

# MALAMANDER



THOMAS  
TAYLOR



WALKER  
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2019 by Walker Books Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text and interior illustrations © 2019 Thomas Taylor  
Cover illustrations © 2019 George Ermos

The right of Thomas Taylor to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Stempel Schneider

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-8628-8

[www.walker.co.uk](http://www.walker.co.uk)





*For Celia — T.T.*





## EERIE-ON-SEA

YOU'VE PROBABLY BEEN TO EERIE-ON-SEA,  
without ever knowing it.

When you came, it would have been summer. There would have been ice cream and deckchairs and a seagull that pinched your chips. You probably poked about in the rock pools with your mum, while your dad found that funny shell. Remember? And I bet that when you got in the car to drive home, you looked up at the words CHEERIE-on-SEA – written in light-bulb letters over the pier – and got ready to forget all about your day at the seaside.

It's that kind of place.

In the summer.

But you should try being here when the first winter storms blow in, when the letters “C” and “H” blow off the pier, as they always do in November. When sea mist drifts up the streets like vast ghostly tentacles, and saltwater spray rattles the windows of the Grand Nautilus Hotel. Few people visit Eerie-on-Sea then. Even the locals keep off the beach when darkness falls and the wind howls around Maw Rocks and the wreck of the battleship *Leviathan*, where even now some swear they have seen the unctuous malamander creep.

But you probably don't believe in the malamander. You maybe think there's no way a fish-man can be real. And that's fine. Stick to your ice cream and deckchairs. This story probably isn't for you anyway. In fact, do yourself a favour and stop reading now. Close this book and lock it in an old tin box. Wrap the box in a heavy chain and throw it off the pier. Forget you ever heard of Eerie-on-Sea. Go back to your normal life – grow up, get married, start a family. And when your children can walk, take them for a day at the seaside too. In the summer, of course. Stroll on the beach, and find a funny shell of your own. Reach down and pick it up. Only, it's stuck to something...

Stuck to an old tin box.

The lock has been torn off and the chain is gone. Can the sea do that? You open the box, and find ...

... that it's empty.

Nothing but barnacles and seaweed, and something else. Something like ... *slime*?

You hear a sound behind you – a sound like footsteps, coming closer. Like slimy, flippery footsteps *coming closer*.

You turn around.

What do you see?

Really?

Well, maybe this story *is* for you, after all.





# THE GRAND NAUTILUS HOTEL

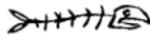
MY NAME'S HERBERT LEMON, by the way. But most people call me Herbie. I'm the Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel, as you can see from my cap. Someone once told me that most hotels don't have a Lost-and-Founder, but that can't be right. What do they do with all the lost stuff then? And how do the people who've lost it get it back?

I'm a bit young for such an important job, I suppose, but Lady Kraken herself – the owner of the hotel – gave it to me. Even Mr Mollusc, the hotel manager, can't argue with that. He'd like to, of course – he hates anything in the hotel that doesn't make money. If he'd had his way, the Lost-and-Foundery would have been shut down as

soon as he became manager, and my little cubbyhole in the reception lobby boarded up for good. And if that had happened, I'd never have met the girl.

The girl I found scrambling through my window.

The girl who said, "Hide me!"



"Hide me!"

I look her up and down. Well, mostly up, because she's got herself stuck on the window latch, and the cellar windows are near the ceiling. If she's a burglar, she's not a very good one.

"Please!"

I get her unstuck, although that means nearly being squashed as she tumbles inside. It's snowing, so a whole lot of winter comes in through the window too.

We get to our feet and now I'm face to face with her: a girl in a ratty pullover with a woolly bobble hat over a mass of curly hair. She looks like she's about to speak, but stops at the sound of raised voices up above. Raised voices that are getting closer. The girl opens her eyes wide with panic.

"In here!" I whisper, and pull her over to a large travel trunk that's been in the Lost-and-Foundery, unclaimed,

for decades. Before she can say anything, I shove her inside and close the lid.

The voices are right up at my cubbyhole now – the whining, wheedling sound of Mr Mollusc trying to deal with someone difficult. I grab a few lost bags, brollies and bits, dump them on top of the trunk and hope they look as if they’ve been there for years. Then the bell on my counter, the one people ring when they want my attention, starts *ting-ting-ting*-ing like crazy. I straighten my cap, run up the steps to my cubbyhole and turn on my how-may-I-help-you? face, as if nothing strange has just happened at all.

