

THE
BOTHERSOME
A Flooty, Factory Adventure
BUBBLES

By
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INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

For everyone who has ever been told they were "too small to understand" by a grown-up who was, in fact, the one who didn't understand a single blithering thing.



CHAPTER 1

IN WHICH BLUNDERBURG-UPON-FIZZ WAKES UP BUBBLY

Blunderburg-Upon-Fizz was the sort of town that sounded like a sneeze and looked like one too. It sat in a fizzing little valley where the river burped (genuinely burped, scientists had checked) and the cobblestones had been laid by a stonemason with the hiccups. Every roof leaned slightly to the left, as though the houses were all listening to the same secret.

On Tuesday morning, the town woke up to find itself covered in bubbles.

Not soap bubbles. Not bath bubbles. Not the sort of pathetic, pop-in-three-seconds bubbles you get from a bottle marked BUBBLE FUN! These bubbles were iridescent — shimmering with purples and golds and a colour Clementine Snodgrass would later describe as "burpleish-greenly-wow."

They drifted out of the chimney of the Pufferton Floaty Factory like a parade of glittering jellyfish, bobbing over the rooftops, brushing past lampposts, settling gently on the noses of confused cats.

Clementine Snodgrass, aged twelve and three-quarters, was already out of bed. Clementine was always out of bed before everyone else, because (as she had observed many times) the world did its most interesting blundering before breakfast.

She had her notebook. She had her pencil. She had her best yellow wellies, even though it wasn't raining.

She flipped to a fresh page and wrote:

OBSERVATION #1: Bubbles came out of the Floaty Factory at 6:47 a.m. They smell like lemonade and pencil shavings. The cat next door is now levitating six inches

off the ground and looks mildly offended.

Indeed, Mr Whiskerton-Bottoms (the cat next door) was floating. He hung in the air like a furry zeppelin, swatting grumpily at a passing bubble.

POP-FIZZLE-WHEEEEE!

Another bubble drifted past Clementine and burst against the postbox. The postbox lifted three inches off the pavement and then thumped back down, looking sheepish.

"Curious," said Clementine, who had been told seventy-three times by her Aunt Prudence that "curious" was an unladylike word.

(Aunt Prudence also believed cucumbers were a type of fish, bless her.)

By 7:15 a.m., the town square was a circus. Mrs Pottlebee the baker was clinging to her shop sign while her hat drifted gently towards the clouds. The mayor's nephew, Cyril, had floated up to the church steeple and was crying into a pigeon. A bubble settled on Mr Grindle the butcher (who had once told his wife he was "the most important sausage-maker in three counties"), and Mr Grindle promptly rose like a hot-air balloon and began bobbing eastward over the rooftops, shouting things that absolutely cannot be printed in a children's book.

"Help me down, you turnip-headed barnacle!" he bellowed.

He rose higher.

Clementine watched with the careful, narrow-eyed look of someone who had Noticed Something.

OBSERVATION #2: Mr Grindle floats higher every time he says how important he is. Mrs Pottlebee, who only says "oh dear, oh dear," is only hovering at hat-height. CONCLUSION: bubbles like big-heads.

She underlined the word "big-heads" three times.

High above the chaos, a fat

brass chimney puffed out another joyful gush of shimmering spheres. On its side, in letters made of polished gold-plated paperclips, were the words:

THE PUFFERTON FLOATY
FACTORY — INFLATING
BLUNDERBURG TO NEW
HEIGHTS!

Clementine narrowed her eyes further. They were now practically slits.

"Right," she said, snapping her notebook shut with a businesslike thwack. "Time to investigate."



CHAPTER 2

IN WHICH CLEMENTINE MEETS SIR REGINALD PUFFERTON-POMP

The Pufferton Floaty Factory was a building that looked exactly like the man who owned it: tall, puffed-up, and far too pleased with itself. It had bay windows that bulged like full cheeks, a chimney that swelled at the top, and a front door painted in what could only be described as *Showing-Off Gold*.

Clementine marched up to it with the determined stride of a girl

who had once told her headmaster he had spinach in his teeth at the school photograph (and been quite right about it, thank you).

She knocked. The door went BONG-BONG-FLIZZ, because of course it did.

It was opened by a man so spectacular in his self-regard that Clementine almost laughed.

