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Opening extract from

Awful Auntie

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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?

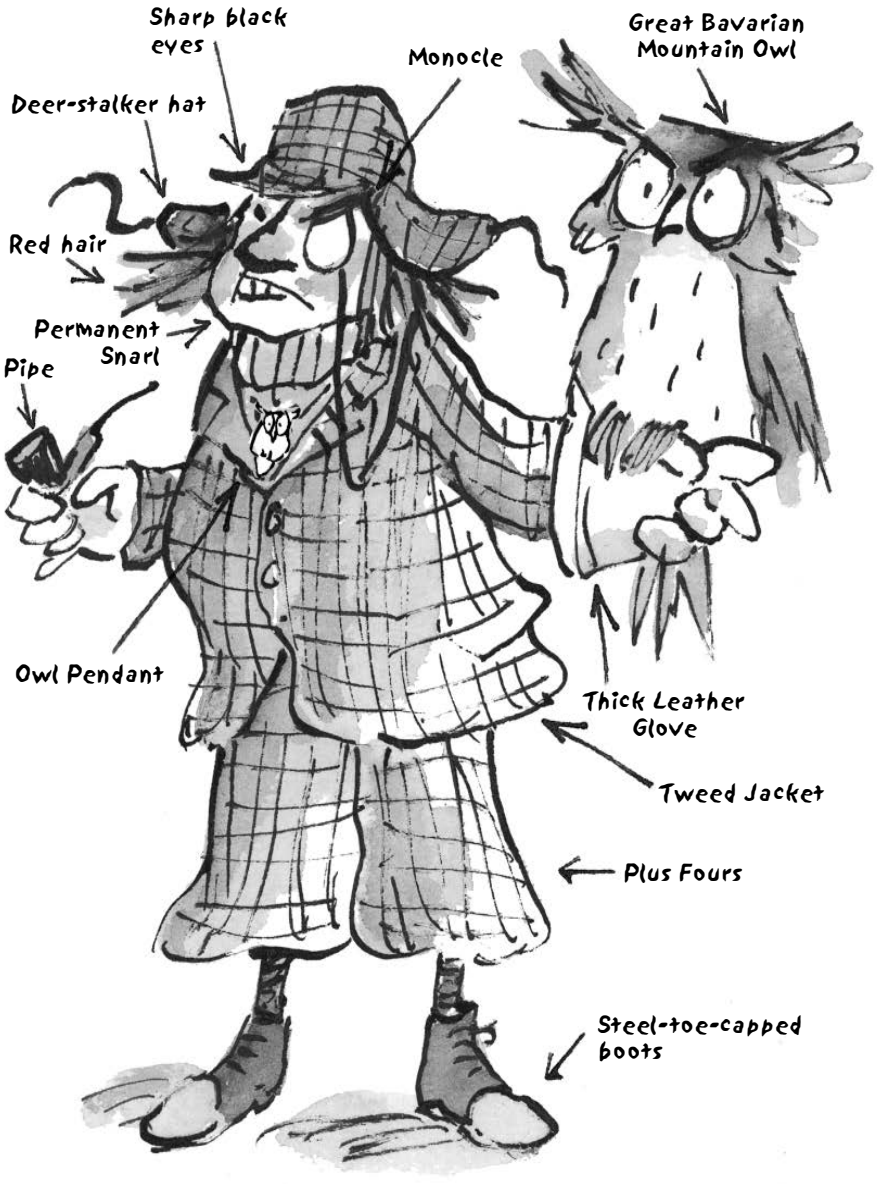
However awful your auntie might be, she will never be in the same league of awfulness as Aunt Alberta.

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.

