

The Cloning

There was no doubt about it: instead of just one crossing-lady at the traffic-lights, there were two. And not just two, thought Alexander, rubbing his eyes in disbelief, but two the same. Exactly the same. The two crossing ladies were dressed in identical coats and hats, held identical lollipops and had identical smiles. As if in a choir, they both said "Hurry along, dear!" to him as he crossed.

"Can't be true," thought the school-boy. Not true, shouldn't be true.

But he had doubts when he found not one, but two versions of the janitor grousing about in the playground, one at either end with a dustbin bag each. What with the cuts in education budgets, he did not think this could possibly be true: two janitors? Not true, can't be true.

The final blow came when he went into the classroom with his friends and, in the sudden hush which descended on a normally riotous class, saw that there was not just one Mrs Garibaldi, but one Mrs Garibaldi and her exact double - another Mrs Garibaldi. No doubt about it. So while one Baldy was efficiently cleaning the blackboard, the other kept an eagle eye on the class, instructing all the pupils to sit down and behave. And for once in several blue moons, this is exactly what they all did.

Neither of the Mrs Garibaldis seemed in the least concerned that her exact double was always there. In fact, they both seemed to enjoy it, smiling happily at each other as the unaccustomed peace and quiet in the classroom continued. When Mr Puttfuss the headmaster poked his head round the door - or was it really Mr Puttfuss? - he was not visibly taken aback.

"A word, Mrs Garibaldi, if you please," he commanded. Both the teachers headed for the door, smiling sweetly. The headmaster muttered something to both of them, there was a whispered discussion, and then everything returned to normal.

The children looked at each other, wondering. And continued to wonder until the end of the day. School-dinners - for those who had them - were an odd affair, since everyone got double helpings, whether they wanted it or not. Big Billy Crockett felt that he had entered Paradise, since he got a double helping, the extra helpings from everyone at his table, plus a second (double) helping from the identical pairs of dinner-ladies. In the end, while there were not exactly two of Big Billy, he weighed at least as much as two.

Alexander went home slowly, thinking over the day's events and keeping a wary eye open for anything unusual. The only anomaly he spotted was Charlotte, the very large cat from up the road, who was lying, as usual, sprawled over the sun-warmed pavement so that no one could get passed without stepping into the road; and also Charlotte, the very large cat from up the road, who was lying draped innocently from a wall, sharpening her claws at eye-level, making every passer-by step sideways, in case.

As he sat on the doorstep in the afternoon sun, waiting for his mum to come home and let him in, Alexander noticed a slight twinkle above, some flash in the sky. As he looked up, he saw the saucer descend. It landed on the steps. The lid flew open and two fat and furry hamsters heaved themselves out and stretched.

“Hm, skinny one, Patty,” said the darker hamster, cleaning his nose. “Still no cheeks,” agreed Patty Perkins, “Not much whiskers, Bert. Hamsters have whiskers.”

Alexander sighed. Trouble had come again.

“Hello, boys,” he said. “Fancy some crumbs?” He open his lunch-box and found a half-eaten cheese sandwich.

Patty and Haricot Bert eagerly stood up for the crumbs. Alexander ate the cheese whilst his two friends filled their pouches. Patty Perkins retired to the saucer to unload. Bert was in chatty mood.

“Seen lots of doubles today, Skinny One?” he asked.

Alexander looked at the hamster suspiciously. “Yes,” he said cautiously.

Haricot Bert smiled smugly. “Hamster technology beats world again,” he boasted.

“Hamsters have technology”, added Patty, coming back from the saucer, his fur covered with sawdust.

“Oh really?” asked Alexander, who had heard some things about hamster technology. “What’s that?”

“DOUBLING,” said Bert. “Duplication Of Unique Bodies Leading to Interesting New Games.” explained Bert. “Means we make two of everything.”

“Oh,” said Alexander, “You mean like cloning?”

“Cloning?” asked Bert, puzzled. “What that?”

“Hamsters have cloning,” said Patty Perkins, utterly unperturbed. Bert darted a look at his fellow-hamster.

“Well, cloning is the same - you can make an exact copy of something. Sounds just like - like DOUBLING, like you said.”

Haricot Bert was dumbfounded. He cleaned his ears industriously. At last he sat up: “No, can’t be. DOUBLING is hamster technology. Cloning must be something else.”

“Hamsters have something else,” confirmed Patty, whose attention was wandering to the dandelion leaf just next to him.

Alexander knew better than to argue with Bert. “So tell me about DOUBLING, then, Bert: sounds most fascinating.”

Bert smiled happily. Since he had been involved in developing and testing the new technology, he knew a lot about DOUBLING.

“Well, what you do is to bend all the light from the sun back on itself by using a gigantic mirror -”

“Hamsters have gigantic mirror.”

“- out in space. And then send the light back again, so there are two of everything.”

Alexander was impressed. “And where is this gigantic mirror then?” he enquired.

Haricot Bert waved an imperious paw to the heavens. “Way out there, Skinny One. You can see it at night. Human parents call it a Comet -”

“Hamsters have parents,” boasted Patty, finishing the last delicious piece of dandelion.

“- but really a huge mirror. And Comet’s tail really all the light being reflected back.”

“I see,” said Alexander, not really seeing at all, but far too polite and quiet a boy to say so. Quiet and polite, quiet and polite, that’s what the two Mrs

Garibaldis had said this afternoon. “And what kind of Interesting New Games can you play when there’s two of everything?”

Bert had exhausted himself with the explanations and so went off for a quick snooze. Patty Perkins cleaned his back feet and continued.

“Hamsters have interesting games,” he confirmed. “Hide and seek much better with two of everything. Cops and robbers, yes. Chainy tig. Football - twenty-two against twenty-two with two balls; much more exciting.”

Alexander was doubtful about this. “But what if everything were to get DOUBLED?” he asked, “Hamsters too?”

Patty was unconcerned. “Pooh!” he snorted, “Hamsters have everything under control.”

“But,” persisted Alexander, “What if there were two Patty Perkins and only one lot of food? Or two Berts and only one saucer, with not enough room for Patty?”

Patty looked worried. He cleaned his back in an agitated fashion.

“Hamsters hadn’t thought of that,” he muttered.

Haricot Bert looked out of his cotton-wool cockpit and yawned.

“What matter, Patty Perkins?” he enquired.

“Skinny One says what if two hamsters and only one food,” reported the co-pilot. “What if two Patties and only one saucer, no room for Bert?”

Bert cleaned his nose in anxiety.

“Hamsters have worries,” said Patty.

Bert agreed. “Maybe DOUBLING not good idea, Patty...”

“Oh no, it’s a great idea, Bert,” said Alexander innocently, “Puts hamster technology far ahead of human technology. Humans have never thought of DOUBLING: far too complicated for their little brains. That’s what comes of not having big pouches.”

“Hamsters have pouches.”

“The invention is quite remarkable,” continued Alexander, “Just imagine: on the way home I saw a cat that had been DOUBLED. Quite a thing,” Alexander went on, pretending not to see the hamsters’ agitation, “With DOUBLING you can make twice as many cats, double the dogs, twice the number of grannies as there are now -”

“Stop, stop!” squealed Bert. “Patty, climb aboard now! We’re going to dismantle that mirror!”

And in as much time as it takes to say “Hamsters Have Considerable Talents” (twice), the saucer was off to outer space. Shortly after that, the Smellie-Flowers Comet was to be seen no more in the sky.