Sir Reginald Pufferton-Pomp stood there in a velvet waistcoat the colour of a sunset that was trying too hard. His mustache had been waxed into two tiny spinning propellers, one over each lip, and they were actually rotating in the breeze.

His pockets bulged with so many gold-plated paperclips that he jingled when he breathed.

"Well well well," he boomed, in the voice of a man who had never once asked himself if he should be quieter. "A small person at my door! How charming. How miniature. How utterly unimportant."

"I'm Clementine Snodgrass," said Clementine, who was not, in fact, particularly small for twelve.

"And I," said Sir Reginald, puffing up like a frog at a poetry reading, "am Sir Reginald Pufferton-Pomp, KNIGHT of the Royal Order of Persons Who Matter Enormously, INVENTOR of

the Floaty Bubble, and **FUTURE** owner of the entire sky above Blunderburg!"

His left mustache-propeller spun faster. A tiny bubble formed at the end of his nose, gold and glittering.

Clementine wrote in her notebook without looking down:

OBSERVATION #3: Sir Reginald is leaking bubbles. He doesn't notice. This is, I suspect, significant.

"Sir," she said politely, "your bubbles are lifting the town into the sky."

"**YES!**" he beamed.

"MAGNIFICENT, isn't it?"

"Mr Grindle the butcher is over the church."

"A PIONEER!"

"Mrs Pottlebee's hat has reached the clouds."

"AN ASCENDANT VISIONARY!"

"And Cyril is crying into a pigeon."

"Then Cyril," said Sir Reginald grandly, "is part of HISTORY."

He swept her into the factory with one velvety arm. Inside, it was magnificently bonkers. Great copper vats bubbled and burbled

like walruses on a waterslide.
Brass tubes coiled overhead,
sloshing with something
pearl-coloured. Workers in tiny
goggles scurried about, looking
exhausted and faintly cross.

In the centre of it all sat **THE
MACHINE.**

It was the size of a small whale
and shaped like a teapot that
had eaten another teapot. From
its spout drifted a steady
stream of shimmering, ascending
bubbles.

"Behold!" cried Sir Reginald. "The
PUFFER-LIFTER 5000! Soon, I shall
sell sky-tours to billionaires!
Five thousand pounds a bubble!
TEN thousand for the deluxe

ones with sandwiches!"

His propeller-mustaches whirred giddily. He rose a full inch off the floor.

He didn't notice.

Clementine did.

OBSERVATION #4: He floats when he brags. The MORE pompous, the HIGHER he goes. The bubbles aren't just lifting people — they're lifting EGOS. And his is the biggest in town.

"Sir Reginald," she said carefully, "what if someone gets stuck up there?"

He waved a hand. "Then they

shall enjoy the VIEW, child. Now run along. Important men have important men's business to attend to."

He turned away with a swirl of velvet.

Clementine did not run along.
Clementine never ran along.

She stayed exactly where she was, watching, listening, and writing.



CHAPTER 3

IN WHICH THE TOWN TRIES VERY LONG STRING

By lunchtime,
Blunderburg-Upon-Fizz was,
frankly, in trouble.

Forty-seven townspeople were
now airborne. They drifted
overhead like a parade of grumpy
balloons, shouting down requests
for sandwiches, umbrellas, and (in
one case) "a **NICE FIRM**
TALKING-TO for whoever is
RESPONSIBLE for this
NONSENSE."

That last one came from Vicar Bumblesnort, who was floating upside-down over the bell tower and getting steadily higher because he kept reminding everyone he had a doctorate in theology.

POP! went another bubble against the greengrocer.

WHOOSH! up he went.

"I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW I WON SECOND PRIZE FOR MY MARROWS!" he shouted, rising another six feet.

The mayor of Blunderburg, a portly man named Mayor Hobnob, had set up an emergency table in the town square. He wore his

Important Hat (which had a feather) and his Important Sash (which had a stain) and he was Doing Something About It.

"**STRING!**" he declared. "We shall use **VERY LONG STRING** to pull everybody **DOWN!**"

The townsfolk cheered, because cheering at mayors is a habit hard to break.

Clementine, sitting cross-legged on the fountain with her notebook open, sighed the sigh of a girl who has just watched a grown-up reach the wrong conclusion at top speed.

OBSERVATION #5: Mayor Hobnob's solution: STRING.

