

THE WHISPERING WALLPAPER

A Mysterious Museum Adventure

By

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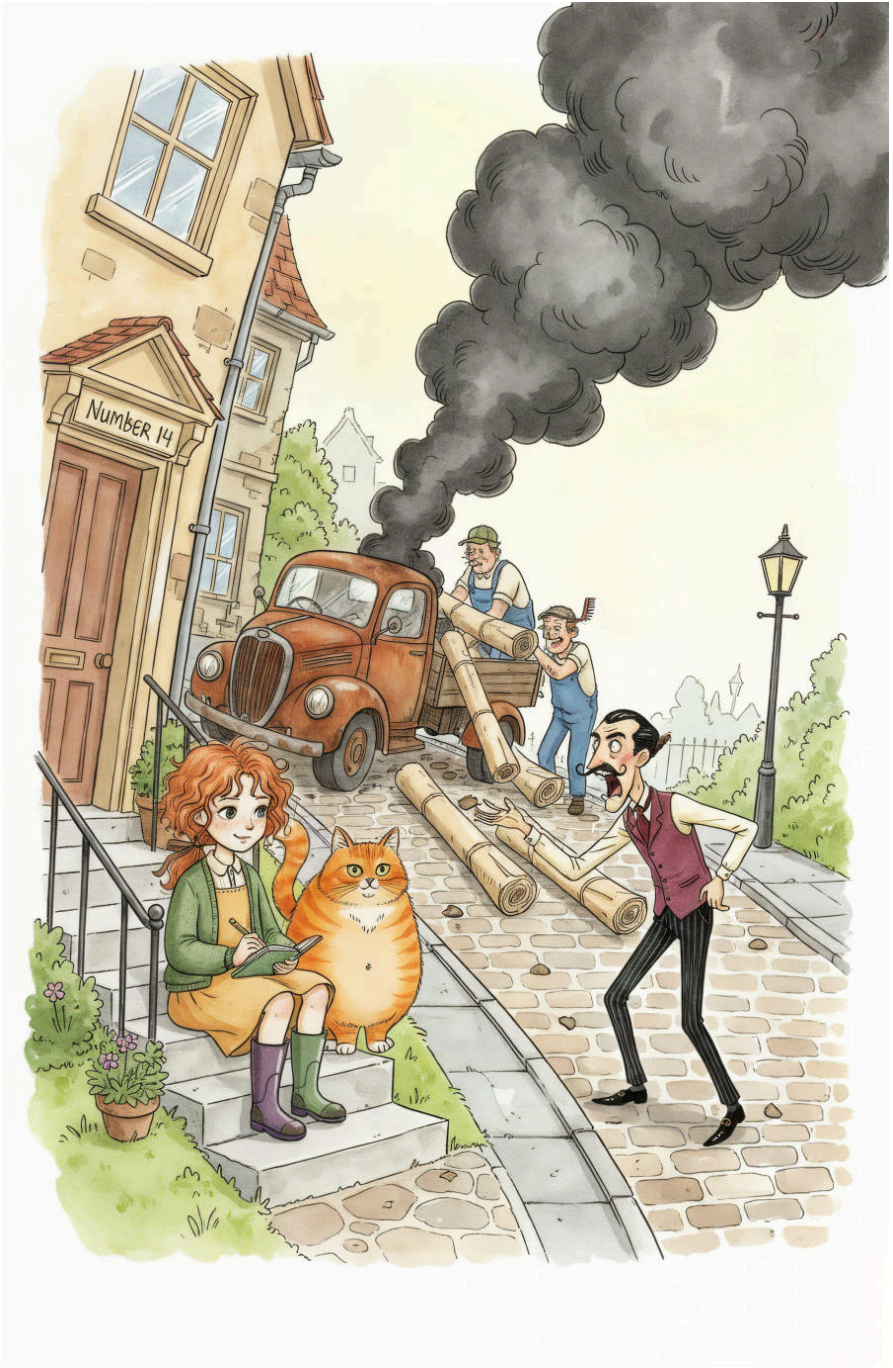
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DEDICATION

For everyone who has ever whispered a secret into a pillow and prayed the pillow couldn't gossip.



CHAPTER 1

A MOST PECULIAR DELIVERY IN BLUNDERBURG

Blunderburg was the sort of town where things tended to go sideways.

Not catastrophically sideways, mind you — just slightly sideways, like a hat worn by a tipsy walrus. The lampposts leaned a touch to the left. The bakery's chimney puffed pink smoke on Tuesdays (don't ask). And the town's enormous Museum of Curiosities sat on the hill above the high street like a great stone toad, watching everyone with its tall arched windows.

It was a Thursday morning when the lorry arrived.

A massive, rust-coloured, wheezing lorry that went BLURP-CHUFF-WHEEEEEEZE! all the way up Pickleherring Lane, belching black smoke like a dragon with a head cold. On its side, in peeling gold letters, read the words:

SNICKERWOOD & SONS — ANTIQUE PAPERS,
ANCIENT SCROLLS, AND OTHER WHISPERY THINGS.

Clementine Muddlepuck, aged twelve and three-quarters, watched it rumble past from the front step of Number 14. She had a frizzle of ginger hair (which behaved itself only on Sundays), a chipped front tooth from a regrettable incident involving a jam tart, and a small green notebook tucked permanently under one arm.

She flipped the notebook open and clicked her pencil.

OBSERVATION #1: A lorry full of "whispery things" has just arrived in Blunderburg. Whispery things are almost never good things. (Whispery things include: gossip, gas leaks, and very small ghosts.)

The lorry hissed to a stop outside the Museum. The back doors

flew open with a CLANG!, and two enormous men in overalls began unloading rolls and rolls of wallpaper. Each roll was as tall as a wardrobe and wrapped in brown paper tied with red string. There must have been forty of them. Fifty, perhaps.

And then — Clementine squinted — she could have sworn one of the rolls giggled.

