

An extract from

AWFUL AUNTIE

by David Walliams

Illustrations by Tony Ross



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

This is Saxby Hall, where our story takes place.



Prologue

Do you have an awful auntie? One that never allows you to stay up to watch your favourite television programme? Or an aunt who makes you eat up every last spoonful of her revolting rhubarb crumble, even though she knows you hate rhubarb? Maybe your aunt gives her pet poodle a big slobbering wet kiss and then immediately gives you a big slobbering wet kiss too? Or does your aunt scoff all the most delicious chocolates from the box, leaving you with just the dreaded black cherry liqueur? Perhaps your aunt demands you wear that horrendously itchy jumper she knitted for you at Christmas? The one which reads 'I Love My Auntie' in huge purple letters on the front?

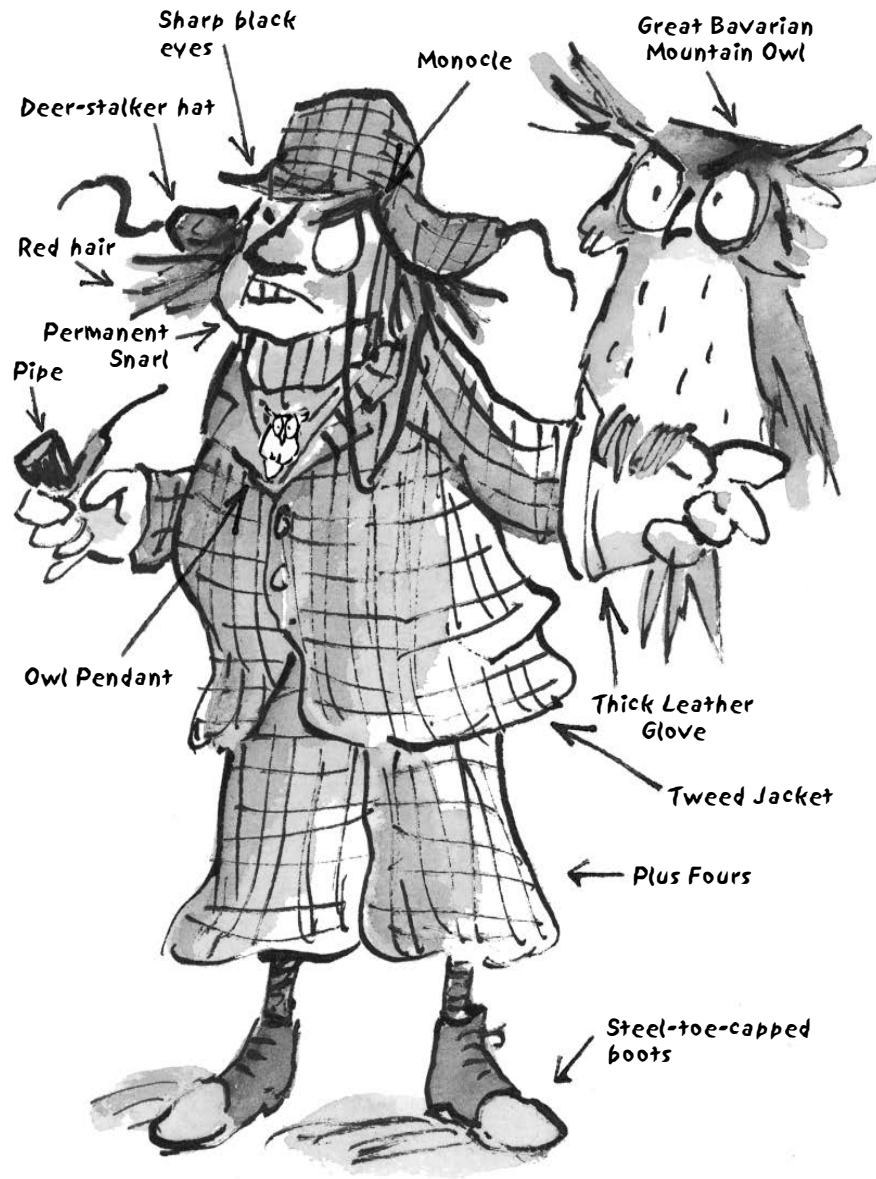
However awful your auntie might be, she will never be in the same league of awfulness as Aunt Alberta.