Problem with **STRING**: bubbles lift people based on how big-headed they feel. **STRING** does not address big-headedness. **STRING** is silly.

She underlined "silly" four times.

The fire brigade arrived with sixteen enormous balls of butcher's twine. They tied one end to a lamppost and threw the other up to Mr Grindle, who was now hovering at second-storey height.

"GRAB IT, MR GRINDLE!" cried the fire chief.

"OF COURSE I'LL GRAB IT," shouted Mr Grindle, who was the finest grabber in three counties,

as everyone WELL knew —

SHWOOMP!

He shot upwards another twelve feet.

The crowd gasped.

"TRY AGAIN!" cried the fire chief.

"I AM A MASTER OF GRABBING!" bellowed Mr Grindle —

FWOOOOOSH!

Up he went, like a balloon full of custard released by a startled toddler. The string flapped uselessly below him.

Mayor Hobnob's face went the colour of a pickled beetroot. He stomped over to the fountain.

"You, child," he snapped at Clementine. "Move along. This is **GROWN-UP BUSINESS.**"

"It's just," said Clementine politely, "that the string isn't going to work."

"**NONSENSE!**" boomed the mayor, swelling visibly. "I am the **MAYOR**. I have a **DEGREE** in **MAYORING**. I have written **THREE PAMPHLETS** on civic—"

Sproing.

A small bubble formed near his ear.

POP!

He rose half a foot.

"...civic LEADERSHIP," he finished weakly, dangling above the cobblestones.

"Oh dear," said Clementine, scribbling fast.

OBSERVATION #6: Mayor now also floating. We are running out of grown-ups.

She hopped off the fountain. Whatever was going to fix Blunderburg, it clearly wasn't going to be the grown-ups. It was going to have to be her.

She marched off in the direction

of the factory, pausing only to wave at Vicar Bumblesnort, who was now somewhere near a passing cloud and looked extremely put out about it.

Behind her, the town drifted upward, bit by bit, bubble by bubble — a slow, sparkling exodus into the blue.

And from the chimney of the Pufferton Floaty Factory, the bubbles kept coming.

KAPLOOP. KAPLOOP.
KAPLOOP-FIZZ.

Sir Reginald, somewhere inside, was laughing.



CHAPTER 4

IN WHICH CLEMENTINE SNEAKS INTO THE VAT ROOM

Sneaking is a skill, and Clementine Snodgrass was very good at it. She had once sneaked an entire Christmas pudding past Aunt Prudence (don't ask). Compared to that, the Pufferton Floaty Factory was a doddle.

She slipped through a side door marked **STRICTLY NO CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY CURIOUS ONES,** which felt almost like an invitation.

Inside, the factory hummed and clanked and burbled. Steam hissed out of pipes. Brass cogs turned. Somewhere, someone was humming a sad little tune about being underpaid.

Clementine tiptoed past a row of vats. Each was labelled in elaborate gold lettering:

VAT 1 — BASE FIZZ

VAT 2 — SHIMMER GOO

VAT 3 — TINGLE ESSENCE

VAT 4 — DO NOT OPEN UNDER
ANY CIRCUMSTANCES
WHATSOEVER

Naturally, she went straight to

Vat 4.

She climbed the little ladder beside it (rung by rung, careful as a mouse trapped in a kazoo) and peered over the rim.

Inside Vat 4 was... nothing.

At least, nothing she could see at first.

Then she looked harder, and saw that the air inside the vat shimmered, the way heat shimmers off a road in summer. And then she saw the eyes.

Hundreds and hundreds of tiny, twinkly, golden eyes, blinking up at her from inside the empty vat.

"Oh!" whispered Clementine.

"Hello."

The shimmer wobbled. A tiny bubble formed in the air and drifted up to her face. It bobbed there, looking — and there was no other word for it — curious.

Clementine, who had been called curious so often it had stopped feeling like an insult, recognised a kindred spirit immediately.

"Hello, bubble," she whispered.

The bubble bobbed twice, as if nodding.

OBSERVATION #7: The bubbles are **ALIVE**. They are not a product. They have been

CAUGHT. Sir Reginald is keeping them prisoner in Vat 4. They are made of something like sunlight and giggles, but sadder.

She wrote it very quickly, because she was suddenly very angry.

A clipboard hung from a hook beside the vat. Clementine flicked through it.

