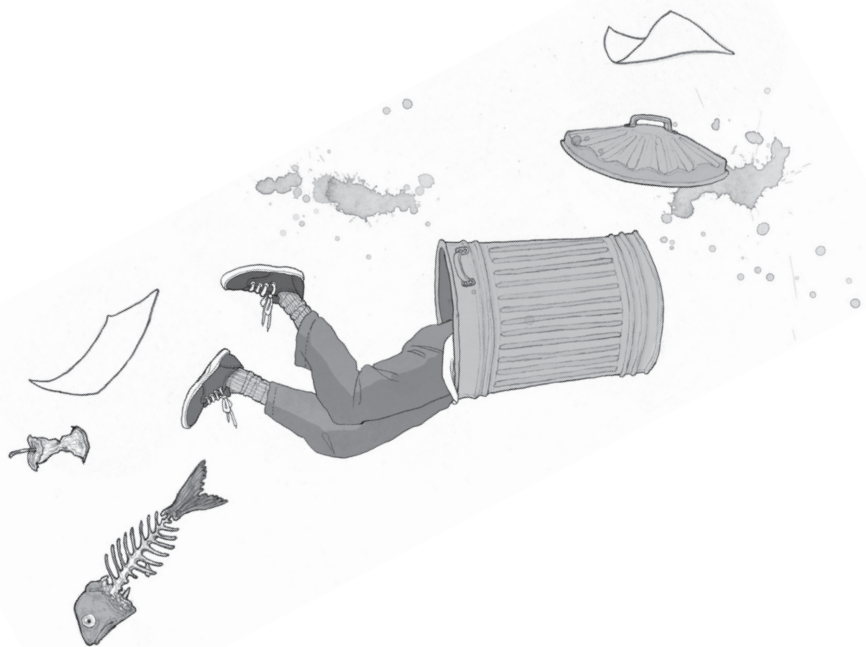


A
RIDDLE
FOR A
KING

From the author of the
Sunday Times number one bestseller,
The Etymologicon



A RIDDLE FOR A KING

MARK FORSYTH



Illustrated by Matthew Land

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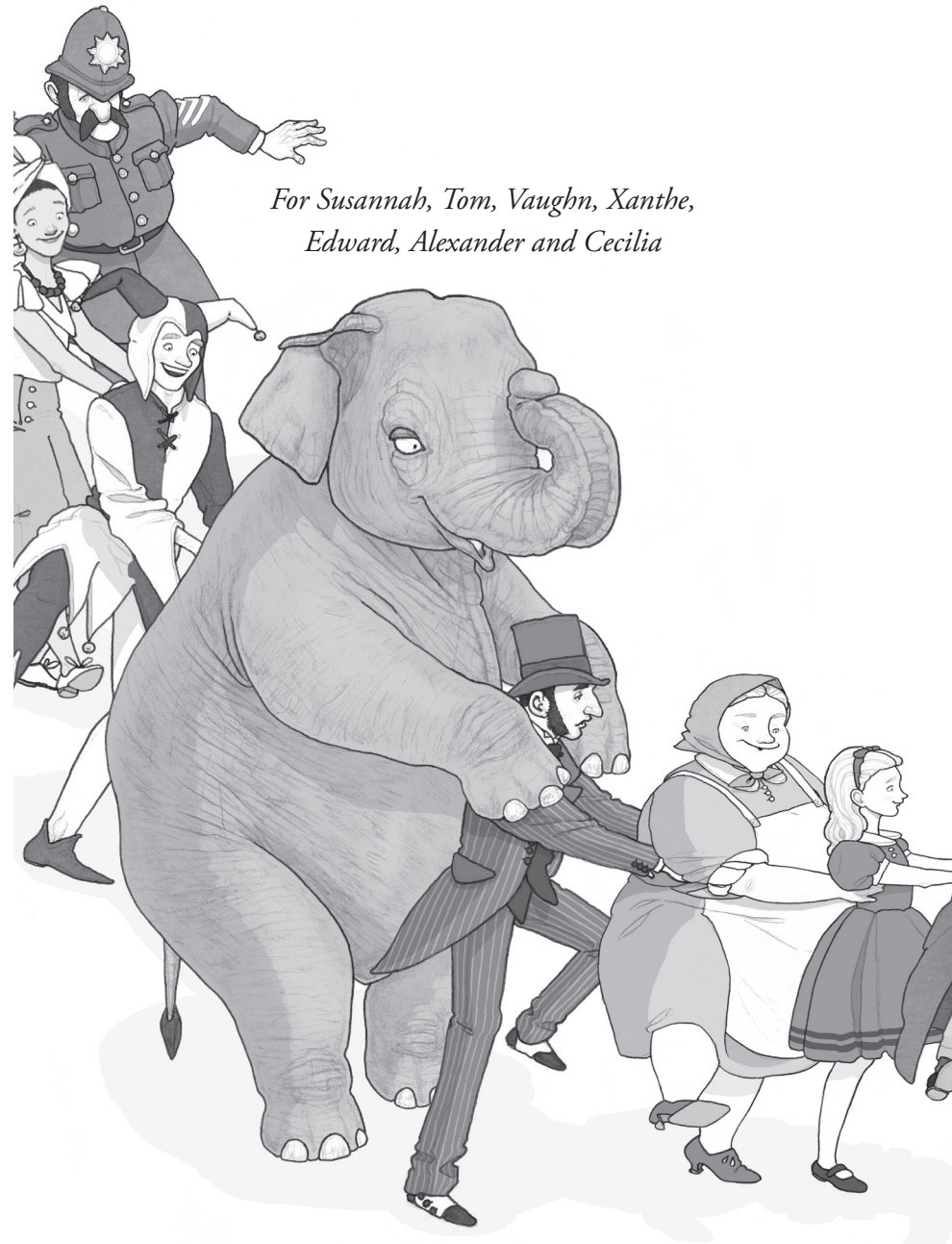
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*For Susannah, Tom, Vaughn, Xanthe,
Edward, Alexander and Cecilia*