Aunt Alberta is the most awful aunt who ever lived.

Would you like to meet her?

Yes? I thought you would.

Here she is in all her awful awfulness...



Are you sitting uncomfortably? Then I will begin...

I

Frozen



It was all a blur.

At first there were only colours.

Then lines.

Slowly through the haze of Stella's gaze the room eventually took shape.

The little girl realised she was lying in her own bed. Her bedroom was just one of countless in this vast country house. To her right side stood her wardrobe, on her left sat a tiny dressing

table, framed by a tall window.

Stella knew her bedroom as well as she knew her



own face. Saxby Hall had always been her home. But somehow, at this moment, everything seemed strange.

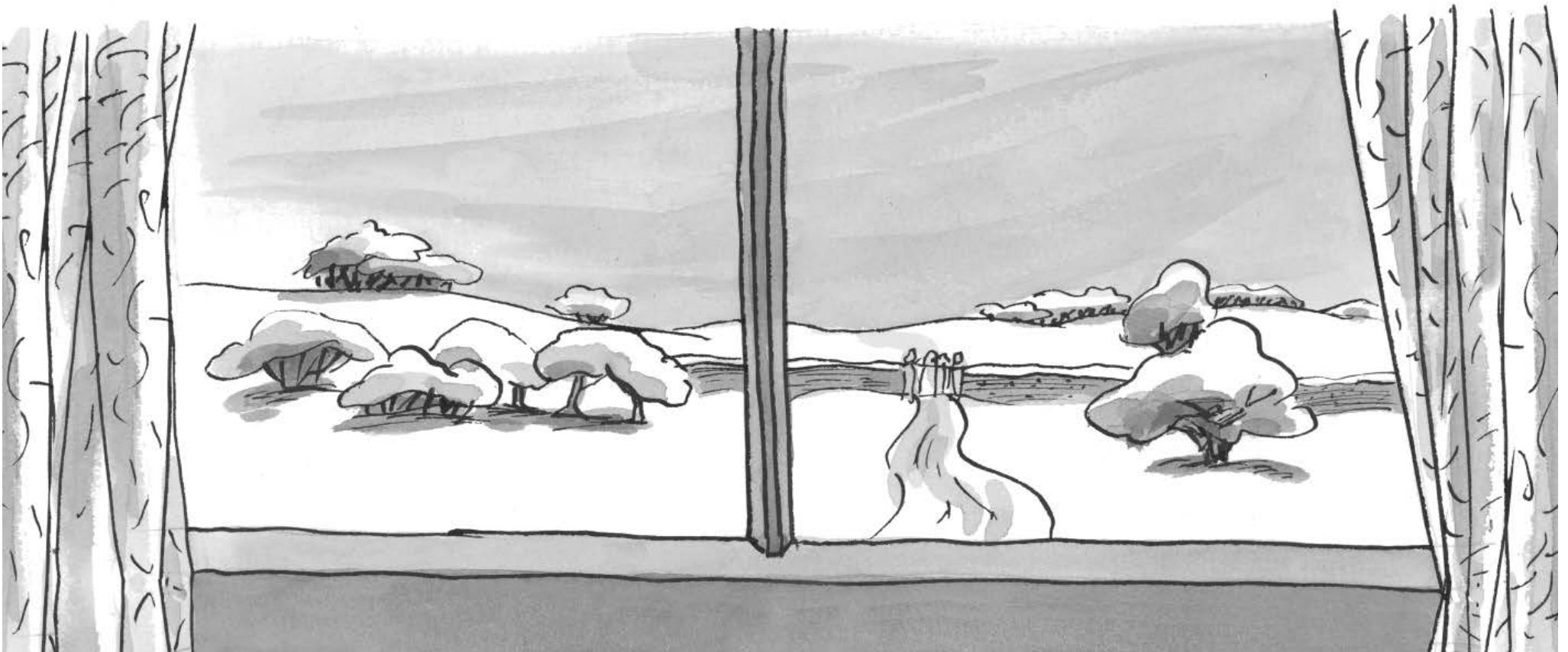
Outside there was not a sound. The house had never been this quiet before. All was silent. From her bed Stella turned her head to look out of the window.

All was white. Thick snow had fallen. It had covered everything within sight – the long sloping lawn, the huge deep lake, and the empty fields beyond the estate.

Icicles hung from the branches of trees. Everything was frozen.