Day 1: Captured Spritelings in the meadow. Splendid! Each one produces forty bubbles per minute.

Day 7: Discovered they react to pomposity! HA! The more important someone feels, the higher they float! GENIUS

application: sell sky-tours to billionaires. Charge extra for the smug ones — they go higher and the view is better.

Day 12: Spritelings refusing to make bubbles. Solution: read them my own memoirs. Production tripled.

Day 19: Considered freeing them. Decided against. Gold-plated paperclips don't buy themselves.

Clementine's jaw set in the particular way her teachers had learned to fear.

She turned back to the vat. The shimmer of eyes blinked sadly up at her.

"You poor things," she breathed.
"He's been making you do this,
hasn't he? You don't even want
to lift people up. You're just
allergic to bragging."

The bubble in front of her
bobbed YES, YES, YES.

"And the MORE someone brags,
the more you HAVE to lift
them?"

Bob bob bob.

"And if someone bragged
ENORMOUSLY," murmured
Clementine, a slow and dangerous
smile creeping across her face,
"you'd lift them ENORMOUSLY?"

The shimmer in the vat

brightened. Suddenly all the tiny eyes were shining.

POP-FIZZLE-GLEAM!

A plan was forming. It was the sort of plan that made Clementine's pencil itch.

She closed her notebook.

She turned to leave.

She turned straight into Sir Reginald Pufferton-Pomp.

His propeller-mustaches whirled furiously. His pockets jingled with golden indignation.

"WELL, WELL, WELL," he thundered, and his mustache

quivered like an angry caterpillar that had just been asked to do its own taxes. "What have we HERE?"



CHAPTER 5

IN WHICH CLEMENTINE PRETENDS TO BE IMPRESSED

Sir Reginald loomed over Clementine like a velvet thundercloud. His propeller-mustaches spun so fast they whistled. His pockets clanked. A single gold-plated paperclip dropped from his waistcoat and pinged across the floor.

"SNOOPING!" he roared. "SPYING! Peering into MY private vats with your stubby little NOSE!"

(Clementine's nose was, for the record, perfectly proportional.)

"I'm so sorry, Sir Reginald," she said, in her best

I-am-only-a-small-and-silly-child voice. She had been practising this voice on Aunt Prudence for years; it was extremely well-oiled. "I just got ever so lost. Your factory is just so enormous and important."

Sir Reginald paused.

His propeller-mustaches slowed from a whirr to a purr.

"...Enormous?" he repeated.

"And so important," sighed Clementine, fluttering her

eyelashes in a manner she had once seen a cartoon donkey do.

"Well." Sir Reginald smoothed his waistcoat. "Well, yes. Yes, I suppose it is rather."

He floated half an inch off the ground.

He didn't notice.

Clementine did.

OBSERVATION #8: Flattery makes him float. Flattery is the key.

"It must take a brilliant mind," she breathed, "to invent a machine like this."

Sir Reginald rose another inch.

"It does," he admitted modestly (in the way that means not modestly at all). "It **DOES** take a brilliant mind. In fact, child, since you **ASK** — let me **TELL** you about my **GENIUS** plan."

He swept his velvet arm grandly. Clementine had to duck to avoid being smacked.

"**TOMORROW**," he announced, "the **BILLIONAIRES** arrive! Forty-seven of the world's **MOST IMPORTANT MEN**, here to enjoy my **SKY-TOURS**! I shall release the **GRAND BATCH — TEN THOUSAND BUBBLES** at once! Blunderburg shall become the **FLOATING CAPITAL** of the

WORLD! And I, Sir Reginald Pufferton-Pomp, shall be **RICHER** than the **QUEEN'S CORGIS!**"

He rose another six inches.

He still didn't notice.

"Goodness," gasped Clementine.

"And the people already floating up there?"

"Oh, they'll come down

EVENTUALLY," he waved. "When they stop feeling important.

Which, in this town, might take **WEEKS. HAHHAHAHA!"**

His laugh was the laugh of a man who had never once shared a biscuit.

He was now hovering a full foot above the floor, propeller-mustaches whirring lazily. A small bubble drifted out of his left ear. He absent-mindedly batted it away.

"You really are terribly clever," sighed Clementine.

"I AM," he agreed.

"And terribly important."

"I AM."

"And terribly, terribly magnificent."

