
The disappearing hat

An uncanny tale from Mike Roden

You'll all remember that bone-chilling December some years ago, which turned out to be one of the coldest for a century. It was cold enough in Battersea on that Carols in the Square evening. I'd been giving out flashing Santa hats and reindeer antlers.

Now the special guest had said their few words, the tree lights had been switched on, and with a couple more carols from local choirs, the event was coming to an end. We pushed to the back of the crowd looking for our friends Leo and Harriet.

If you were there that year you're certain to have noticed Leo. He is very tall, well over six feet. And he was wearing his long black winter overcoat, almost to his ankles. But the hat made him stand out. It was a souvenir of their trip to the north-west USA the previous year – a garish tartan fur-trappers hat with fur lined ear-flaps. The overall effect was enhanced by the large metal badge pinned on it in the shape of a grizzly bear with sharp teeth set in an evil grin.

Snatched

The crowd and choir were united (more or less) in a lusty rendering of the final carol *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*. Leo and Harriet stood in the entrance to Cotswold Mews both clutching plastic cups of mulled wine and Leo still held his song sheet. But rather than Leo's silly hat, I saw his shock of unruly white hair.

'Where's the hat?' asked my wife.

Harriet shrugged. 'He's always losing something. He left his umbrella on the 170 yesterday. Our neighbour picked it up and brought it back. Someone always brings things back. He's like a human magnet.'

She waved her hand back into the mews. 'It's in there somewhere. Must be. No sign of it though.'

Leo shook his head in a rather dazed fashion. 'This boy snatched it off my head, and ran off singing – 'Where did you get that hat?'

'An old music hall song,' I said. 'Don't hear it that much these days.'

Leo stared back into the mews again, most of the offices were in

darkness. 'There was a laundry there. I could smell damp washing and soapsuds...'

Harriet studied me thoughtfully. 'This isn't going to turn up in one of those stories of yours is it?'

'Well,' I pondered, 'There used to be a laundry there. From about the time of the first world war – the Cotswold Laundry.'

Laundry

'I see,' said Harriet. 'Look, this mulled wine is a bit short on wine for my liking. I need a real drink.'

'Listen,' Leo grabbed my arm, 'I had no idea that used to be a laundry.'

'I don't believe you did, Leo.'

But all the way to the Woodman he couldn't let it go. He'd strayed into Cotswold Mews out of curiosity. 'It's one of those places you never go in. It looked mysterious. Then out of nowhere this skinny boy snatches my fur hat off my head and runs off waving it like a trophy...'

'Just exactly as he told me!'

The young woman who spoke had followed us into the pub. 'It's a real strange tale.'

'Then you must sit down,' said Harriet, 'Leo – get the lady a drink.'

She shook her head. 'No thanks, I can't stay. My name's Laura, by the way. I guess you've noticed that I'm an American.'

She addressed Leo. 'When I came into the Square tonight and saw you – wearing that crazy hat, with the badge it was quite ... moving.'

Her voice broke a little and then she became brisk. 'I was about twelve, thirteen years old when Grandpa told me the story – showed me a picture, too. He died a couple of years later, but I never forgot. He was born here in Battersea. He told me how one December day...'

She paused and looked at us all, 'The same date as today – how he snatched the cap from a tall thin guy who came into the laundry yard where he was working, doing odd jobs. It was a joke, he was going to give it

back, but the guy just vanished...'

She paused, 'There were a couple of other weird things. He suddenly heard a choir singing a carol out in the square. And the guy was holding some kind of pamphlet – now I know it's the song sheet they give out. It had a date on, same date – but different year. It made no sense to him. But then nothing made any sense. The man vanished, the choir too. It was all part of the weird story. He always wished he could be around in the 21st century so he could come back to Battersea and take a look.'

She gave a sad little smile. 'He didn't quite make the millennium. As you'll have guessed he left his hometown and went travelling. Ended up in New York, raised a family, had plenty of grandchildren, including me. And your hat came in pretty useful during our winters, Leo.'

'You've come all the way to Battersea just to see if his story was true?' interrupted Harriet with an air of disbelief.

'Oh I always believed it was true,' said Laura fiercely, 'Grandpa wouldn't have lied to me. And I guess he'd be tickled to know that I might live in Battersea one day when the US embassy moves across the river. I work there, you see, so it wasn't too hard for me to come here today and take my own look.'

She stood up, 'But I must go now. And you really should have this back, Leo.'

Teeth

On the table she laid a metal badge showing a grizzly bear on its hind legs, with its teeth showing in an evil smile. 'I said I'd return it if I could.' Then she was gone.

Wonderingly Leo turned the badge over in his hand. 'Looks the same,' he said. 'But the story doesn't seem very likely does it?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'As Harriet observed earlier, if you lose something, it always comes back to you.'

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