The sun was nowhere to be seen. The sky was as pale as clay. It seemed to be not quite night, not quite day. Was it early morning or late evening? The little girl had no idea.

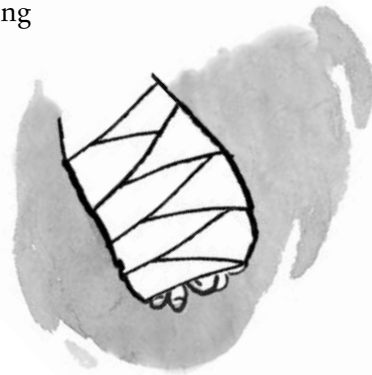
Stella felt as if she had been asleep forever. Was it days? Months? Years? Her mouth was as dry as a desert. Her body felt as heavy as stone. As still as a statue.



For a moment the little girl thought she might still be asleep and dreaming. Dreaming she was awake in her bedroom. Stella had experienced that dream before, and it was frightening because try as she might she couldn't move. Was this the same nightmare again? Or something more sinister?

To test whether she was asleep and dreaming, the girl thought she would try to move. Starting at the far end of her body, first she tried to waggle her little toe. If she was awake and she thought about waggling her toe it would just waggle. But try as she might it wouldn't waggle, or wiggle. Or even wobble. One by one she tried to move each toe on her left foot, and then each toe on her right. One by one they all point-blank refused to do anything. Feeling

increasingly panicked she tried to circle her ankles, before attempting to stretch her legs, then to bend her knees and finally



she concentrated as hard as she could on lifting her arms. All were impossible. It was as if she had been buried in sand from the neck down.

Beyond her bedroom door, Stella heard a sound. The house dated back centuries, it had been passed through many generations of the Saxby family. It was so old that everything creaked, and so vast that every noise echoed down the endless labyrinth of corridors. Sometimes the young Stella believed that the house was haunted. That a ghost stalked Saxby Hall in the dead of night. When she went to bed, the little girl was convinced she could hear someone or something moving about behind her wall. Sometimes she would even hear a voice, calling to her. Terrified, she would dash into her mother and father's room, and climb into bed with them. Her mother and father would hold Stella tight, and tell her she was not to worry her pretty little head. All those strange noises were just the clatter of pipes and the creaking of floorboards.

Stella was not so sure.

Her eyes darted over to the huge oak-panelled door of her bedroom. At waist height there was a keyhole, though she never locked the door and didn't even know where the key was. Most likely it had been lost a hundred years ago by some great-great-great-grandparent. One of those Saxby lords or ladies whose paintings were hung every few paces along the corridors, captured forever unsmiling in oils.

The keyhole flickered light to dark. The little girl thought she saw the white of an eyeball staring at her through the hole before quickly disappearing out of view.



"Mama? Is that you?" she cried out. Hearing her own voice out loud, Stella knew this was no dream.

On the other side of the door an eerie silence lingered.

Stella plucked up the courage to speak again. "Who is it?" she pleaded. "Please?" The floorboards creaked outside. Someone or something had been spying on her through the keyhole.

The handle turned, and slowly the door was pushed open. The bedroom was dark, but the hallway was light, so at first all the girl could see was a silhouette.



It was the outline of someone as wide as they were tall. Even though they were extremely wide they still weren't particularly tall. The figure was wearing a tailored jacket and plus fours (those long billowy shorts that golfers sometimes wear). A deer-stalker hat adorned the figure's head, with the ear flaps unflatteringly down. Jutting out from their mouth was a long thick pipe. Soon plumes of sickly sweet tobacco smoke clouded the room. On one hand there was a thick leather glove. Perched on the glove was the unmistakable outline of an owl.

Stella knew instantly who this person was. It was her awful aunt, Alberta.

"Well, you have finally woken up, child," said Aunt Alberta. The woman's voice was rich and deep, like a boozy cake. She stepped out of the doorway and into her niece's bedroom, her large brown steel-toe-capped boots clumping on the floorboards.

Now in the half-light Stella could make out the heavy tweed of her suit, and the long sharp talons of



the owl wrapped around the fingers of the glove. It was a Great Bavarian Mountain Owl, the largest species of owl there was. In the villages of Bavaria these owls were known by locals as ‘flying bears’ on account of their startling size. The owl’s name was Wagner. It was an unusual name for an unusual pet, but then Aunt Alberta was a highly unusual person.