"I AM, I AM, I AM!"

He drifted up another three feet.

His head bonked gently against a low pipe.

"OW. Anyway." He floated back down with some difficulty, looking confused. "Run along, child. Tomorrow at NOON, all of Blunderburg shall witness my GREATEST TRIUMPH. You may watch from a distance. From VERY FAR AWAY. Where small unimportant people belong."

He shooed her towards the door. Clementine, the picture of meekness, scurried out.

The moment the factory door clanged shut behind her, she ducked behind a hedge and flipped open her notebook.

OBSERVATION #9: PLAN:

Tomorrow at noon, Sir Reginald will release 10,000 bubbles. He will be the most pompous man in the world. If we can get him to BRAG ENOUGH, the bubbles will lift HIM. Higher than anyone. Maybe forever.

OBSERVATION #10: We need: 1)

An audience of billionaires (already arriving). 2) A microphone. 3) A child who knows exactly which buttons to press on a vain man's ego. (I am available.)

OBSERVATION #11: Also: free the Spritelings.

She underlined Observation #11 twelve times.

Then she ran home through the floating chaos of Blunderburg — past Mr Grindle, who was now caught in a treetop; past Mayor Hobnob, who was bobbing miserably above the war memorial; past Vicar Bumblesnort, who had given up shouting and was now praying very loudly at a cloud — and she began to prepare.

Tomorrow at noon, she had an appointment with a pompous balloon of a man.

And she did not intend to be late.



CHAPTER 6

IN WHICH THE BILLIONAIRES ARRIVE (AND SO DOES A PIN)

The billionaires came to Blunderburg-Upon-Fizz in forty-seven shiny black cars that purred up the cobbled streets like cats made of money.

Out they climbed: forty-seven men in forty-seven identical suits, each carrying a briefcase, each wearing the smug expression of a man who had never once made his own tea. They wore monocles and pocket-watches and

ties so silken they hissed when they walked.

Clementine watched them from her bedroom window with narrowed eyes.

OBSERVATION #12: Forty-seven billionaires. Estimated combined pomposity: catastrophic. If any of them gets within sniffing distance of a bubble, they will ascend like rockets.

She was already dressed. She wore her sensible blue dress, her best yellow wellies, and her grandmother's old pinafore — the one with the very, very deep pockets.

In one pocket: her notebook.

In the other: a pin.

Not just any pin. A long, thin, silvery hat-pin she had borrowed (unforgivably, but for noble reasons) from Aunt Prudence's hat collection. Aunt Prudence used it to fasten a hat shaped like a swan. She would not miss it. Probably.

Clementine had also done one other thing.

That morning, before dawn, she had crept back to the factory. She had climbed in through the side window (CREAK-SQUEAK-SHHHH!), tiptoed to Vat 4, and whispered to the Spritelings.

"Today," she had said, "we end this. When I give the signal — when he's at his very, very, very most pompous — I want you to give him **EVERYTHING** you've got. Lift him so high he sees his own ego from above. Can you do that?"

The shimmer in the vat had blinked back at her, golden and gleeful.

She had also, very gently, unscrewed the brass clasp on the top of Vat 4. Just a little. Just enough. So that when the moment came, the **Spritelings** could get out.

Now she stood at her window and waited.

At eleven o'clock, the town square filled up. The billionaires settled into rows of velvet chairs Sir Reginald had set up specially. (The chairs were gold. Of course they were gold.) Above them, the unfortunate floaters of Blunderburg drifted miserably — Mr Grindle still in his treetop, Mayor Hobnob bobbing against the clock tower, Vicar Bumblesnort somewhere in the vicinity of a confused seagull.

A grand stage had been erected in front of the factory. On it stood a brass podium with a microphone shaped (and this is true) like a small golden trumpet. Behind the podium, the great teapot-shaped Puffer-Lifter 5000 had been wheeled out, its spout

glittering in the sun.

At precisely eleven forty-five,
Sir Reginald Pufferton-Pomp
swept onto the stage.

He wore a NEW velvet
waistcoat, this one the colour of
a peacock having an argument
with itself. His
propeller-mustaches had been
freshly waxed and were spinning
like little helicopters. His
pockets bulged so enormously
with gold-plated paperclips that
he listed slightly to the left.

The billionaires applauded
politely. They clapped with two
fingers, the way very rich men
do, as though their hands were
too valuable to bring fully

together.

