



In which Poppet is lost

Mrs Groves, headmistress of Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers, sat on the edge of her desk, knitting and sucking on peppermints. Her new kitten, Lucky, lay beside her, purring and licking the ink off the gas bill. Mrs Groves' legs kicked back and forth, back and forth, as she knitted with joyful abandon. Such abandon, in fact, that the snipping-snapping strands of wool whisked up several items from her desk, and she suddenly realised that she had knitted two metres of sticky tape, three rubber bands and Lucky's tail into the woollen garment.

Lucky was not amused. He did not even see the funny side of finding himself in a decidedly *unlucky* situation, despite his optimistic name. He scratched and hissed and leapt about as kittens do, until all four legs were bound

together in a tangle of yarn. His poor tiny tail remained firmly ensnared in the knitted garment.

‘Oh dear,’ whispered Mrs Groves, and she popped another peppermint into her mouth.

This was Mrs Groves’ solution to many of life’s little hiccups. Pop a peppermint into one’s mouth! By the time one had rolled the sweet over one’s tongue and savoured the minty bliss for a minute or two, a problem could slip out of one’s thoughts as easily as a frog slips out of one’s pocket.

Bloop!

Forgotten!

And a problem forgotten was a problem with which one no longer had to deal.

‘Mmmm,’ she sighed, sucking on the peppermint. ‘Minty ... fresh ... sweet ... minty ...’

A red balloon drifted by outside.

Mrs Groves jumped off her desk, threw the window open, leaned out and grabbed the balloon by its string. The sound of rollicking music and merry chitter-chatter drifted through the air.

‘The school fair!’ she cried. ‘Well, goodness gracious me! It must be in full swing. The garden sounds as though it is *buzzing* with activity. There might even be jolly happenings!’

She pulled the balloon inside and tied it to her desk lamp.

‘Jolly happenings are my favourite thing in the whole wide world ... afxr crumpets and honey, of course! I had best venture out.’

Mrs Groves stuffed her knitting into the pocket of her apron, wondering only slightly why it wriggled so. She patted her mobcap, smiled, then trotted along the crumbling corridors of the old mansion and out the back door.

‘Oh my!’ she gasped. ‘What an astonishing scene!’

And resisting the urge to hide beneath a shrub, she stepped into the thick of the school fair. The Inspector of Schools would be attending and it was important that she showed herself to be in control of the day’s events.

Of course, Mrs Groves was *not* actually in control of the day’s events.

Mrs Groves was never in control of *anything* that happened at her school.

But here she was, out and about in the garden on this sunny Saturday afternoon, smiling and nodding with great enthusiasm and charm. That had to count for something, surely!

‘Good afternoon, Blimp,’ she cooed to the fat white rat. ‘What a wonderful job you are doing there, judging the

cake competition. And what a *fascinating* technique you are using, tunnelling through the middle of each entry with your mouth wide open, then rolling back and forth across the icing while moaning in ecstasy.'

Mrs Groves smiled and trotted on.

'Oh my!' She gulped, clutching her throat. 'Anastasia! Eduardo! Alfonzo! It is quite spectacular the way you are tightrope walking and cartwheeling along the struts at the top of the Ferris wheel as it spins around and around. So high up! Rather dazzling! Although a little nerve-racking too, I must say!'

She pulled a lace handkerchief from her apron pocket and flapped it before her face.

'A jumble sale!' she cried. 'What a marvellous money raiser, Frank. Although it might have been nice to sell something other than the school's entire collection of mathematics textbooks.'

Mrs Groves blinked rapidly and stumbled ahead.

'Hello, Tommy!' she sang. 'What a splendid amount of fairy floss you have shoved up your nose. Truly awe-inspiring. You have a real talent there. And Jabber! Such fun you are having in that bouncy castle. Although I do wonder at the wisdom of juggling all those knives while leaping around inside something that is very much like a large balloon ...'

A splash of water hit Mrs Groves full in the face.