“How long have I been asleep please, Auntie?” asked Stella.

Aunt Alberta took a long suck on her pipe, and smiled. “Oh, just a few months, child.”

II

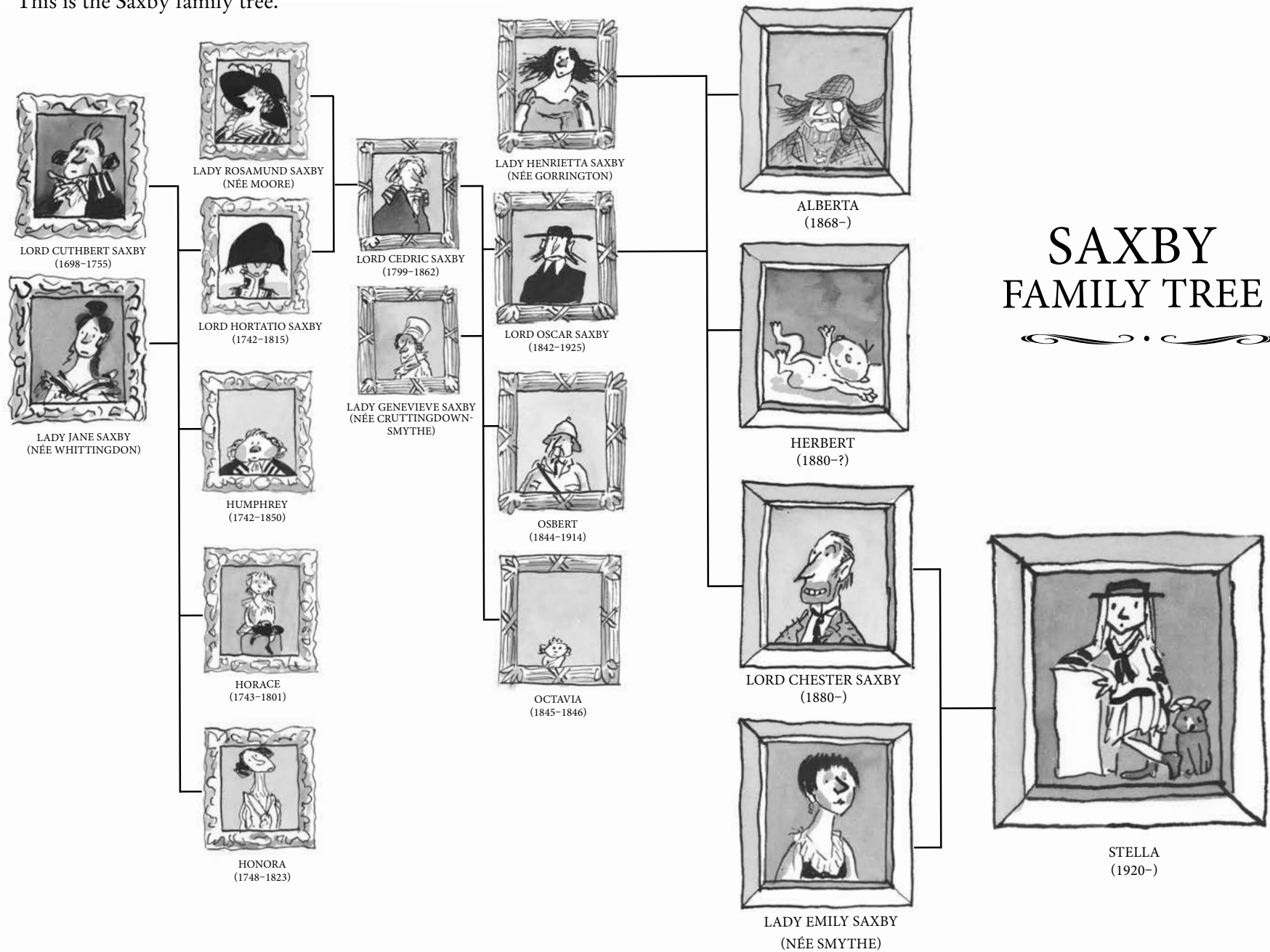
A Baby Vanishes



Before we continue our story, I need to tell you a little more about Aunt Alberta, and why she was so awful.



This is the Saxby family tree.