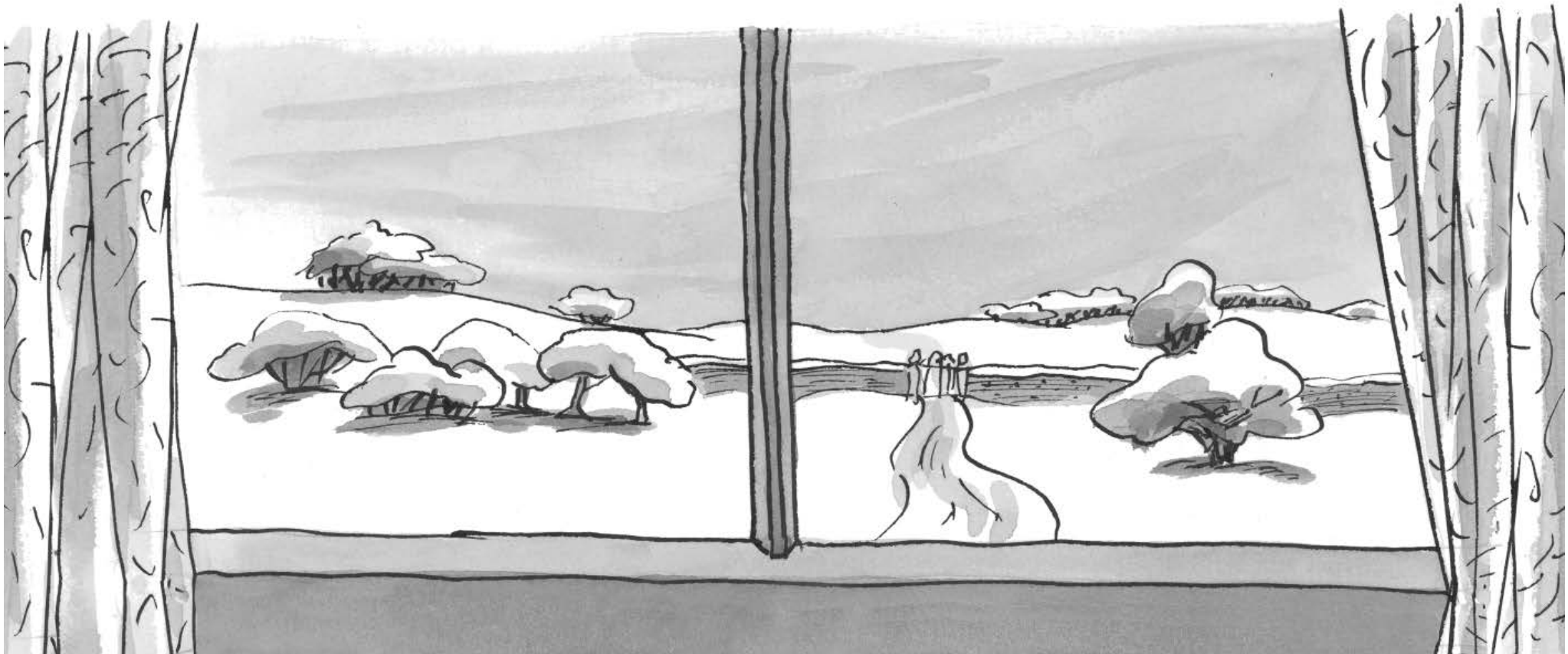
Outside there was not a sound. The house had never been this quiet before. All was silent. From her bed Stella turned her head to look out of the window.

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 woggle. 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 unmistakeable 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.

SAXBY
FAMILY TREE



LORD CUTHBERT SAXBY
(1698–1755)



LADY JANE SAXBY
(NÉE WHITTINGDON)



LADY ROSAMUND SAXBY
(NÉE MOORE)



LORD HORTATIO SAXBY
(1742–1815)



HUMPHREY
(1742–1850)



HORACE
(1743–1801)



HONORA
(1748–1823)



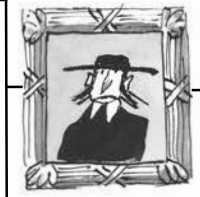
LORD CEDRIC SAXBY
(1799–1862)



LADY GENEVIEVE SAXBY
(NÉE CRUTTINGDOWN-
SMYTHE)



LADY HENRIETTA SAXBY
(NÉE GORRINGTON)



LORD OSCAR SAXBY
(1842–1925)



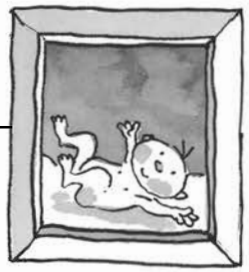
OSBERT
(1844–1914)



OCTAVIA
(1845–1846)



ALBERTA
(1868–)



HERBERT
(1880–?)



LORD CHESTER SAXBY
(1880–)



LADY EMILY SAXBY
(NÉE SMYTHE)



STELLA
(1920–)

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.

"Aaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrgggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!"

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



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.