Clementine slipped into the crowd.

She wormed her way forward, past the velvet chairs, past the polite billionaires, past a small dog wearing a top hat (don't ask), until she stood at the very front of the stage.

Sir Reginald did not see her. He was too busy beaming at himself.

"GENTLEMEN!" he boomed into the microphone. "WELCOME — to the GREATEST DAY in the HISTORY of FLOATING!"

The billionaires clapped two-fingerly.

"TODAY," he continued, "I shall demonstrate the GRANDEST INVENTION of the GRANDEST MAN of the GRANDEST CENTURY!"

He rose three inches off the stage.

Nobody mentioned it.

Clementine fingered the hat-pin in her pocket. Her heart drummed. She glanced sideways at the factory chimney, and there — just visible — was a small shimmer creeping out of an open window.

The Spritelings were coming.

She smiled a small, private,

dangerous smile.

"Sir Reginald!" she called out brightly. "Could you tell us more about how clever you are?"

Sir Reginald's propeller-mustaches whirred to life.

"OH, DEAR CHILD," he beamed. "I THOUGHT YOU'D NEVER ASK."



CHAPTER 7

IN WHICH SIR REGINALD GOES UP, UP, UP

"WHERE TO BEGIN!" cried Sir Reginald, throwing his arms wide. "I am, of course, the **MOST INTELLIGENT MAN** in Blunderburg!"

He floated up two inches.

The billionaires murmured.

"I am the **FINEST INVENTOR** in three counties!"

Up four inches.

"I have a **WAISTCOAT** for every day of the **WEEK** and a **BACKUP** waistcoat for emergencies!"

Up six inches.

The **S**pritelings were beginning to drift out of the chimney now — not in a steady stream, but in a great shimmering **CLOUD**, glittering and gold and twirling overhead like a swarm of celebratory comets. They circled the square, looking down at **Sir** Reginald, looking at **Clementine**, waiting.

She gave them the tiniest nod.

They began to descend.

"Tell us **MORE**, Sir Reginald!" cried Clementine sweetly. "We are **SO** impressed!"

"**OF COURSE YOU ARE,**" he boomed. "I am **SIR REGINALD PUFFERTON-POMP! KNIGHT! INVENTOR! MAGNATE! MY GRANDFATHER ONCE SHOOK HANDS WITH A VERY MINOR PRINCE!**"

Up he went — a foot now, maybe two.

The first **Spriteling** bubble drifted down and bopped him gently on top of the head.

SHWOOP!

He floated up another two feet.

He didn't notice. He was too busy.

"I HAVE INVENTED THE GREATEST PRODUCT IN THE HISTORY OF SKY-RELATED COMMERCE!" he bellowed. "I AM ABOUT TO BECOME THE RICHEST MAN IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY! POSSIBLY THE COUNTRY! POSSIBLY THE PLANET!"

POP-POP-POP! Three more bubbles brushed him.

WHOOSH!

He rose another five feet.

The billionaires were watching now with great interest. One of

them — a man with a moustache nearly as silly as Sir Reginald's — leaned forward and whispered, "I say. He's floating."

Sir Reginald, eight feet in the air, finally noticed.

He looked down at his velvet shoes, which were dangling above his podium.

"OH!" he beamed. "WHY YES! I AM ALSO THE WORLD'S FIRST AND GREATEST FLOATING MAN! BEHOLD MY MASTERY!"

WHOOSH! Up twelve feet.

"BEHOLD MY MAGNIFICENCE!"

WHOOSH! Up twenty.

"BEHOLD MY—"

The Spritelings were swarming him now. They had recognised him. They had remembered. Every bubble he had ever forced them to make, every sad day in Vat 4, every page of his memoirs they had been forced to listen to — it was all coming back to them.

They closed in on him in a glittering, vengeful, joyful cloud.

POP! POP! KAPLOOP!
FIZZ-FIZZ-SPLORCH!

Up he went — thirty feet, forty, fifty —

"WAIT!" cried Sir Reginald, his propeller-mustaches whirring

frantically. "WAIT, I— I CAN
COME DOWN — I— I AM NOT
THAT IMPORTANT—"

WHOOSH!

The Spritelings paused. They considered. They decided, collectively, that they did not believe him.

WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH!