‘Deary, deary me!’ She removed her little round glasses, wiped them on her apron and returned them to her nose. ‘Helga the hippo is quite enthusiastic when bobbing for apples, isn’t she? Perhaps someone ought to tell her that one is not meant to dive holus-bolus into the barrel, but just stick one’s face in the water. Never mind, never mind. A broken barrel never hurt anyone ... except for Helga, perhaps ... but splinters can be removed from bottoms without too much trouble ... even splinters the size of doorstops ... Just run along to the infirmary, Helga, and make sure you don’t slip on any of those squashed apples.’

Mrs Groves jumped over a puddle of water and trundled on. Suddenly, Tiny Tim seized her by the hand and whispered urgently into her ear.

‘Oh my!’ the headmistress gasped, her cheeks now glowing a rosy red. ‘Num-Num! What a talented young dinosaur you are! It would appear that you have won the pie-eating competition. Tiny Tim tells me that you ate all three hundred and twenty-seven blackberry pies *and* a tan and white Chihuahua that just happened to be wandering by. Quite an appetite you have there. Well done! Well done!’

‘Hiccup!’ The dinosaur towered over Mrs Groves, grinning. Her scaly green face was smeared with purple



stains. A tuft of white dog hair poked from the corner of her mouth.

‘Num-Num were bery, bery hungry,’ she growled.

‘Yes, dear.’ The headmistress patted Num-Num’s front paw. Then, feeling a little weary, she made her way to the refreshments tent.

Olive, our delightful ten-year-old heroine, brought her a cup of tea and a scone. Reginald appeared from under the table and kindly buttered the scone. He also buttered Mrs Groves’ plate, hands and apron strings.

Mrs Groves took a long sip of her tea and sighed.

‘It’s time,’ said Olive.

‘Absolutely!’ agreed Mrs Groves. She took another sip of tea, nibbled at her scone and asked, ‘Time for what?’

‘Time,’ explained Olive, ‘to declare the school fair officially open.’

‘Oh dear,’ gasped the poor, befuddled woman. ‘I don’t think we want to do that sort of thing here at my esteemed boarding school.’

‘Yes, we do!’ cried Reginald. ‘We always have an official opening of the fair. Someone babbles on and on and on until two or three people have fainted from boredom, then they cut a large red ribbon.’

Mrs Groves blinked and stared at Olive.

‘It’s true,’ said Olive. ‘It happens at all fairs. And the Inspector of Schools is here already, so we really must do our best to make a good impression.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ agreed Reginald. ‘The Inspector hasn’t been too happy since Helga the hippo knocked him over while sledding down the grand staircase in a sink.’

Mrs Groves grew quite distressed. She fiddled with her buttered scone until it fell apart, then began to rearrange the crumbs.

Reginald shrugged and buttered his cuffs.

‘Important people love speeches,’ Olive said encouragingly.

‘But I have already smiled and nodded all over the place,’ Mrs Groves cried. ‘And look! Now I have made a picture of a chicken with my scone crumbs. I do think that is quite enough public speaking for one day.’

‘Good grief,’ said Olive, but she did not despair. Being a practical girl, she simply squared her shoulders, pushed her fringe out of her eyes and said, ‘Right!’

Taking a deep breath, she said, ‘Right!’ two or three more times, then came up with an idea.

‘I am school captain,’ she declared. ‘I am brave and clever and rather good with words. What if *I* give the speech and declare the school fair officially open? Then all you will

need to do, Mrs Groves, is snip the big red ribbon that is tied between those two potted palms.'

'Marvellous!' shouted Reginald, licking his knife.

'Meow!' whined Mrs Groves' apron pocket.

'That's settled!' cried Olive.

She accompanied Mrs Groves up onto the stage that had been erected in the middle of the garden, and seated her next to the Inspector of Schools, the Mayor and the Ringmaster.

Wordsworth, the little grey rat, was standing by with his notebook and pencil. He was going to write an article about the fair for the school newsletter. Not that the school *had* a newsletter, but Wordsworth would enjoy writing the report nevertheless. He simply loved words – reading words, writing words, saying words, even *eating* words.

The Inspector of Schools seemed quite agitated. He kept looking out across the garden, tugging at his beard and muttering, 'I wonder where Poppet has got to? Has anyone seen my Poppet?'

Olive did not know who Poppet was, but made what we call an Educated Guess.

'Good grief,' she sighed. 'I had best get the formalities over and done with before Poppet's whereabouts are discovered and disaster ensues.'