Mr Mollusc is the first person I see, trying to smooth his hair over his bald patch.

“I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding,” he’s spluttering to someone. “If you would just allow me to make enquiries...”

The someone he is talking to is unlike anyone I’ve ever seen before. It’s a man in a long black sailor’s coat that’s sodden with water. He looms over the desk like a crooked monolith, his face a dismal crag, his eyes hidden beneath the peak of a ruined captain’s cap. With one stiff finger he is jabbing the button of my bell like he’s stabbing it with a knife. He stops when I arrive

and leans in even further, covering me in shadow.

“Where...?” he says, in a voice that sounds like two slabs of wet granite being scraped together. “Girl. Where?”

“Ahem,” I say, clearing my throat and putting on the posh voice Mr Mollusc expects me to use with guests. “To whom may you be referring, sir?”

The man’s mouth, which is nothing more than a wide upside-down “V” in his dripping bone-yellow beard, opens with a hiss. I notice there is seaweed in that beard, and more tangled around his tarnished brass buttons. He smells like something bad is about to happen.

“WHERE?”

I gulp. Well, I can’t help it, can I? I’m just a lost-property attendant. I’m not trained for this.

“My dear sir,” purrs the voice of Mr Mollusc, “I’m sure we can sort this out. What exactly have you lost?”

The man pulls himself back out of my cubbyhole, and towers over Mr Mollusc. He draws his right hand, which has been hidden till now, out of his coat. Mr Mollusc shrinks back when he sees that where the man’s hand should be is a large iron boathook, ending in a long gleaming spike.

“Girl,” the man says.

Now one thing I will say about old Mollusc is that he knows which battles to fight. In this case, since there's no way he can beat this great hulking intruder, he decides to join him instead. He turns on me.

“Herbert Lemon! Have you got a girl down there?”

Now they're *both* looming in at me.

I shake my head. My how-may-I-help-you? face dissolves, so I try an innocent grin instead.

“No,” I manage to say in a squeaky voice. I hate it when my voice does that. “No girls are hiding down here. None at all.”

And that's when there's a soft thud down in the basement behind me. It sounds exactly like someone who is hiding in a travel trunk trying to make themselves more comfortable.

Oops.

The bearded sailor opens his mouth in a moan of triumph, his dark eyes flash beneath his cap. He yanks open the door to my cubbyhole and shoves me against the wall as he pushes past. He squeezes down the steps to the cellar, filling the tunnel, his back crooked as he stoops beneath the low ceiling.

I hurry after him. This isn't me being brave, by the way, this is just me not knowing what else to do.

The sailor is standing in the middle of the room, filling the space. I see him look at the patch of melted snow beneath the open cellar window. I see him turn his head to follow the wet footprints that lead straight to the travel trunk. The bags and brollies I dumped on it have fallen off. By now there might as well be a big flashing sign over that trunk that says, “YOO-HOO! SHE’S IN HERE!”

Mr Mollusc, rushing down to join the party, sees all this too, and goes crimson with rage.

“Herbert Lemon! Why, I ought to...!”

But what he ought to I don’t find out, because of what the sailor-with-a-spike-for-a-hand does next. He raises his spike and brings it down with a sickening thud, driving it deep into the lid of the chest. He wrenches it out and then swings again, and again. The lid of the trunk splits and sunders with each blow, splinters of wood raining down all around. The trunk itself begins to disintegrate. The man tears the rest of it open with the help of his one good hand to reveal ...

... nothing!

Well, not quite nothing. There’s a very surprised-looking spider sitting amongst the wreckage. And a woolly bobble hat. I watch the spider scurry away and

wish I could join it. Now all there is to look at is the hat. It is very definitely the brightly coloured hat the girl was wearing. But of the girl herself there is no sign.

With a slow, deliberate motion, Boathook Man skewers the hat on the tip of his spike. He turns and holds it out to me, his face like a thundercloud. Somehow I find the courage not to squeak as I reach out and gently take the hat off him.

“Just some lost property,” I say. “It was, um, handed in this morning. I-I haven’t had a chance to label it yet, that’s all.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then Boathook Man roars – a great, wordless bellow of fury. He starts ransacking my cellar, sweeping his massive arms from side to side. I fall back on the stairs as bags, coats, hats, lost-thingummy-doodahs of every kind – including some that must have lain undisturbed down here since almost for ever – fly about as the man goes berserk trying to find the girl. But he finds no one.

She’s gone.