As you can see from the family tree, Alberta was the eldest of three children. She was the first-born child of Lord and Lady Saxby, followed by her twin brothers Herbert and Chester. A dreadful fate befell Herbert – the first-born twin – as a baby. As the oldest male child, Herbert was destined to take the title of Lord Saxby when his father eventually passed away. With the title came riches too – the family home, Saxby Hall, and all the jewels and silver that had been passed down the generations. The laws of inheritance ruled that the first-born boy of the family was given everything.

However, soon after Herbert was born the most mysterious thing happened. The baby vanished in the dead of night. His doting mother had put him to bed in his cot, but when she came into his nursery in the morning he had simply disappeared. Wracked with pain she screamed the house down.

“Aaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrr
rrrrggggggggggghhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

Folk from the neighbouring towns and villages streamed out of their houses to help the search. They combed the surrounding countryside for the infant day and night for weeks, but no trace of him was ever found.



Alberta was twelve when her baby brother disappeared. Nothing in the house was ever the same again. It was not just that little Herbert was gone, it was the not knowing what had happened to him that hurt his parents the most. Of course they still had Chester (Stella's father), but the pain of losing their beautiful baby boy never left them.

The case became one of the great unsolved mysteries of the age.



Wild theories swirled around the baby's disappearance. The young Alberta swore she had heard howling outside on the lawn that night. The girl was convinced a wolf had taken her baby brother in the dead of night. However, no wolves were found within a hundred miles of Saxby Hall. Soon this theory became just one of many. Some supposed that a visiting circus troupe had kidnapped Herbert, and disguised him as a clown. Others believed that the infant had somehow climbed out of his cot and crawled out of the house. Most unlikely of all was the suspicion some had that the boy had been spirited away by a gang of evil elves.

None of this wild speculation helped bring Herbert home. Years passed. Life went on, though not for Herbert's mother and father. The night of the disappearance froze the lord and lady in time. They were never seen in public again. Putting on their happy faces became impossible. The sense of loss, the not knowing; it was unbearable. The lord and lady could

Awful Auntie



barely sleep or eat. They roamed around Saxby Hall like ghosts. In the end they were said to have died of broken hearts.

III

A Beastly Child



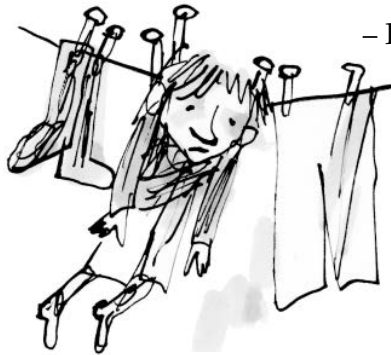
With baby Herbert gone, Chester (Stella's father) became the heir. Growing up, Alberta was absolutely beastly to him. As a child she would:

- Give her little brother a highly poisonous tarantula spider for Christmas.



Awful Auntie

- Collect rocks and dust them with icing sugar. Then give one to her younger brother to eat pretending it was a rock cake.



- Peg him to the washing line and let him dangle there all afternoon.

- Chop down a tree while he was climbing it.



A Beastly Child

- Play hide-and-seek with him. Alberta would let the boy hide and then she would go on holiday.



- Shove him in the lake when his back was turned feeding the ducks.



- Replace the candles on his birthday cake with sticks of dynamite.



Awful Auntie

- Swing him around the playroom by his ankles as fast as she could and then let go.



- Cut the brake cables on his bicycle.



- Force-feed him a bowl of live worms saying it was 'special spaghetti'.

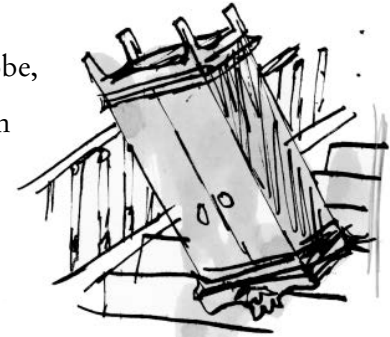


A Beastly Child

- During a snowball fight, cover cricket balls in ice then hurl them at him.



- Lock him in a wardrobe, and then push it down a flight of stairs.



- Put earwigs in his ears while he was sleeping so he would wake up screaming.



- Bury him up to his neck in sand at the beach, then leave him there as the tide came in.



