

Chapter 11

Alice

After breakfast Grampa MacBear had gone to visit Wompy. He was anxious to talk to him about the islands. Wompy himself had already noticed that the outer islands had clumped themselves together across the entrance to the loch.

"The only reason we know for them doing that," said Wompy, "is to hide the loch from outsiders approaching from the sea. They've done that a few times in my lifetime. But on those occasions we saw a big ship out to sea."

"It was during the haar that they moved," said Grampa. "There might have been a ship we couldn't see because of the haar. But why haven't they moved back now? Do you think this could have anything to do with Grizzlette?"

Wompy had thought of that too, but he didn't know the answer. They sat in the roof garden pondering.

Then they spotted something moving very fast across the loch. Too fast for any Bearloch boat. Too big for a bird. Although they screwed up their eyes, they could not make out what it was.

"Upstairs!" said Wompy, clomping his big hind foot. They clambered up to the observatory and trained the telescope on the loch. They could see very clearly now Beth riding a kelpie.

Grampa was almost beside himself with alarm. "Jiggeration! We're in the jiggers of a guddle now. Panic stations, Wompy!"

Wompy was seriously worried too, but he said, "We shouldn't fear the worst too soon. You know that kelpies *can* be kind if they choose to be. Perhaps this one has taken a liking to Beth and is giving her a ride around the loch." This did not seem very convincing to either of them.

They set off at once for the Den. Much to Grampa's annoyance, Wompy kept saying, "Well, something really is happening now. You can't complain now that nothing happens. This is what you wanted, you know." And so on. If Wompy had a fault, it was that he liked to rub things in.

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As Grampa and Wompy turned up the path to the Den, they met Duff, Tosh and PC Bobby running down it. They had run all the way from Blair Bear. They had no plan except to take Grampa's fishing boat and head towards the seaward end of the

loch, for which the kelpie had seemed to be making. They had no chance of catching it up. It was already far out of sight and had probably already reached the farthest islands where, they supposed, it must have its lair.

They had called at the Den to tell Mother MacBear what had happened, and also for Duff to collect his "secret weapon," as he mysteriously called it. It was now in the small rucksack he had on his back.

Grampa and Wompy insisted on coming with them in the boat. Grampa knew both his boat and the loch better than any of them. He could be trusted to navigate through the skerries unerringly.

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Since it would take some time to reach the outer islands and in order to keep their minds off worrying about Beth, Wompy told them a story. It was one of the stories about Mrs MacSheep's wool shop that he had promised to tell them.

"This," he said, "is the story of how that shop got to be so strange in the first place.

For two centuries the shop has passed down in the female line, from mother to daughter. A century and a half ago it was kept by an ancestor of Mairi MacSheep, who was called Mrs Bluebell MacBleat.

In her time the shop was stuffed just full of things. Besides the wool, of every colour and kind, and the knitting needles, knitting patterns, workboxes and so forth, there were also woollen clothes, which Mrs MacBleat's friends and relatives knitted. There were woolly hats and multi-coloured cardigans and shawls like the bluebell-coloured one she often wore wrapped around her woolly self.

It was strange that so many of those who bought the woollens were sheep. You might have thought they had enough wool of their own. But then again, as you know, it can be bitterly cold in Bearloch in the winter.

There were also soft toys and dolls, and not only woollen ones. One day, trying to sort out her stock and rummaging in a heap of toy puffins, barn owls, bishbirds and bonxies, Bluebell MacBleat found a doll she had never seen before. She could not think how it had got there.

It was also very strange. What was it? Not a hedgehog, surely? But then she realised: it was a girl. A human girl. Bluebell had not seen a human girl for many years, but now she remembered this was what they looked like.

It was a fine porcelain doll with beautifully made clothes. It really did not belong among the rather garish puffins. So Bluebell took it over to the counter to

look at it. It had fair hair hanging down below the shoulders, held back off the face with a hairband. Over the pretty dress was a white pinafore, tied in a big bow behind. The expression on the face was quizzical.

On the wall of the shop there was a big oval mirror for customers trying on hats and scarves to see themselves in. The fateful thing that Bluebell did was to sit the doll on the counter facing straight into the mirror.

She herself sat down in her armchair behind the counter. She looked at the doll, but very soon found herself looking past the doll into the mirror. Reflected in the mirror the shop was recognizable but also oddly different. It was even darker and the cavernous interior receded into jet-black distance.

But much of the mirror was filled by the reflection of the doll. The mirror-doll seemed very much bigger than the doll and it was looking straight out of the mirror at Bluebell MacBleat.

The effect was hypnotic. Bluebell was drawn into the world of the mirror and oblivious to the shop this side of it.

