

# the Mirror Chronicles

## THE BELL BETWEEN WORLDS



## Prologue

A new scene

George Lumberly peered over his crooked nose into the sack of parcels. He shook his head.

This was wrong. Very wrong indeed.

The Shop of Things?

George knew this town. He didn't just know one street from another or how many flats were in each building; he knew the postcode of every road and street, every lane and cul-de-sac. He knew which side to find odd numbers and which to find even. If there was a number missing he knew why. If there was an owner away, the chances were that George knew when they were back. And it wasn't just his postal rounds that he had committed to memory. He knew where the kids' den was in the park; he knew what was in it and who had built it (the first time, and the second time); and he knew where the secret one was, the one where they would spy on Old Man Retch doing his morning exercises. He even knew where the rabbits liked to play and the dumpster in which the foxes were raising a family. George knew this town, but he had never heard of any Shop of Things.

And yet what really preyed on his mind as he wheeled his trusty Rover down the road was the address.  
Gabblety Row.

George and Gabblety Row were old friends – as far as any man and any building can be friends. That grand old terrace had been on George's first round more than fifty years before, and one of its four shops – now Veeglum & Retch, the undertakers – had been the recipient of his very first delivery. As the years had passed and George had taken to wearing spectacles – as his back had bowed and Rover the cart had developed an incurable squeak – so he had watched that grand old building slump a little more into the earth, its beams sagging like his shoulders, its joints creaking like his own. They were friends and they were brothers, facing the years together.



How was he to believe that now, out of the blue, here was a new shop at his very favourite address and he had heard nothing of it?

“Wrong,” he mumbled as he reached the Church of the Holy Trinity and peered over the road at Gabblety Row. “Wrong, it is.”

His wizened eyes travelled admiringly over the crooked beams and the muddled brickwork of Gabblety Row, the garret rooms that leaned out over the street, supported only by old wooden brackets. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the terrace’s nickname – “Gambler’s Row” – the name he had given it years before, because it looked like it might tumble down at any minute, right on the heads of those walking below.

When the traffic stopped, George lowered Rover off the curb and with surprising speed and agility, wove the squeaking cart between the purring cars to the opposite pavement. Rover complained as he hoisted it up the curb, its wobbly wheel letting out a sharp squeal.

“You’re all right, old boy,” said George, patting its red canvas side. “Don’t fret, we’re nearly there. Too many blimin’ parcels, that’s what it is...”

He turned the corner and started along the main frontage of Gabblety Row, both he and Rover still grumbling about the excessive load of parcels. George gazed down at them disapprovingly. What were these things, anyway? There were good orderly oblong ones and jagged, weird unruly ones; there were long ones and short ones, thin ones and fat ones, curvaceous ones and angular ones. It was perplexing. And even more perplexing were the stamps and franks, which were from all over the world: from Caracas and Kabul, Turin and Tunis, Uluru and Ouagadougou. George stroked his shaggy grey beard and shook his head.

“Wrong, it is,” he said.

Just as he reached the end of the terrace, Rover let out a particularly loud shriek. The wobbly wheel suddenly sprang off its axle and careered off towards the gutter as if making a bid for freedom. George lurched forwards in an attempt to steady the cart but it was too late: the momentum was too much for his old joints and wasting muscles and Rover groaned, tipped on to its side and spilled its cargo of parcels all over the pavement.

“Oh dear!” cried George, snatching desperately at the falling parcels.

He looked down at the pile of strange object and then at the torn piece of brown paper in his hands. “Oh dear, oh dear!” he muttered.

The paper was fine and brittle, franked in Myanmar.

His eyes searched the fallen packages, looking for the one he had accidentally unwrapped. Then he saw it – just by his foot: a strange oblong object, which looked a little like a book, with a glistening black front cover and a back cover in white.

He frowned and picked it up.

“Oh dear, Rover,” he said, eyeing his fallen cart. “This won’t do... won’t do at all. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Suddenly the peculiar black and white book shifted between his fingers and the two covers swung open. “Blast!” cried George, wrestling to keep hold of it. Finally he caught both covers, one in each hand. He found himself looking down not at an open book, but at two mirrors, one bordered in black, the other in white. “Stranger and stranger,” he said, with a frown.

He went to close it but something caught his eye and he glanced back at the mirrors. It was something odd about the reflection. He peered into the black mirror and saw his tired old face peering back, the thick grey eyebrows and bushy beard filling the silvered glass.

He chuckled to himself. “Don’t be daft, George,” he muttered, “this job’s finally got to you.”



The smile fell from his face.

The other reflection – the face in the white mirror – was different. It was only at the edge of his vision, but he was sure of it. The hairs rose on his neck.

It had no beard. There were no glasses.

His hands began to shake. He flicked his eyes across to it.

He saw himself staring back, his eyes wide behind round spectacles.

He let out a loud guffaw and snapped the mirrors shut, then scabbled for the piece of brown paper.

“Serves you right, you old fool,” he murmured, “meddling with things that aren’t yours. You deserved a fright, you did, that’s all.”

He found the paper and wrapped it as quickly as he could with trembling hands and the trusty roll of tape in his pocket. Then he grabbed an armful of parcels and hurried along the pavement to the final shop in the row. The empty shop.