Sir Reginald was sixty feet up, then seventy, then ninety, his velvet waistcoat fluttering, gold-plated paperclips raining out of his pockets like glittering hailstones.

PING! PING-PING-PING! they bounced off the cobblestones.

The billionaires looked up,
mouths open.

Clementine, calm as a Sunday
morning, climbed onto the stage.
She took the microphone from
the abandoned podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" she
announced. "Sir Reginald has been
keeping the Spritelings prisoner!
He has been stealing their
bubbles! He has been LIFTING
YOUR TOWN INTO THE SKY for
PROFIT!"

The crowd gasped. A small dog
in a top hat barked.

High above, Sir Reginald was now
a velvet dot against the clouds.
Faintly, faintly, his voice drifted

down:

"I AM TERRIBLY IMPORTANT! I
AM TERRIBLY, TERRIBLY
IMPOR—"

WHOOOOOOOSH.

He vanished into a cloud.

There was a long, stunned
silence in the square.

Then, from somewhere inside the
cloud, came a sound.

SPLORCH.

Followed by a much wetter,
larger, more magnificent —

KASPLOOOOORCH!!

The cloud, it turned out, was not a cloud at all.

It was the underside of the
GIANT MOTHER VAT of
Shimmer Goo on the factory roof
— the great copper tank that
fed all the bubble machines. Sir
Reginald had floated up through
its open inspection hatch, which
(as a matter of careless factory
upkeep) he had never bothered
to close.

He came back down a moment
later.

Slowly.

Drippingly.

Coated head-to-toe in iridescent,

pearly, slightly-sticky **Shimmer Goo**. His propeller-mustaches were clogged solid. His velvet waistcoat sagged. His pockets, now empty of paperclips, oozed gloop. He landed in the town fountain with a magnificent —

SPLOOSH!

— sending pearl-coloured goo over every single billionaire in their gold velvet chairs.

The billionaires, soaked in goo, looked at one another.

Then they looked at **Sir Reginald**.

Then they got up, dripping, jingling no more, and walked

silently back to their forty-seven
black cars.



CHAPTER 8

IN WHICH THE SKY RETURNS EVERYONE

With Sir Reginald sitting in the fountain, weeping iridescent tears, the Spritelings were free.

They swirled into the sky like a great glittering ribbon, looping and laughing and somersaulting (insofar as bubbles can somersault). Then, one by one, with great kindness, they descended to fetch the floating townspeople.

A Spriteling drifted up to Vicar Bumblesnort and gave him a gentle nudge. He drifted down, pop, pop, pop, until his feet touched the bell tower.

"BLESS my cassock!" he cried, kissing the cold stone as though it were a long-lost aunt. "Solid ground! Marvellous, ordinary, UNFLOATING ground!"

One by one the Spritelings fetched them all down. Mrs. Pincushion from the chimney pots. The entire Blunderburg Brass Band (who, being upside-down, had been playing everything backwards). Constable Trundle, who had floated so high he'd had a brief and confusing conversation with a pigeon. Down,

down, down they came — pop,
pop, pop — until every last
citizen stood once more on the
dear hiccuping cobblestones,
blinking like moles at a disco.

And in the middle of it all sat
Sir Reginald Fizzwallop, weeping
into the fountain, his great
propeller-moustache drooping like
a wilted stick of celery.

Clementine marched up to him,
yellow wellies **SQUELCHING**, and
folded her arms.

"You trapped them," she said.
"Every **Spriteling** in the valley.
You squeezed them into your
bottles and sold their giggle as
Fizzwallop's Finest Fizz — and
you charged people for their own

stolen laughter."

Sir Reginald's moustache gave a guilty quiver, exactly like an angry caterpillar caught with its hand in the biscuit tin.

"I — I only wanted to be **ADMIRERD**," he sniffled. "Nobody admires a man who makes ordinary lemonade."

"Nobody admires a **THIEF**, either," said Clementine.

And that was when the Spritelings decided to admire him properly.

They swooped. They swirled. They lifted Sir Reginald clean out of the fountain — **WHOOSH**

— and wrapped him, head to toe, in a colossal shimmering bubble of his own bottled fizz. He bobbed up over the rooftops, spinning gently, propeller-moustache whirring like an actual propeller, hollering things that are NOT suitable for a children's book.