Despite all this Chester was always kind to his sister. When Lord and Lady Saxby died and he eventually inherited Saxby Hall from his parents, he was determined to look after the old place as best he could. The new Lord Saxby loved the house as much as his parents always had. But because Chester was by nature such a generous man he gave the family's huge treasure trove of silver and jewels to his sister Alberta.



Altogether it was worth thousands and thousands of pounds. However, within a short while, the woman had lost it all.

That's because Alberta had a dangerous obsession. Tiddlywinks.

It was a very popular game at the time. Tiddlywinks was played with a pot and different sized discs or 'winks'.



The aim was to use your large wink, named a 'squidger', to propel as many of the smaller winks into the pot as you could. From childhood, Alberta would force Chester to play with her. To stop her hurling the pot of winks across the room if she lost, Chester would always let her win. Alberta was not only a very bad loser, she was also a cheat. As a child she created

her own tiddlywinks moves, all of them completely against the rules:

‘Whipple-scrump’ –
to eat your opponent’s
squidger.



‘Gnash-gnosh’ –
to bite your opponent’s
hand while they try to play.



‘Knicker-knocker-glory’ –
hiding all your opponent’s
winks in your knickers.

‘Boom-shack-a-lack’ – to fire your winks into the pot
with an air rifle.



‘Winkferno’ – to burn
all your opponent’s
winks.



‘Knee-thumper’ – to
make the tiddlywinks
table shake when it’s
your opponent’s turn by
bashing it with your knee.

‘Snatcheroo’ – when your opponent’s wink is in mid
flight and a highly trained bird of prey catches it in
its bill.



‘Sticky-wink’ – gluing your opponent’s winks to the table.



‘Gigantopot’ – when your opponent is not looking, replace the pot with one that is much taller making it impossible for them to fire any winks in.



‘Poot’ – to break wind on your opponent’s squidger, thus rendering it unusable for a short while.



One Christmas, Chester bought his big sister *The Tiddlywinks Rulebook* by Professor T. Wink. His hope was that together they could consult the rules, and her terrible cheating would cease. However, Alberta point-blank refused to even open the book. *The Tiddlywinks Rulebook* gathered dust on a shelf of the huge library of Saxby Hall.

Ever since she was a child, Alberta was ridiculously competitive. She had to win. Again and again and again.

“I am the best. **B, E, E, S, T!**”

she would chant. Her spelling was always atrocious. However, this aggressive desire to conquer everyone else is what ended up costing her relatives dear. As soon as she got her hands on some of the Saxby family fortune, thanks to Chester’s kindness, she gambled it away. Alberta played at the high-stakes tiddlywinks tables at the casinos of Monte Carlo. Within a week the woman had lost everything she had. Thousands

upon thousands of pounds. Next she sneaked into her brother's study and pinched his chequebook. Forging his signature, Alberta secretly stole all the money out of Chester's bank account. Within days she had lost her brother's money too. Every last penny. The family was plunged into terrible debt, from which it was impossible to recover.

As a result, Chester was forced to sell all the possessions he possibly could. Antiques, paintings, fur coats, even his beloved wife's diamond engagement

ring, all went to auction houses so Lord Saxby could fight to keep the family home. A home that had been in the Saxby family for centuries. Like any great house, Saxby Hall employed an army of staff to keep it running – a cook, a gardener, a nanny, a chauffeur and a platoon of maids. However, with all the money squandered by Alberta, they simply couldn't be paid any more. The bank demanded they all be fired immediately. So with a heavy heart Chester had to let them go.



Except one. The ancient butler, Gibbon.



Lord Saxby tried to give Gibbon his notice a dozen times or more. However, the servant was so old, just short of a hundred, that he had become very deaf and

blind. As a result it was impossible to tell him to go. Even if you shouted right into his ear, the poor old soul wouldn't hear a thing. Gibbon had worked for the Saxbys for generations. He had been in service for them for so long, he had become part of the family. Chester had grown up with Gibbon looking after him, and loved him dearly, like he was an eccentric old uncle. Secretly he was overjoyed that Gibbon stayed at the house, not least because he was sure the ancient butler had nowhere else to go.

So Gibbon continued to roam Saxby Hall carrying on with his duties, though in a totally topsy-turvy way. Gibbon would:

– Mow the carpet
with a lawnmower.



– Bring in a tray piled high with dirty socks and announce, “Afternoon tea, m’lord.”