A high, papery, mischievous little giggle, like a mouse trapped in a kazoo.

"Did you HEAR that?" she said to her cat, Barnacle, who was sunning himself on the step.

Barnacle, being a cat, declined to comment.

Out of the Museum's grand front doors swept Curator Crumblesnoot himself — a tall, pinched, pointy man in a plum-coloured velvet waistcoat. His mustache was magnificent and oily, twirled into two sharp points, and tucked behind his right ear (as always) was a tiny velvet eyebrow-comb that he used to groom his caterpillar-thick eyebrows roughly once every six minutes.

"GENTLY, you blithering oafs!" he shrieked at the deliverymen. "These rolls are delicate! These rolls are historic! These rolls are —" he lowered his voice to a hiss "— mine."

Clementine narrowed her eyes.

OBSERVATION #2: Curator Crumblesnoot has just called the wallpaper "mine" in the same voice my Aunt Petunia uses when she's hiding the last biscuit. SUSPICIOUS.

A second giggle floated out from one of the rolls. Then a third. And then — quite distinctly — a tiny papery voice whispered:

"...he hasn't paid his taxes in eleven years..."

Crumblesnoot went the colour of boiled beetroot. He clapped his hands over the nearest roll and bundled it inside so fast he nearly tripped over his own pointy shoes.

Clementine snapped her notebook shut.

Something, she decided, was thoroughly peculiar in Blunderburg today. And Clementine Muddlepudd had never

met a peculiar thing she didn't want to poke with a stick.

She tucked her notebook under her arm, gave Barnacle a scratch behind the ears, and set off up Pickleherring Lane.

When wallpaper starts gossiping before it's even been hung, you can bet your last toffee that someone is up to no good.



CHAPTER 2

BEHIND THE VELVET ROPE

The Museum of Curiosities was, on the outside, the most impressive building in Blunderburg.

On the inside, it was mostly dusty.

Glass cases held things like The Earwax of King Cuthbert the Slightly Damp and A Pebble Once Sat Upon by Lady Margaret Mumblewort. There was a stuffed badger that had been mounted backwards in 1847 (no one had bothered to fix it), and a corridor of portraits whose eyes followed you with the dreary patience of bored relatives at Christmas.

Clementine knew every inch of it. She'd been coming here

since she was four. Old Mrs. Crinklehoff at the ticket booth always let her in for free in exchange for a butterscotch.

"Morning, Mrs. Crinklehoff," said Clementine, sliding a butterscotch across the counter.

"Morning, dear," said Mrs. Crinklehoff, who had hair like a dandelion clock and the kindly squint of someone who'd long ago stopped wondering why anything happened. "Curator's in a state today. Been pacing the East Wing like a turnip with toothache."

"Oh?" said Clementine, very innocently.

"Mmm. Says no one's allowed in there till tomorrow. Redecorating, he says."

"Redecorating, is he?"

"That's what he says."

Clementine smiled sweetly, tipped Mrs. Crinklehoff a wink, and immediately set off in entirely the wrong direction.

The East Wing was sealed off with a velvet rope and a hand-lettered sign reading CLOSED FOR REFURBISHMENT — KEEP OUT — THIS MEANS YOU, CHILDREN. The sign had three exclamation marks and a small drawing of an angry face. Clementine slipped under the rope without breaking stride.

The corridor beyond smelled of glue.

Not normal glue. Strange glue. Glue that smelled faintly of secrets and old library books and (somehow) regret.

SPLITCH-SPLITCH-SPLITCH! went somebody's brush, somewhere up ahead. Clementine crept along the carpet on tiptoe, her notebook pressed to her chest.

She peeked around the corner.

There was Curator Crumblesnoot, perched at the top of a tall wooden ladder, smearing great gloops of glue onto the wall with a paste-brush. And there, unrolling itself from the bottom of the ladder like a very long, very smug tongue, was a fresh strip of the ancient wallpaper.

It was the colour of old cream and printed with little curling vines and tiny pink roses. It looked, to all appearances, like perfectly ordinary Victorian wallpaper.

Except, of course, that it was muttering.

"...mffmmmf... told her the soup was homemade... fmfmfm... bought it at the shop..."

Crumblesnoot cackled. Actually cackled. Like a panto witch who'd just won the lottery.

"Splendid," he murmured. "Splendid. The Mayor's reception is in three days. Three days! And then EVERY wealthy fool in Blunderburg will set foot in this Wing — and every secret they've ever told in a room with walls shall be SHOUTED for all to hear!"

He smoothed a roll into place with a great wet SCHLORP!

"And then — oh, the donations! Oh, the generous patronage! — that shall flow into the Crumblesnoot — er, I mean, the Museum's — coffers, in exchange for my discreet silence!"

His mustache quivered like an angry caterpillar.

Clementine's eyes went wide. She flipped her notebook open with trembling fingers.

OBSERVATION #3: Crumblesnoot is BLACKMAILING the whole town with magical wallpaper. The wallpaper REPEATS secrets aloud. The reception is in THREE DAYS.

OBSERVATION #4: I have THREE DAYS to peel away the truth. (Pun intended. I'm rather proud of that one.)

She tiptoed backwards.

She did not see the small puddle of glue behind her left heel.

SPLOOOP!

A curator who whispers to his wallpaper is a curator with something to hide — and probably something to glue you to.



CHAPTER 3

A MOST UNFORTUNATE VICAR

It took Clementine seven full minutes to unstick her left shoe from the puddle of glue.

By the time she'd managed it (leaving the shoe behind as a noble sacrifice), Curator Crumblesnoot had stopped his cackling and turned, suspiciously, toward the corridor. Clementine flattened herself against a marble bust of Sir Reginald Twiddlebottom, Inventor of the Slightly Improved Spoon, and held her breath until her cheeks went purple.

He muttered something about "drafty old buildings" and went back to pasting.

She hobbled home one-shoed.