"You can come down," called Clementine sweetly, "just as soon as you've apologised to every single bubble. Out loud. By name. There are four thousand and twelve of them."

(He is, at the time of writing, on bubble number nine hundred and six.)

Clementine took out her

notebook and wrote, in her best careful handwriting:

OBSERVATION #88: A grown-up who steals other people's joy will always, **ALWAYS** run out of his own. Also: bubbles remember everything. Be nice to bubbles.

And the moral, fizzy and floating, was this: the smallest, lightest things have the longest memories — and a borrowed giggle always, eventually, pops back home.

CHAPTER 9

IN WHICH EVERYTHING SETTLES (BUT ONLY A LITTLE)

Blunderburg-Upon-Fizz was never quite the same again, which is to say it was finally, properly itself.

The Floaty Factory was handed over to the Spritelings, who now make a fizz so joyful that one sip gives you the hiccups of happiness for a full ten minutes (the council, naturally, has Opinions about this). Vicar Bumblesnort fixed a small brass plaque to the bell tower that

reads: ON THIS SPOT, A VICAR
REMEMBERED HOW MUCH HE
LIKED THE GROUND.

And Clementine? Clementine was
made Official Keeper of the
Bubbles, a job she takes Very
Seriously. She still wears her
yellow wellies. She still writes
in her notebook. And on quiet
evenings, when the river burps
its goodnight burp, a single
Spriteling drifts down to her
window and bobs there, glowing,
just to say thank you.

She always says you're welcome.

(She is, after all, the only
person in Blunderburg who ever
bothered to listen to a bubble —
and that, dear reader, made all

the difference.)

The End

MEET THE CHARACTERS

CLEMENTINE SNODGRASS



*Twelve-year-old observer in
yellow wellies with a notebook*

SIR REGINALD PUFFERTON-POMP



*Pompous inventor with spinning
propeller mustache*

MR GRINDLE THE BUTCHER



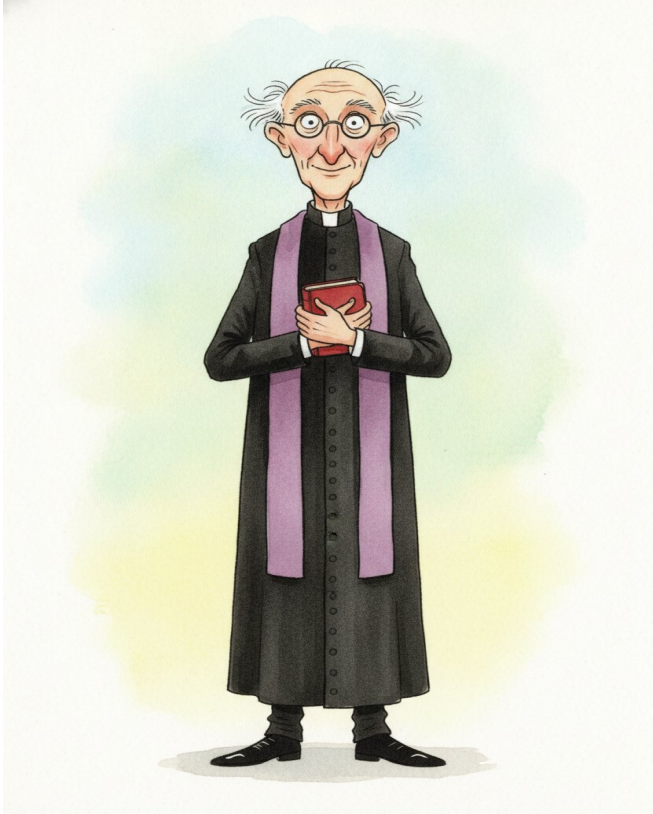
*Boastful butcher who floats
highest*

MAYOR HOBNOB



*Portly mayor with feathered hat
and stained sash*

VICAR BUMBLESNORT



*Floating upside-down vicar in
black cassock*

THE SPRITELINGS



*Tiny golden bubble-creatures with
twinkly eyes*

MRS POTTLEBEE THE BAKER



*Flustered baker clinging to her
shop sign*

ABOUT M.C. WOBBLE

M.C. Wobble writes books about the sort of characters nobody ever puts in books — blobs, beasts, and things made entirely of baked goods. The stories are silly on the outside and surprisingly warm on the inside.

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