The doll - but we must now call her the girl - had picked up Bluebell's knitting from the counter and was wielding the knitting needles with astonishing rapidity.

"So what would you like?" said the girl to the sheep.

"That's my question," said Bluebell, with a hint of irritation in her voice. "I'm the shopkeeper here." She was already taking a dislike to the girl.

"Of course you are. I meant: What would you like me to knit for you? I can knit all sorts of things. I could do you an egg or a bannock or a shepherd's pie or a sheep dog or a trough of very evil-smelling sheep dip."

As she said this, the girl picked up another pair of knitting needles and started knitting with all four at once.

"Oh, very funny," thought Bluebell to herself. "Are you a girl or a teetotum or a porcupine?" she asked aloud, though it seemed a rather silly question as soon as she said it.

"I'm seven and a half exactly," said the girl promptly. She sounded as though she had much experience of giving confident answers to strange questions and had perfected the art of doing it without hesitation.

"That's no answer to my question," snapped Bluebell, now sure that the answer was even sillier than the question.

"Yes it is. Have you ever met a teetotum that was seven and a half exactly?"

"Too clever by half," Bluebell muttered to herself. To the girl she said, "No, but I remember a porcupine who was." This was a barefaced lie, but she felt driven to it.

"You haven't told me what you would like me to knit for you." Evidently the girl was also experienced at changing the subject when it suited her. She was now knitting with six pairs of needles at once.

Bluebell tried to think of something very difficult to knit. After a moment she said, "I would like a river."

"Easy!" Picking up five more pairs of knitting needles the girl knitted so rapidly that all Bluebell could see was a moving blur in front of her chin.

"You'll have to row," said the girl, "because I have to go on knitting the river. If I stop, the river will run out and we'll run aground and the crocodiles will get us.

"Here, take these!" She handed a very large pair of knitting needles to Bluebell MacBleat. "You can row, can't you?"

Of course Bluebell could row. She had lived by the loch all her life. But she was used to calm water. They were now in a rowing boat on a very fast flowing river.

She noticed that whenever the girl's knitting pace slackened a little, so did the river. And vice versa, of course. Bluebell didn't really need to row because the current took them along quite fast enough for her liking.

"Look out for the hungry hippos!" yelled the girl suddenly. "You'll have to row back the other way."

She meant that Bluebell must turn the boat round and row upstream. The girl considerably slowed down her knitting while Bluebell managed this manoeuvre. But once the boat was turned upstream she quickened her pace again. Bluebell found herself having to work the big knitting needles in the water so hard she began to protest that she couldn't keep it up.

"You asked for a river," said the girl. Unfortunately this was undeniable.

Then the girl cried, "Look out! Waterfall ahead! You'll have to turn around again."

Bluebell did this and enjoyed the luxury of floating with the fast flowing stream, until the girl again cried, "Look out! Waterfall ahead!"

Alarmed, Bluebell looked over her shoulder and saw that they were not about to plunge down a waterfall. Strange as it may seem, the very high waterfall ahead was flowing uphill.

"That's not a waterfall," she said. "The water isn't falling at all. It's rising."

It was a moment before the girl answered. "You're right! For a sheep that's rather sharp. Maybe you don't have such a woolly mind as I thought you did."

She had been so surprised she had stopped knitting. With a scrunch the boat ran aground on the dry river bed. "Crocodiles," she screamed, dragging Bluebell out of the boat, as the crocodiles emerged from the disappearing river.

But Bluebell MacBleat was now very sure of herself. "Not crocodiles. Alligators," she said firmly. "If you'd stop a moment and look at them, you'd see they're alligators," she continued, dragging the girl to a standstill in front of her.

In a flash Bluebell was back in the wool shop, with a woolly alligator in each hand. "Look - alligators!" she was saying to the back of the porcelain doll on the counter.

She knew she must not look in the mirror until she had moved the doll.

After that she wasn't sure what to do with the doll. She began to think how easily she might have got stuck in the mirror world and not been able to get back. It had not been exactly nice in there.

On the other hand she had to admit it had been more of a challenge than an average afternoon in the shop. So although she was tempted to throw the doll away, she couldn't bring herself to. One day she might want to do it again.

She hid the doll in a cupboard with several rather drab woollen donkeys in front of it so that no one would be likely to find it."*

"So is the doll still in the shop?" asked Tosh, eagerly. "It would be ever so really exciting to go into the mirror world."

"You would have to ask Mairi MacSheep," said Wompy. "It's a very long time since I've seen it. But don't you think this little adventure of ours is exciting enough? Before it's over I think you may decide that life is quite exciting enough this side of the looking-glass."

* Readers who would like to read a different account of what happened in this story can find it in chapter 5 of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.