That evening, the Blunderburg Bugle carried a small notice on its back page:

MUSEUM REOPENS EAST WING — TEA AND BISCUITS PROVIDED — ALL WELCOME.

The reception had been moved up. To tomorrow.

Clementine groaned into her pillow loud enough to startle Barnacle off the duvet.

The next morning dawned grey and damp, the way mornings in Blunderburg often did. Clementine pulled on her wellies (one purple, one green — the matching pair was a casualty of yesterday's adventure), grabbed her notebook, and marched up Pickleherring Lane.

A small crowd had already gathered outside the Museum. There were ladies in feathered hats, gentlemen in waistcoats stretched tight over biscuit-bellies, and, towering above them all, Vicar Pootlewhistle — a tall, kindly man with a face like a friendly

potato.

Crumblesnoot stood at the doors, beaming like a crocodile. He'd combed his eyebrows twelve times already that morning; you could tell because they stood up like startled hedges.

"Welcome! Welcome ALL!" he boomed. "Do please come in! Mind the wet paint! — er, paste! — er, the wet nothing! Step right this way!"

The crowd shuffled into the East Wing.

Clementine slipped in among them, ducking behind Mrs. Quibblegrumble's enormous bustle.

The walls were gorgeous. Cream and roses and curling green vines, glowing softly in the morning light. The visitors oohed. They aahed. They sipped their tea from little china cups and nibbled on shortbread.

For approximately forty-three seconds, all was well.

Then the wallpaper spoke.

It started as a whisper — fmfmfm fmfmfm — but the wallpaper, you see, had only one volume, and that volume was LOUD.

"VICAR POOTLEWHISTLE," the wall bellowed in a high crackly voice, "HAS NOT READ THE BIBLE IN SIX YEARS! HE READS DETECTIVE NOVELS DURING SERMONS AND HIDES THEM BEHIND THE HYMN BOOK!"

There was a sound like forty-two teacups being dropped simultaneously.

CLINK! SMASH! SPLOSH!

The Vicar went the colour of a boiled lobster.

"That — that — that is a SCANDALOUS untruth!" he sputtered, very loudly, in a voice that very much suggested it was not a scandalous untruth at all.

The wallpaper, encouraged, carried on.

"AND LAST TUESDAY HE ATE THE ENTIRE COMMUNION BISCUIT TIN BY HIMSELF!"

"AND CALLED HIS MOTHER-IN-LAW A 'FACE LIKE A WET BADGER' IN HIS DIARY!"

The Vicar fled. Actually fled. Hat flying, cassock flapping, like a very holy ostrich. WHOOSH-FLAPPITY-WHOOSH!

The crowd stood frozen in horror. Several of them began edging very slowly toward the doors. Clementine noticed Mrs. Quibblegrumble had gone the colour of a turnip and was clutching her handbag as if it were a life preserver.

Crumblesnoot stepped forward smoothly, smoothing his mustache with one oily finger.

"Now, now," he purred. "These walls do have rather a lot to say, don't they? But I'm sure that for a small contribution to the Museum's preservation fund, I could arrange for certain visitors to enter through... alternative galleries. Galleries with, ahem, quieter walls."

The wealthy townsfolk exchanged panicked glances.

Mrs. Quibblegrumble pressed a fat wad of banknotes into Crumblesnoot's palm before he'd even finished his sentence.

Clementine scribbled furiously.

OBSERVATION #5: The blackmail is WORKING.

Crumblesnoot just made fifty pounds in twelve seconds.

OBSERVATION #6: The wallpaper is loud but stupid. It only says secrets, not lies. So secrets must be its weakness somehow. Think, Clementine, THINK.

She tapped the pencil against her chipped tooth.

The wallpaper, behind her, was just getting started.

Wallpaper that knows everything is bad news for everybody — except, of course, the man holding the paste-bucket.



CHAPTER 4

GREAT-AUNT HORTENSIA AND THE TEA THAT TELLS

There was exactly one adult in Blunderburg whom Clementine Muddlepuck considered worth consulting, and that adult was her Great-Aunt Hortensia Muddlepuck.

Great-Aunt Hortensia lived in a tilting little cottage at the end of Marmalade Mews, surrounded by sixteen wind-chimes and a garden full of plants that no one could identify. She was ninety-one, wore a pair of spectacles thick enough to magnify a flea, and had — according to family legend — once been a librarian at a library so old that several of the books bit back.

If anyone knew about whispering wallpaper, it would be her.

Clementine knocked. TAP-TAP-TAP-TAPPITY-TAP.

The door creaked open.

"Clemmie, my dumpling!" cried Great-Aunt Hortensia, ushering her in with an arm like a willow branch. "Tea? Of course tea. Sit, sit, sit."

Within thirty seconds, Clementine was sat at the kitchen table with a steaming mug of something that smelled like cinnamon and old socks. She did not drink it. (She had learned.)

"Auntie," she said, getting straight to the point, "I need to know about whispering wallpaper."

Great-Aunt Hortensia's eyebrows went up so fast they nearly flew off her face.

"Oh, cabbages," she muttered. "Don't tell me it's resurfaced."

"It's all over the East Wing of the Museum. Crumblesnoot's using it to blackmail people."

"That oily little eel," Great-Aunt Hortensia spat. "I knew he was up to something when he started buying tweed waistcoats with PAYMENTS-IN-FULL." She rummaged about in a drawer and pulled out a leather-bound book the size of a pillow.

THUMP! She dropped it on the table.

The book was called *A Compendium of Papers Most Peculiar* and it smelled, like the wallpaper, faintly of regret.

She flipped through brittle pages, muttering. "Singing scrolls... nattering napkins... ah! Here we are. *Snickerwood Whispering Wallpaper*, est. 1623."

Clementine leaned forward.

"It says here," read Great-Aunt Hortensia, "that the Wallpaper is enchanted with a most ironic curse. It will shout aloud only those secrets which the speaker **MOST DESPERATELY** wishes to keep. The deeper the shame, the louder the bellow."

