



PIPPA AND THE Sheep Snatchers







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PIPPA



LULABELLE



GUMBOOT GARY



DIGGER DAN





DETECTIVE MIKE TE HIRA



CLAIRE PERRY



PAUL THE POSSUM







PROLOGUE

The small town of Dargaville, New Zealand, was quiet except for the odd cow mooing and a faint rustling in the trees.

Like many farmers in town, Claire Perry was wheeling her tools into the shed at the end of a hard day's work. As she pushed the wheelbarrow towards the shed, she heard something in the tree above her.

Rustle, rustle, rustle it went. **Rustle, rustle, rustle.**

She looked up, but there was nothing to see except a bird sleeping in its nest. She shrugged. *The noise must have been the wind in the trees*, she thought.

She went back to putting her tools away but as soon as she started, the rustling came again. Claire looked up, but there was still nothing to see. Was she imagining things? Possibly.



It had been a long day.

But then, cutting through the quiet like a sharp knife through crusty bread, came a **hrrrrr, hrrrrr, hrrrrr.**

Slowly, the bird in the nest began growing and growing. It got bigger and bigger until Claire could see it wasn't a bird at all. Instead, it was a four-legged, furry monster.

'Ahhhhhhhhh!' screamed Claire, dropping the wheelbarrow in horror.

The monster turned towards her, a single red eye cutting through the darkness like unholy beacons in the twilight.

Claire stared up at its paws. They were clutching a bird's egg. **'Hrrrrr, hrrrrr, hrrrrr,'** the monster growled at her in warning.

'Ahhhhhhhhhhh!' she screamed again.

Leaping over the upturned wheelbarrow, Claire raced up the stairs, through the front door and sprinted to the phone. She shakily dialled the number of the town's mayor, Finn O'Connor.

'Hello?' he answered. 'CLAIRE, I've told you not to call me at home unless it's an emergency.'

'IT IS AN EMERGENCY,' shouted Claire. 'THEY'RE BACK!'

'Who's back?'

'THE P-P-P-POSSUMS!'





CHAPTER ONE

Gumboot Gary and Digger Dan

The lights were on and the curtains were drawn in the ramshackle cabin on the outskirts of town.

The wind howled around the cabin like a child who had just dropped their ice cream. But if you got closer, you might hear a muttering, a chattering, a plottering and a pattering.

Mutter, mutter, mutter, went the muttering.

Chatter, chatter, chatter, joined the chattering.

Mutter, chatter, mutter, chatter, mutter, mutter, mutter, went the mutter-chattering.

Plotter, patter, plotter, patter, plotter, patter, patter, went the plotter-pattering.



But who were these two shady souls deep in secret plots and plans? Why, it was Gumboot Gary and his right-hand man (who was actually a left-handed farmboy), Digger Dan.

‘Dan, we’re goners if we don’t think of a quick way to make a buck. I’m up to my neck in bills. Runnin’ a farm ain’t easy, ya know,’ said Gary, grabbing Dan’s bony shoulders.

‘I’ve got seeds to source, balers to buy and food to get to feed me-self. Look at me. I’m wastin’ away!’

Dan stared down at the potbellied man drinking from a 2L bottle of L&P* and grunted. He tapped his forehead, ‘I know, you old turnip. I’m using my noggin as best I can.’

Suddenly, a loud noise from outside the window made Dan jump in the air as if his bum was a firecracker.

‘Hrrrrr, hrrrrr, hrrrrr,’ it went.

Then, something furry swung from the branch of the kohekohe tree outside and leapt in through the window.

‘WHAT WAS THAT?’ shouted Dan.

‘That’s Paul,’ said Gary, offering no further explanation.

The creature scrambled across the floor and scurried up Gary’s leg and onto his shoulder. When it stopped moving, Dan could see that it had a big bushy tail

* Lemon & Paeroa, also known as L&P, originated in the small town of Paeroa when lemon juice and carbonated mineral water were combined.





and a big scar where its left eye should have been.

‘What is it?’ asked Dan, sitting back down and staring at the creature intently.

‘He’s me new pet,’ said Gary. ‘I found him. And the best part is . . . I don’t need to feed ’im because he forages eggs and tree leaves. Which is great because they were blocking my view.’

Gary stared out the window at the paddock with a few bare trees dotted around, a smug expression on his face.

‘Ahhh, very boring,’ he sighed peacefully.

‘Hrrrrr, hrrrrr, hrrrrr,’ came a noise of agreement.

(You see, Paul couldn’t speak English because he was a possum.)

‘What happened to his face?’ asked Dan.

‘I found him stuck in a trap, so I rescued him,’ said Gary. ‘But getting back to more important matters, we need to figure out how we can make money, and lots of it! Our plan’s gotta be more smarterer and more cleverer than any scheme we’ve come up with before,’ he added.

Dan thought for a moment. ‘I know. We can rob the bank!’

Thwack! Gary whacked Dan on the forehead with his newspaper.

‘No, that would never work. They have cameras, and a big bloke like me stands out like a sore thumb. Hmmm . . . but



we could take something worth a lot of money.'

'Ohhhhhh yes, I like stealing,' said Dan, cupping his dirty little hands together like a rat with a stolen macadamia nut.

'But what can we steal and make lots of money from?' asked Gary.

'Hmmm . . . we could steal fruit from Mrs Brinley's orchard and sell it,' suggested Dan.

'Nah, she has dogs guarding her property.'

'We could take down that gumdigger statue in the town's centre and ask for money to return it,' offered Dan.

'And how would we do that?'

'Hmmm . . . how about pretending your car's been stolen for the insurance money?' Dan shrugged.

'I don't have insurance.'

'What about a garage sale?' said Dan, looking around at the many unused appliances littering Gary's house.

Gary aggressively shook his head. 'Oh, forget about it. I'll have to think of something myself,' he grumbled, sitting down in defeat.

Gary unfolded his newspaper and began reading. But he didn't get far before his eyes lit up with a devilish gleam.

'Hey Dan, check this out,' he said as he passed over the newspaper.

Dan wiped his dirty hands on his trousers, leaving a



glistening trail of oil, mud, and who knows what else.

‘Actually, on second thought, I’ll read it to ya,’ said Gary, yanking the newspaper back. ‘It says, “Sheep snatches first prize at Dargaville pet competition.” Sheep snatches . . . SHEEP SNATCHERS! There are lots of farms in town and loads of sheep on them. We could snatch sheep and sell ’em. I’ve heard they’re worth a pretty penny. We could be sheep snatchers!’



‘Gary, you’re a genius!’ said Dan.

Dan stood up excitedly and started doing a jig. His long, skinny legs hopped up and down like two uncoordinated pogo sticks while his torso remained rigid.

‘We’re gonna snatch some sheeeep, then we’ll have lotsa money to keep,’ Dan sang.

THUD! Gary kicked over a chair in excitement.

In a surprisingly high-pitched voice for a large, bearded man with a big belly, he joined in the song.

‘We’re gonna snatch some sheeeep, then we’ll have lotsa money to keep!’

‘Hrrrrr, hrrrrr, hrrrrr,’ added Paul.

So, the villains sang and danced and plotted their evil plan until the morning light came up on the little ramshackle cabin.