Moments later he found himself standing before the ornate glass door, peering into the murky interior.

Deserted, as he thought.

He felt a warm glow of satisfaction. Everything was as it should be.

He stepped back and drew a long breath, wondering what to do next. He had been right, but that left him with a lot of parcels with no home, and at least one of those parcels he very much wanted off his hands.

His eyes traced the disused door, the dusty shop window, the cobwebbed porch and then they drifted up, to the tired old nameplate above the door – the blank one – the one he had seen a thousand times before.

He blew a low whistle and his mouth gaped wide.

“What in the world is—”

Welcome to my little shop.

It was a soft, kind voice that sounded clearly over the noise of the traffic, as if at his ear. George shivered and lowered his eyes.

There, behind the glass of the shop door, he saw a small elderly man wearing an old rumpled suit, a slumped green hat and a matching green tie. His oriental face was almost as creased as his clothes, with many smile lines around the eyes and a deeply furrowed brow. But while he had the look of a man who had lived a great deal of life, his features were bright and alert and his eyes twinkled playfully through the glass.

Only now did this strange shopkeeper open the door, making the old shop bell ring loudly above his head.

George frowned. But he had sounded so close.

Suddenly the old shopkeeper was standing before him and holding out a hand. George saw to his surprise that it was clad in an ornate glove of the same green as the hat and tie. He also noticed that in the other hand, the shopkeeper was holding another parcel wrapped in brown paper, as if he had already taken a delivery.

“I’m Mr Zhi,” said the stranger. “Good to meet you.”

“Aye, hello,” said George, hesitantly. He was still trying to understand the trick of the voice. He rushed past Mr Zhi and laid the bundle of parcels inside the front door and then returned to shake the gloved hand. “The name’s George,” he said, and then blurted: “the postman,” as if that was not perfectly evident.

“Excellent!” exclaimed Mr Zhi, casting his eyes down the pavement to the pile of parcels. “Oh dear, I’m sorry to have put you to such trouble!”

George gave an embarrassed laugh. “It’s me blimin’ cart, Rover. Gave up the ghost, he did, just as we got ’ere.”

“Oh yes, I see,” said Mr Zhi, stroking his little pointed beard. “Poor Rover!”



“Poor nothin’” grumbled George, gathering up the remaining parcels. “He’d better watch it or I’ll trade him in for a bike with a nice basket.” He glanced back at the cart. “Hear that, Rover? These all right inside the door?”

“Yes, thank you, thank you, that’s very kind.”

George laid the last of the parcels in the dark, dusty interior then turned and held out his hand again.

“Well, good to meet you,” he said, still a little flustered. “Be seeing quite a bit of you, I expect.”

“Yes, I hope so,” said Mr Zhi, shaking his hand again. “Before you go, George, here’s a little something from me.” He held out his other hand, containing the small disc-like parcel.

“Sorry, Mr Zhi,” he said. “You’ll have to take that down the Post Office. I’m not allowed to take parcels—”

Mr Zhi laughed and thrust the parcel forward. “It isn’t a parcel, it’s a gift!”

Now George was even more flustered. “For... for me?” he said, eyeing it like might bite him. “But... but I—”

“I’d be grateful if you would accept it,” said Mr Zhi. “I have far too many Things in my shop and I think you’ll have far more use for this one than I do.”

George continued to gaze at the parcel. This was strange. Very strange. But perhaps it would be rude to say no. And he couldn’t remember the last time a customer gave him something...

“Please,” said Mr Zhi, glancing at Rover. “For your trouble.”

Slowly George’s face brightened. “OK then, Mr Zhi,” he said. “I will, I’ll take it. Thank you very much, sir!”

“No sirs and no thank yous!” exclaimed Mr Zhi, turning and walking back into the shop. “It’s the least I could do!”

With that he waved his gloved hand in farewell and let the door of the shop swing shut.

For a moment George stood on the pavement, staring into the dark glass, watching as Mr Zhi gathered up some of the parcels and then disappeared into the gloom. Finally he sucked in a breath, gave a little chuckle and walked over to Rover.

He righted the cart and bent down to examine the damage.

“Blast!” he muttered, eyeing the twisted axle. “Think you’re a goner this time, Rover.”

He shook his head gravely, pondering what to do next.

Just then something made him glance down at Mr Zhi’s gift – the round, disc-like parcel. He chuckled again.

“Don’t be daft, you old fool. Getting superstitious, you are.”

But before he knew it he was tearing off the paper and tossing it into in the cart. He looked at the heavy object in his hands. There, glinting bright in the morning sun, was a beautifully crafted wheel. Its hub was exquisitely cast with ornate, tapering spokes, each of which was painted in a rainbow of vivid colours, depicting outlandish shapes and symbols.

George shook his head and with trembling fingers he lined up the wheel with the axel.

He gave it a gentle push.

Then a slight twist.

It clicked.

With quivering knees he stood and turned, eyeing the front of The Shop of Things with newfound awe. Then he took hold of Rover’s well-worn handle and began pushing it along the pavement.

He stopped and frowned, then a bemused smile formed across his ruddy old face.

There was no squeak.

“Well I never...” he said.