"That part I figured out," said Clementine. "But how do you **STOP** it?"

Great-Aunt Hortensia squinted at the page. Her spectacles wobbled.

"The Wallpaper feeds upon the urge to conceal. It grows louder with every secret hoarded, every truth buried, every lie politely told over the dinner table." She looked up over her spectacles.

"It is silenced only when its targets WILLINGLY confess their secrets aloud — at which point the paper, having no more to feast on, curls itself up and goes to sleep."

Clementine sat very still.

OBSERVATION #7: The wallpaper is silenced by HONESTY. People must CONFESS their own secrets and the paper goes quiet.

OBSERVATION #8: Problem: nobody in Blunderburg wants to confess anything. Especially the rich ones. Especially CRUMBLESNOOT.

"And what," she asked slowly, "happens if someone tries to confess another person's secret? Like, say, the Curator's?"

Great-Aunt Hortensia tilted her head like a curious owl.

"Oh, my dumpling. The Wallpaper rather enjoys that. It joins in. With ENTHUSIASM. It'll shout every secret that person has ever had until they're hollered hoarse." She closed the book. "Why?"

Clementine smiled.

It was a slow, dangerous, twelve-and-three-quarters-year-old smile. The kind of smile that has caused empires to wobble.

"No reason," she said sweetly.

She kissed her Great-Aunt on the cheek, picked up her notebook, and skipped out of the cottage humming.

Behind her, Great-Aunt Hortensia poured herself a second cup of cinnamon-sock tea and chuckled.

"That child," she said to her ginger cat, "is going to be PRIME MINISTER one day. Lord help us all."

Outside, a great commotion was rising from the centre of town.

The walls of Blunderburg Museum were getting LOUDER.

A clever child plus a clever great-aunt plus a forbidden book equals trouble for somebody — and that somebody is usually the villain.



CHAPTER 5

THE DAY THE TOWN LOST ITS MIND (AND SEVERAL MARRIAGES)

By the time Clementine reached the High Street, Blunderburg was in CHAOS.

Not the gentle, sideways chaos of a normal Blunderburg Tuesday. Real chaos. The kind of chaos where people run in different directions while screaming about pickles.

The wallpaper, you see, had been spreading.

Crumblesnoot had been so busy taking bribes that he hadn't noticed his rolls of Snickerwood paper slithering out of the East Wing on their own — UNROLLING themselves down the marble stairs, slipping out the front doors, and creeping along

the cobblestones like very polite, very papery snakes.

By lunchtime, a strip of it had glued itself to the front of the bakery.

"BAKER FLOPSY," the bakery wall bellowed, "USES SHOP-BOUGHT DOUGH AND CALLS IT 'ARTISANAL'! HIS 'GRANDMOTHER'S RECIPE' IS FROM A PACKET! HE CHARGES DOUBLE FOR IT!"

Baker Flopsy, mid-loaf, dropped a baguette on his own foot. CRUNCH!

Mrs. Quibblegrumble's drawing-room wall (where she'd hosted last Sunday's tea) began screaming about how she'd been sneaking sherry from her husband's decanter and replacing it with apple juice for eleven years. Mr. Quibblegrumble, who had been complaining about the "off" taste of his sherry for over a decade, dropped his pipe.

The greengrocer's wall confessed he weighed his thumb on the scales.

The constable's wall confessed he'd been napping in the broom cupboard during work hours every Wednesday since 1998.

The dentist's wall confessed she actually hated teeth.

Children were screaming. Adults were screaming. A small dog was screaming, though admittedly the small dog might have just been excited.

CRASH! SPLOSH! HONK! SPLATTER!

Clementine watched the spectacle from atop the village fountain, scribbling so fast her pencil-stub was smoking.

OBSERVATION #9: The wallpaper has gone WILD. It is spreading itself with no help from anyone. The Museum is FILLING UP. New strips are uncurling every minute.

OBSERVATION #10: Theory: the wallpaper FEEDS on hoarded secrets. The more people try to suppress their shame, the more it grows. Blunderburg has been SECRETLY ASHAMED for so long that the paper is feasting like a hippo at a hot-dog stand.

Just then, Crumblesnoot himself came barrelling out of the Museum doors, robes flapping. He was sweating so profusely his eyebrow-comb had slid out from behind his ear and was dangling over one ear like a small velvet earring.

"STOP THAT!" he was shrieking at the wallpaper, smacking at a strip that was busy attaching itself to a lamppost. "GET BACK INSIDE! YOU BELONG TO ME!"

The wallpaper ignored him. Wallpaper, as a rule, does not take orders.

He clapped his hands. He stamped his feet. He even tried tearing a strip down — but every time he ripped one off, two more uncurled to replace it, like the world's nastiest hydra. SPLORCH! SPLORCH! SPLORCH!

His mustache quivered like an angry caterpillar with very strong opinions.

"This is — this is a DISASTER!" he howled. "This wasn't the PLAN! The plan was controlled whispering! Discreet blackmail! Tasteful extortion!"

Clementine hopped down from the fountain and walked up to him as bold as a hedgehog at a hat shop.

"Curator Crumblesnoot," she said sweetly, "you appear to be having a small problem with your wallpaper."

He whirled around. His eyes were the size of teacups.

"YOU!" he gasped. "The notebook child! Off! Away! Shoo!" He flapped his hands at her like she was a pigeon.

"I think," said Clementine, "that I can help you."

He stopped flapping.

"...you can?"

"Oh, certainly," she said. She held up her green notebook. "I know exactly how to stop the wallpaper. It's written right here. And I'll tell you — for a price."

His eyes narrowed. The eyebrow-comb dangled.

"What price?"

Clementine smiled her dangerous twelve-and-three-quarters smile.

"Meet me at the Museum doors tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock sharp. Bring every wealthy person you've blackmailed. And bring the paste-bucket."

She tipped her chin up and marched off, leaving Crumblesnoot blinking like an owl in a thunderstorm.

