. It’s the story of a baby found abandoned in the hotel, of parents completely vanished, of strange lights seen by the shore, of police swarming everywhere, searching high and low. Two pairs of shoes belonging to a man and a woman discovered, left neatly on the harbour wall. Along with footprints in the sand, leading from the harbour wall to the sea.

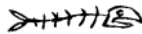
It’s a sad story.

Other prints were in the sand too – funny-shaped markings, as if something with flippers had dragged

itself out of the water. But the tide came in before anyone could photograph them properly, and that part of the story was left out of the papers.

In fact, all this is hardly a story at all now, more a legend. The Lost-and-Founder before me was briefly involved, but a baby isn't exactly something you can tag and shelve in a hotel cellar, so she got taken away and was never heard of again.

Until now...



“OK, I’m going to stop you right there,” I say to the girl, because I think I can see where this is going. “Even if you are this legendary lost baby all grown up, I really don’t see how I can help. I just do lost *things*. Not lost persons. You need a ... a detective, or something.”

“But isn’t it your job to find the owners of lost things? How do you do that?”

“Well, sometimes there are clues...”

“Exactly! Clues,” she says. “You *are* a detective. I’m just another clue.”

I sit back in my chair and fold my arms. “That’s not how it works. When I say ‘clues’, I mean labels and name tags. I mean when someone scratches their phone

number on the underside of their suitcase. Do you have a phone number scratched on your underside? No? Well then.”

“But I do have this,” says the girl, and she reaches into her ratty pullover and pulls out a folded postcard that she is wearing on a ribbon around her neck. She takes it off and hands it to me.

On one side is a picture of a monkey wearing a top hat. Or is it a chimp? Either way, it’s not your regular monkey or chimp: it has the lower body of a fish. Printed on the back is a series of letters and numbers.

I glance at the girl because this is something I recognize. But I’m not ready to tell her that yet, in case it sets off the whole detective thing again.

“It was in my cot,” says the girl. “When they found me, twelve years ago, in one of the rooms of this hotel. Surely you know something about it, Herbert.”

“Seriously, call me Herbie,” I say, handing the card back. “Only Mr Mollusc calls me Herbert.”

“Who’s Mr Mollusc?”

“He’s the horrible man who will kick you out into the snow when he finds you down here. And me too, probably.”

“Don’t you mean *if* he finds me?”

“Er, he’s already nearly found you once,” I say. “And thanks to you, my cellar was trashed by a hideous man with a hook for a hand. So I’m sticking with *when*, thanks.”

She looks crestfallen.

“So you won’t take my case?”

“Case? *Case?*” I shake my head in disbelief. “The only cases down here have unwashed pants in them. You can stay here tonight. It’s freezing outside ...”

She beams.

“... but I don’t take cases, and I don’t see how I can help you.”

“My name is Violet, by the way,” she says, grabbing my hand and wagging it up and down. “Violet Parma. And I just know that if anyone can help me, Herbie, it’s you.”

It’s as if she hasn’t been listening to a word I said! I watch as she slips off her ridiculously flimsy shoes and props them by the fire. Outside, the snow has stopped and ice has bloomed across the window. I want to ask her about Boathook Man. I want to ask her where she’s been all these years. Then I wonder if she’s hungry, this Violet Parma, but by the time I open my mouth to ask, she’s already asleep on a pile of coats.

I'm just thinking I should maybe crash out myself – I have a foldaway bed down here – when there's a loud *ting-ting* from up at my desk. It's so unexpected at this time of night that I almost jump out of my skin. I tiptoe up to my cubbyhole but there's no one there. On the counter is a folded note addressed to the Lost-and-Founder of the Grand Nautilus Hotel. Or, in other words, to me.

I open the note.

*Dear Herbert Lemon,
Please come to my rooms immediately.
Yours sincerely,
Lady Kraken*

I do a gulp. I can't help it. Lady Kraken summons no one to her presence lightly. The hotel runs like a venerable and well-greased machine, with old Mollusc supplying all the grease needed and then some. Every cog in that machine – from the manager himself to the most rabbit-eyed chambermaid – knows its place and turns correctly round its particular duty.

Or gets removed.

"Just wait till Lady Kraken hears about this," Mr Mollusc said earlier.

Well, it looks like she already has.

My hand is wobbling slightly as I put the CLOSED sign up on my counter. I glance across Reception – empty this late at night – and catch sight of myself in one of the ancient mirrors. I tug straight the front of my uniform – royal porpoise blue, with a double row of brass buttons – and tuck as many of my scrappy blond tufts under my cap as I can. I try not to think this might be the last time I get to wear it.

Then I set off for the hotel’s stately brass elevator.