– Iron the plants.

– Water the sofa.



– Serve a boiled billiards ball in an egg cup at breakfast.



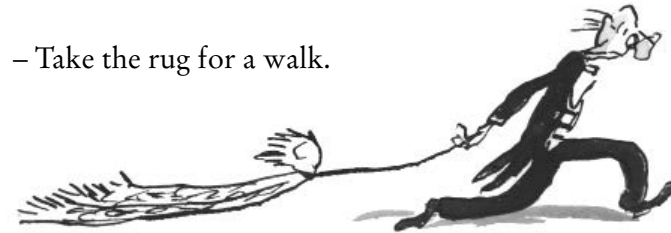
– Polish the grass.

– Boil your shoes.



– Pick up the lampshade and say “Saxby Ball, who is speaking please?” as if it was a telephone.

– Take the rug for a walk.



– Put the chicken to roast in the boot of the Rolls Royce.

Stella's mother and father worked tirelessly, day and night, to care for the house and grounds, but Saxby Hall was just too big for them. Inevitably it fell into disrepair. Soon they had a huge house they couldn't afford to heat or light, and an old Rolls Royce they could barely afford to run. Through his considerable charm Chester, now Lord Saxby, just managed to keep the angry bank manager in London at bay.



When Stella was born he was determined that his daughter would one day inherit this great house, as he had from his father. Of course his sister Alberta had shown she couldn't be trusted with Saxby Hall, so Chester made sure his wishes were crystal clear in his will.

The Will of Lord Saxby of Saxby Hall.

I, Lord Chester Mandrake Saxby, do hereby leave the family home, Saxby Hall, to my daughter Stella Amber Saxby. In the event of Stella's untimely passing, the house should be sold and all the money given to the poor. It is my express wish that my sister, Alberta Hettie Dorothea Pansy Colin Saxby, should not inherit the house, as she will only gamble it away playing tiddlywinks. To ensure this does not happen, the deeds of ownership to Saxby Hall have been concealed in the house, somewhere my sister Alberta will never ever find them.

*Signed the day of Monday 1st of January 1921
Lord, Chester Mandrake Saxby*



Lord Saxby kept this will top secret from his sister. If she ever read it, it would be sure to plunge her into a terrible rage.

IV

The Great Bavarian Mountain Owl



Now how did Aunt Alberta come to have a Great Bavarian Mountain Owl as a pet, I hear you ask. To answer that, I'll need to take you back in time once more, to before young Stella was born.

Soon after Alberta had lost all the family's money at the tiddlywinks tables of Monte Carlo, Europe was thrust into war. Chester joined the army as an officer, and was awarded a chestful of medals for his bravery on the battlefields of France. Meanwhile his sister also enlisted, and found herself fighting in the forests of Bavaria as a machine-gunner. Unusually for someone who was British, she chose to fight on the German side. Alberta's only reason was that she 'preferred

the German uniforms'. She felt she looked smokin' hot in one of the German army's spiked helmets, called *Pickelhauben*. You can judge for yourselves...



One thing she had often done as a child was to steal rare birds' eggs. Alberta knew that the Great Bavarian Mountain Owl was one of the rarest birds in

the world. So when she spotted one nesting in the forest where she was posted she climbed the tree and stole the egg out of its nest.

Then she sat on it until it hatched, and named the little owlet 'Wagner', after her favourite German composer.*



*The composer's name was 'Wagner'. Keep up.