When a child invites a villain to a meeting and tells him to bring his own paste-bucket, the villain ought to ask more questions.



CHAPTER 6

A TRAP OF THE STICKIEST SORT

That night, Clementine did not sleep.

Instead, she sat at her bedroom desk with a candle, her green notebook, a length of string, three of Great-Aunt Hortensia's mysterious herb-sachets, and a determined expression. Barnacle the cat sat on her feet, providing moral support and approximately four hundred ginger hairs to her pyjamas.

She wrote out The Plan three times to make sure she had it right.

She muttered to herself. She tapped her chipped tooth. At one point she laughed out loud, which startled Barnacle so badly he

fell off the bed. THUD!

By dawn, she had it.

She crept out of the house with her notebook, a small jar of Great-Aunt Hortensia's "loosening lotion" (don't ask), and a roll of brown packing paper she'd nicked from the pantry. She painted the brown paper to look — to a panicking curator's eye — exactly like ordinary wall.

Then she went to the Museum and got to work.

At nine o'clock sharp, Curator Crumblesnoot arrived at the Museum doors carrying a paste-bucket the size of a small bathtub. Behind him trailed a sour, grumbling procession of every wealthy citizen he'd been blackmailing: Mrs.

Quibblegrumble, Lord Dimsey, the Honourable Lady Bumbleforth, Mr. Picklesworth the banker, and several others, all clutching their hats and glaring at one another.

The Mayor of Blunderburg — a small round man named Mayor Pinwhistle, who looked rather like a startled potato — was also present, having been blackmailed twice as much as everyone

else (a story for another book).

Clementine stood at the top of the Museum steps, looking quite small and quite calm.

"Right," she announced. "Thank you for coming. I am going to give a demonstration."

"A demonstration?" snapped Crumblesnoot. "I was promised a SOLUTION!"

"You'll get one," said Clementine. "But first — everyone inside, please. The East Wing."

They trooped in, muttering.

The East Wing's walls were positively trembling now with the effort of holding in everyone's secrets. The cream wallpaper was bulging in places like a balloon full of custard. Tiny puffs of word-shaped dust burped out from behind the radiators.

PFFT. PFFT. PFFFFFFT-WHEEZE.

"Now then," said Clementine, pulling out her notebook. "I have been doing research. The wallpaper, you see, has a very particular weakness. It is silenced — fully silenced — by the truth."

The wealthy townsfolk looked at one another in horror.

"That is to say," Clementine went on, "if everyone in this room speaks aloud the secrets they have been paying to hide, the wallpaper has nothing more to feed on. It curls up and goes quiet. Forever."

There was a long, sticky silence.

"That is OUTRAGEOUS," sputtered Lord Dimsey.

"Absolutely NOT," shrilled Mrs. Quibblegrumble.

"I would rather be eaten by badgers," declared the Honourable Lady Bumbleforth, with feeling.

Crumblesnoot beamed. Beamed. His blackmail business was safe.

"You see, child?" he said, smoothing his mustache. "They WON'T confess! Your little plan FAILS! Now off you trot, and let the grown-ups handle —"

"Oh," said Clementine mildly. "I wasn't talking about them."

Crumblesnoot blinked.

"I was talking about you."

"Me?"

"You, Curator Crumblesnoot." She took a small step backwards. "You're the one who's been hoarding the biggest secret of all, aren't you? About where the Museum's donation fund has been actually going for the last six years?"

His face went very, very still.

"What — what do you mean?"

"Tell them," said Clementine softly. "Tell them what you've been spending the Museum funds on. Go on. Make a clean

breast of it. The wallpaper will love you for it."

His mustache began to twitch.

"I — I have NOTHING to confess," he hissed. "I am an HONOURABLE — a DISTINGUISHED — a —"

Clementine reached behind her, into the great brown roll of plain paper she'd hung up that morning, and gave a small tug on a length of string.

WHOOSH! SPLORCH-SPLORCH-SPLORCH!

The brown paper dropped away — and revealed, behind it, the largest, freshest, hungriest strip of Snickerwood Whispering Wallpaper anyone had ever seen, sticky with Great-Aunt Hortensia's loosening lotion and absolutely ravenous.

Crumblesnoot's eyes bulged.

The wallpaper inhaled.

And then —

When a villain is cornered by his own wallpaper, the only thing left to do is duck.

CHAPTER 7

THE WALL HAS SOME THINGS TO SAY

What happened next was, in the unanimous opinion of everyone present, the most magnificent and horrifying thing that had ever occurred inside the walls of Blunderburg Museum.

The newly-uncovered wallpaper — fed all night long by Clementine on a steady diet of Crumblesnoot's own secrets, whispered from her notebook through a small papery funnel — drew in one enormous, papery, ravenous BREATH.

WHOOOOOOSH.

Then it began to SHOUT.

"CURATOR ARCHIBALD CRUMBLESNOOT," the wall bellowed, in a voice like forty trombones blowing through a megaphone, "HAS NOT BEEN PAYING HIS MUSEUM STAFF! HE HAS NOT BEEN PAYING HIS TAXES! HE HAS NOT BEEN PAYING THE GAS BILL EITHER!"

The crowd gasped.

Crumblesnoot turned the colour of a damp ghost. "STOP IT!" he shrieked. "STOP — STOP THAT WALL!"

The wall did not stop. The wall, in fact, was just getting warmed up.

"CURATOR CRUMBLESNOOT HAS BEEN STEALING THE MUSEUM'S DONATION FUND FOR SIX YEARS TO BUY VELVET WAISTCOATS! HE HAS NINETY-FOUR VELVET WAISTCOATS HIDDEN IN A LOCKED CUPBOARD! ALL PLUM-COLOURED!"

"OH NO YOU DON'T!" Crumblesnoot howled, lunging at the wallpaper with his paste-bucket. He tried to slap a fresh strip over the speaking strip to muffle it — but the loosening lotion

was already doing its work, and his hands went SPLOTCH and stuck to the wall like they'd been welded there.

"CURATOR CRUMBLESNOOT WEARS A WIG ON ALTERNATE THURSDAYS!"

"NO I DON'T!" he wailed, his wig (which it was, alas, Thursday) slipping cheerfully off one ear.

"HE STOLE THE BADGER!"

"WHAT BADGER —"

"THE BACKWARDS BADGER! HE MOUNTED IT BACKWARDS HIMSELF BECAUSE HE'S NEVER ACTUALLY SEEN A BADGER!"

Lord Dimsey began to laugh. He couldn't help it. It started as a wheeze and grew into a great booming HONK-HONK-HOOOONK, like a goose discovering jokes for the first time.

Mrs. Quibblegrumble joined in. Then Mr. Picklesworth. Then

the Mayor, who laughed so hard he fell sideways into a glass case containing The Earwax of King Cuthbert the Slightly Damp, knocking it onto Crumblesnoot's head.

CRACK! SPLATTER! GLOOP!

Royal earwax dribbled down the Curator's stuck face like sticky brown jam.

"HE PUT EARWAX IN HIS HAIR PRODUCT TO MAKE IT SHINY!" the wall added helpfully.

"HE BUYS HIS MUSTACHE WAX FROM A CATALOGUE!"

"HE NAMED HIS EYEBROW-COMB 'PHILLIP!'"

The eyebrow-comb (Phillip) dropped from behind his ear and landed in the earwax puddle with a small, sad PLOP.

Now the wallpaper was cackling — really and truly cackling — and from every wall of the East Wing, more sticky strips were peeling off and slithering toward Crumblesnoot, drawn to the great glistening fountain of hoarded shame that was now

spurting out of him like steam from a kettle.

SLITHER-SLITHER-SCHLORP!

They wrapped around his ankles. They wound up his trousers. They glued his mustache to his nostrils. They stuck his pointy shoes to the marble floor and bound his elbows to the wall.

Within thirty seconds, Curator Archibald Crumblesnoot was wallpapered head to toe — a quivering, bellowing, secret-shouting man-shaped lump of cream and roses, with one wig-flap waggling forlornly from the top of his head.

"AND HE'S AFRAID OF MICE!" the wall added, by way of dessert.

A small SQUEAK! came from somewhere near the badger case. Crumblesnoot fainted dead away inside his wallpaper cocoon with a muffled MMMMFFFF.

The crowd of formerly-blackmailed townsfolk stood absolutely silent for one long moment.

And then they applauded. Wildly. Like walruses on a waterslide.

Mrs. Quibblegrumble was crying with laughter. Lord Dimsey was on his knees. Mayor Pinwhistle, still half-buried in royal earwax, lifted one hand and gave Clementine a damp thumbs-up.

Clementine Muddlepuck closed her green notebook with a satisfying SNAP.

"That," she said, "is what we call peeling away the truth. Tricky stuff, the truth. It always comes out in the end — even if it has to come out through the WALLPAPER."

(The wall, rather pleased with itself, gave a small satisfied ripple, and a single painted rose on its pattern winked at her. Clementine winked back. Some things are best not questioned.)

She opened the green notebook again — just for a moment — and wrote, in her neat, decided hand:

OBSERVATION #93: A secret hidden in the walls will always,

ALWAYS find a crack to whisper through. Far better to say the true thing out loud yourself, in daylight, before the furniture does it for you.

And the moral, papered and plain, was this: you can paper over a great many things — damp, cracks, even dreadful wallpaper of your own choosing — but you can never, ever paper over the truth.

CHAPTER 8

IN WHICH BLUNDERBURG REDECORATES

It took four strong townsfolk, a bucket of warm water, and one extremely reluctant wallpaper-scraper to peel Curator Crumblesnoot out of his cocoon. He emerged blinking, soggy, and — for the very first time in his entire life — completely out of secrets to sell.

He was relieved of his post at the Museum of Curiosities, which reopened under cheerful new management with a strict new policy: every exhibit now tells the honest truth about itself on a little brass label, and the famously fearsome stuffed badger turned out to have been a very large, very surprised guinea pig all along. (The town took the news remarkably well.)

The whispering wallpaper was carefully peeled, rolled, and given pride of place in the Grand Hall, where it now whispers only nice things — compliments, mostly, and the occasional excellent recipe. Visitors come from three counties to be told, by a wall, that their hat is lovely.

As for Clementine Muddlepuck, she was awarded the Freedom of Blunderburg, a medal the size of a dinner plate, and — at her own request — a brand-new notebook. Green, of course. With a very satisfying SNAP.

She keeps it in her pocket to this day.

And if you ever visit Blunderburg, and you happen to pass the Museum on the hill, and you hear a soft little voice murmuring somewhere behind the plaster — don't be alarmed.

It's only the truth, having a quiet word.

(It usually does, in the end.)