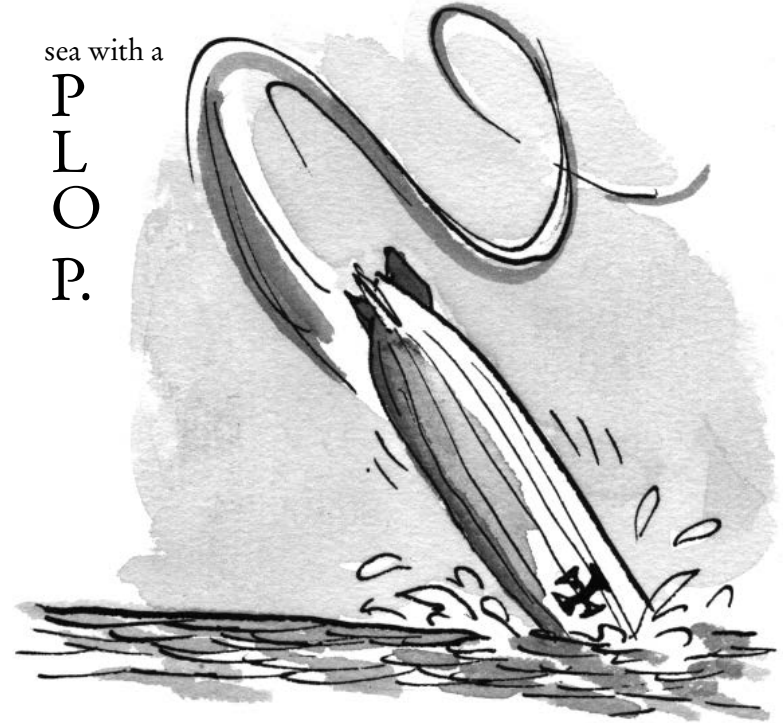
The war ended soon after. Alberta had been fighting for the losing side, and the prospect of being sent to a prisoner-of-war camp did not appeal. So she stole a Zeppelin, one of the huge German military airships. With the little owlet Wagner safely under her arm, she took to the air. At first all went well, she piloted the Zeppelin hundreds of miles over mainland Europe. However, while flying over the English Channel with the white cliffs of Dover in sight, disaster struck. The metal spike on her helmet burst the huge gas cell

above her. Instantly the Zeppelin started violently spurting hot air. The airship was really nothing more than a giant balloon after all. It farted its way across the sky at terrific speed, before crash-landing into the



sea with a

P
L
O
P.



Alberta just managed to swim to shore, the owlet (still larger than the average owl) perched precariously on her head.

Once safely back at Saxby Hall she began training the bird. Wagner never knew his real owl parents, but quickly accepted Alberta as his mother. Indeed the woman would feed the owlet live worms and spiders

from her mouth, passing them from lip to bill. As Wagner grew, so did the treats. Soon she would feed him mice and sparrows she had caught in traps. Food became a reward, and over time Alberta had taught her owl a number of impressive tricks:

- Fetching her slippers.



- Flying a loop-the-loop.



- Aerial reconnaissance (a military term she had picked up when fighting in World War One, which meant spying from the air).



- Dive-bombing children's kites.



- Stealing old ladies' knickers from washing lines.



- Dropping stink-bombs from the air at the village's summer fete.



- Delivering a letter or parcel within a hundred-mile radius.



- Duetting with her on her favourite German opera arias. This was painful to listen to as Aunt Alberta was an even worse singer than the owl.



- To use a special owl urinal when having an owl pee.



- To swoop on kittens and devour them in one gulp, bones and all.



- To make an apple strudel.

THE GREAT BAVARIAN MOUNTAIN OWL



'Owling', 'Owlery', 'Owlcraft', 'Owlistry', 'Owlography', 'Owlosophy', call it what you will, Alberta became an expert.*

*Or 'Owlpert' to use the correct terminology (or 'Owlology').

Soon she and her beloved Wagner became famous in owling circles. They even started doing photoshoots for specialist bird of prey publications, such as *My Owl*, *Just Owls*, *Owl!*, *Owls Owls Owls*, *Owls Only*, *Mature Owls*, and *Owling Monthly: The Magazine for Owls and their Admirers*. Once they even appeared together on the cover of *Twit-Woo!*, very much the



Hello! magazine of the owl world. Inside there were twelve pages of 'at home with' photographs, and a lengthy interview where they talked about how they had met and their hopes for their future together. Of course

Wagner's answers were all in squawks.

Alberta and Wagner. Wagner and Alberta. It was a very close relationship.

The pair travelled everywhere together on Alberta's

motorcycle, with Wagner in the sidecar. Both had matching leather flying helmets and goggles.

What was more unusual still was that Alberta and Wagner also shared a bed. When Stella would bring her aunt her nightly glass of sherry, Alberta and Wagner would be tucked up together in matching striped pyjamas reading the day's newspapers. It was a bizarre sight. Another time Stella heard the two of them splashing around in the bath together. It wasn't natural, it wasn't right, and it definitely couldn't be hygienic. Especially not for the owl.

However, this closeness between man and beast was not without purpose. For all this time, Aunt Alberta was training her owl to obey her every command. Even to do unspeakable evil...

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