The End

MEET THE CHARACTERS

CLEMENTINE MUDDLEPUCK



Twelve-year-old amateur detective with a green notebook

CURATOR ARCHIBALD CRUMBLESNOOT



Pinched, vain museum curator and secret blackmailer

GREAT-AUNT HORTENSIA MUDDLEPUCK



Ninety-one-year-old retired librarian with magical books

VICAR POOTLEWHISTLE



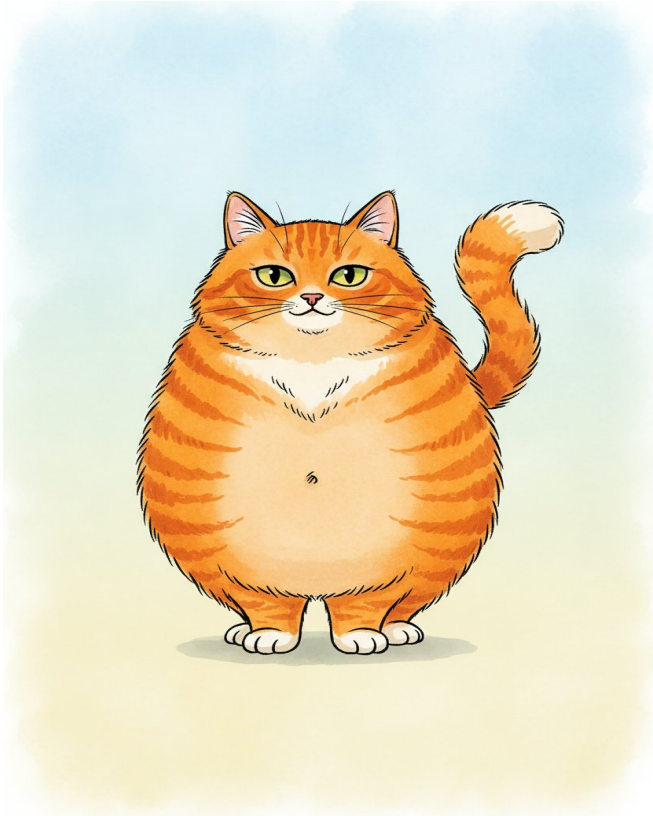
Kindly potato-faced vicar with guilty secrets

MRS. QUIBBLEGRUMBLE



Wealthy, gossipy townswoman with enormous bustle

BARNACLE



Clementine's ginger cat, perpetually unimpressed

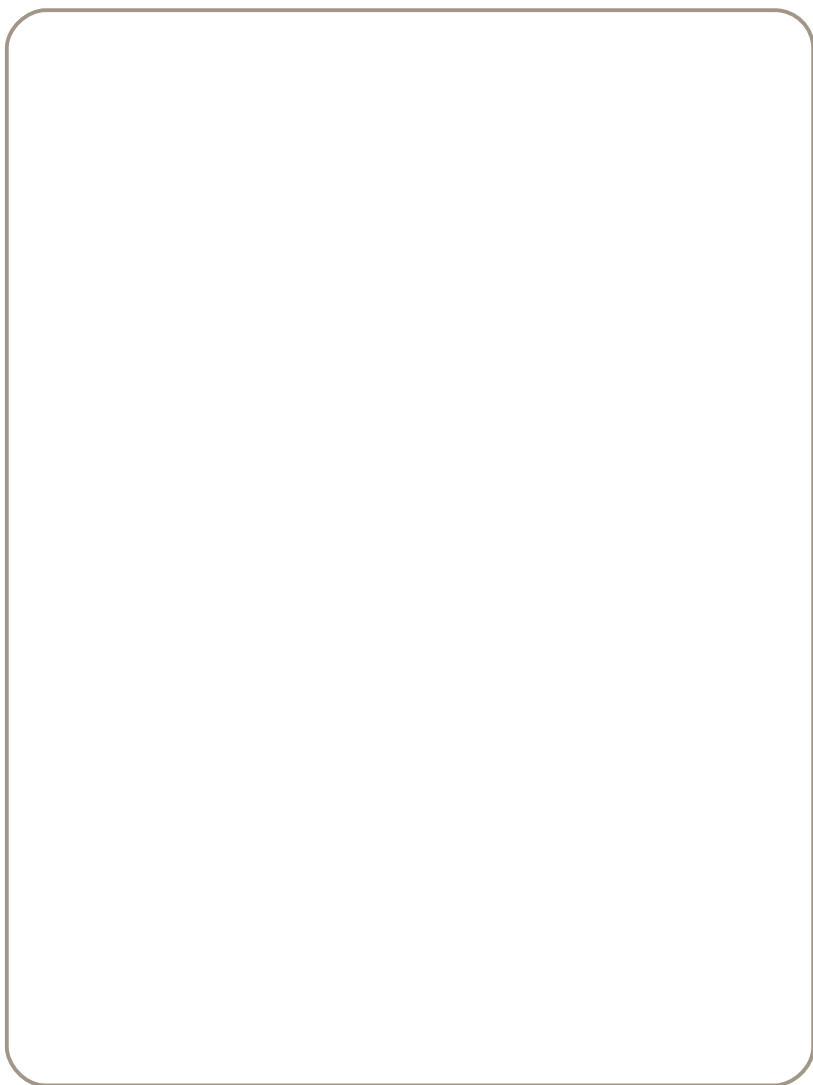
THE WHISPERING WALLPAPER



Sentient Victorian wallpaper that shouts secrets

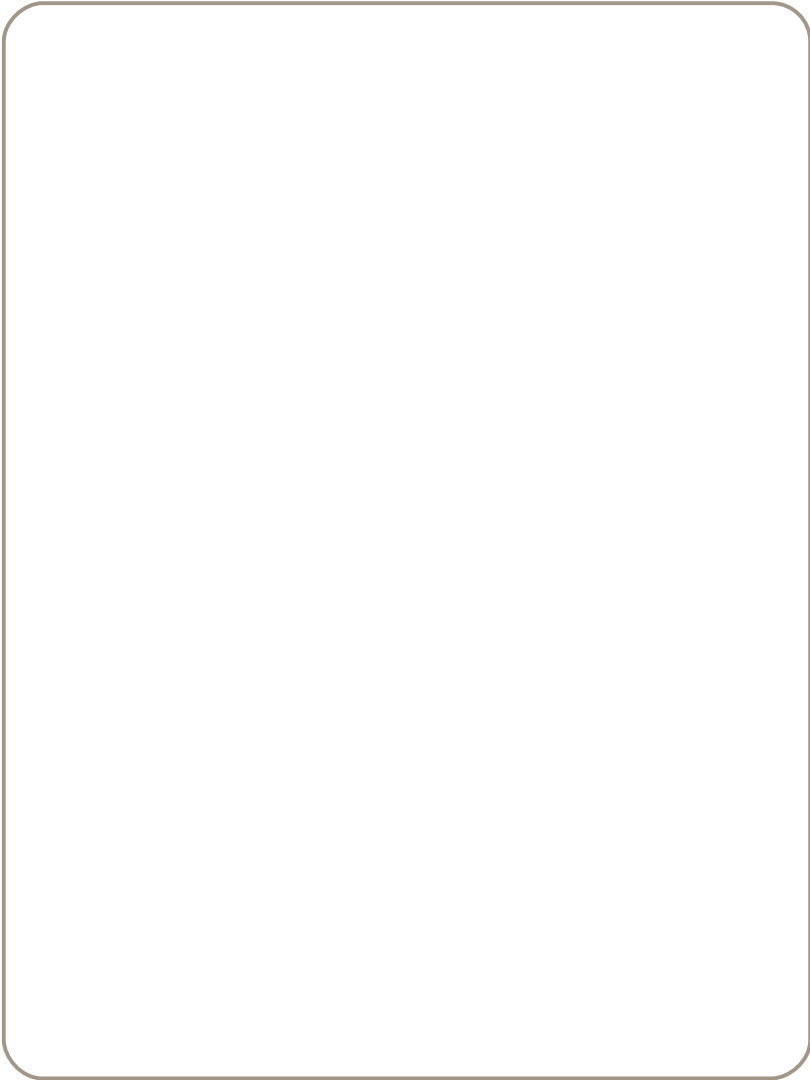
YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Draw Clementine Muddlepuck!



YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Draw your favourite moment from the story!

A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners, intended for drawing. The box is outlined in a thin, dark brown line and occupies the central portion of the page below the instruction text.

YOUR TURN TO WOBBLE

Design your very own Wobble character!



MORE FROM WOBBLE BOOKS



Muffin Man

Sammy Sprocket thought the villain business was over — until a secret message turned up baked inside his breakfast muffin. Now Sammy and his crumb-detecting best friend Penny must follow a trail of clues, catastrophic baking, and impending doom before Jellybean Junction gets itself into another sticky mess. Whatever you do, don't trust the muffins.

ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Baffling Bubblegum Beast

Giant pink blobs are oozing through Sweetwhistle, and the grown-ups are blaming children (as usual). But twelve-year-old Mia Muddlepuck has spotted something the adults haven't — the blobs grow bigger every time someone grumbles, and one of them just squeaked at her. Can Mia crack the gloopy mystery before the whole town gets stuck for good?

ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Bothersome Bubbles

When the Pufferton Floaty Factory starts belching out bubbles that shimmer in colours nobody's ever seen before, Blunderburg-Upon-Fizz wakes up to floating cats, bobbing lampposts, and a mystery that smells of lemonade and pencil shavings. Twelve-year-old Clementine Snodgrass has her notebook ready and her best yellow wellies on — because somebody needs to find out what's inside those bubbles before the whole town drifts

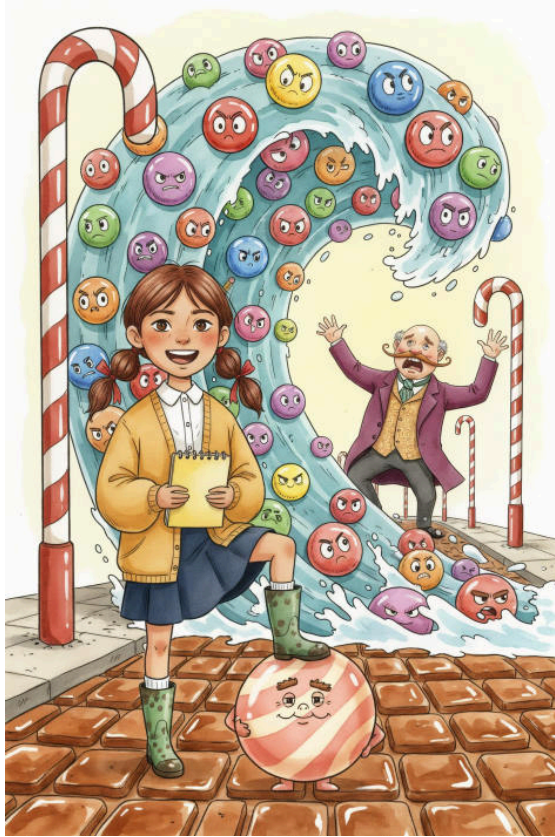
ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Dastardly Doughnuts

Gigglefest is ruined, the whoopee cushions are flat, and every grown-up in Jellybean Junction is queuing for doughnuts with a glazed look in their eyes. Sammy Sprocket knows something is horribly, stickily wrong — especially when his best friend Penny, who once called doughnuts 'sugar-coated tyranny,' tells him to try one. Behind the counter, the dastardly Dr. Dipple is cooking up something far worse than pastry.

ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Grumbling Gobstoppers

Sweetwhistle-on-Toffee makes the finest gobstoppers in the world — until the gobstoppers start grumbling back. Eleven-year-old Pippa Muddlepuck, armed with her yellow notebook and far too much cleverness for the grown-ups' liking, is the only one who notices that something in this sticky little town doesn't add up. When sweets start telling the truth, some very important people have a lot to worry about.

ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Marvellous Misbehaving Clocks

Every clock in Cogglesworth Hollow has gone barmy — ticking backwards, hiccupping, and making Tuesday feel suspiciously like last Thursday. Eleven-year-old Wendell Sprocket, keeper of the Book of Suspicious Things, is on the case. But when time itself starts misbehaving, how do you solve a mystery before it's already un-happened?

ALSO BY M.C. WOBBLE



The Peculiar Pickles

Gherkinford-by-the-Sea is a town drowning in vinegar, pickle parades, and not a single sensible adult. So when a jar of pickles whispers 'PSSST' at eleven-year-old Wendell Snodgrass, he does what any too-clever-for-his-own-good boy would do — he listens. What the pickles have to say is going to turn this briny little kingdom upside down.

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.

Every Wobble Book is designed with dyslexic readers in mind — not as an afterthought, but from the first word. Because every child deserves a book that feels like it was made for them.

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