CHAPTER 1

Which is Mainly Boring, until right at the end

This story begins on a perfectly ordinary day. Sorry about that. We'll get to the Flying Castle and the Tower of Punishment and the Bridge-Riddler and the Penguin Gate and the Midnight Witch later. But for now, it was a perfectly ordinary day, and Philo was a perfectly ordinary boy. Well, of course, there was the funny name (which rhymed with high-low), and some people said that he had too much imagination, and some people said he had too little. I'll leave you to decide on that. But for the moment, Philo was an ordinary boy who lived in an ordinary house, and it was raining.

The rain clitter-clattered against the windows as though it wanted to get in, and there was a rainy smell that was somehow sneaking into the house; the

smell of mud and puddles. Aunt Harriet and Uncle Harry, with whom Philo lived, wanted to go to the seaside to see if it was raining there too, and they wanted to set off at 8:46 ON THE DOT.

Uncle Harry and Aunt Harriet liked to do everything ON THE DOT. They talked about it so much that Philo used to imagine a little black dot on which everything would be done.

‘Not a minute before and not a minute after,’ said Uncle Harry. ‘Being early is as bad as being late.’

‘Not a second before, darling, and not a second after,’ said Aunt Harriet. ‘It’s got to be done ON THE DOT.’

And that made Philo wonder. Because if you couldn’t be a second early or late, then why not half a second? Or half of half of a second? Or half of half of half of half of a second?

And you could go on forever like that: halving again and again and again. The dot would get smaller and smaller and smaller, until, eventually, it would be impossible to do anything On The Dot because the dot would be so unbelievably small that you wouldn’t have time to blink.

And then you wouldn’t be able to do anything.

And then you’d be stuck.

Aunt Harriet and Uncle Harry had planned the

trip to the seaside very, very carefully.

‘We shall set off at eight forty-six a.m. precisely,’ said Uncle Harry.

‘We shall drive for one hour and thirteen minutes,’ said Aunt Harriet.

‘Then we shall get out and look at the view for seventy-two seconds,’ said Uncle Harry.

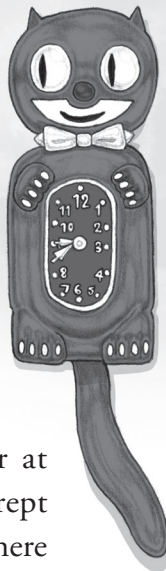
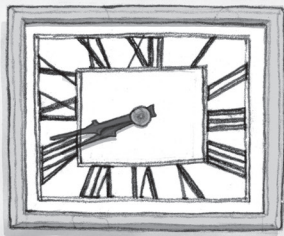
‘Then we shall drive for another two hours and twelve minutes,’ said Aunt Harriet.

‘By which point it will be time for sandwiches,’ said Uncle Harry.

‘Sandwich time,’ said Aunt Harriet.

The problem was that Philo could never quite remember the schedule, and whether it was four minutes seventeen seconds to eat the sandwiches or seventeen minutes and four seconds to do up your seatbelt. And there never seemed to be an hour for dilly-dallying or shilly-shallying or pretending to be an explorer.

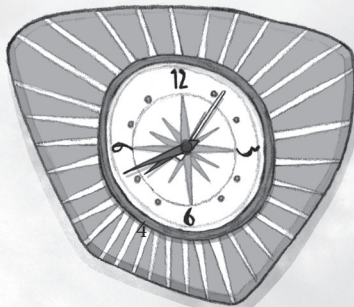
That was what Philo longed for. He longed for strange adventures and monsters of the forest and perilous journeys with a faithful friend, and daring escapes and mysterious letters arriving from an unknown land. But there was never room for any of that in the timetable; and anyway, Philo had never received a mysterious letter from an unknown land.



In fact, he had never received a letter at all. There had been a time when he had crept downstairs early in the morning to check. But there was never anything for him. And even if there had been an invitation to adventure, he knew that there wouldn't have been time.

'Four minutes!' called Aunt Harriet.

She didn't really need to. It was easy to tell the time in that house, because although the house was perfectly ordinary in most ways, there was one funny thing about it: it was full of clocks. Alarm clocks, carriage clocks, digital clocks, cuckoo clocks, balloon clocks and banjo clocks; all tick-tocking, beep-beeping and chiming the hours.



But Philo was standing next to the one clock that didn't keep time properly. It was a great big tall grandfather clock made of dark oak with a high white face like the moon, and a little door in the front. It was Philo's favourite, because it had belonged to his parents. But it was always wrong. No matter how many times Uncle Harry adjusted it and Aunt Harriet told it off, it wouldn't tell the right time.

They'd set it to three o'clock exactly and go away and make a cup of tea, and by the time they came back it would be claiming that it was five past ten. Sometimes Philo was sure he had seen it going backwards, and sometimes he'd heard it chiming in the middle of the night, which wouldn't have been wrong in itself, clocks are meant to chime every hour. But Philo had heard it chiming thirteen, and clocks should never chime thirteen.

That's why Aunt Harriet and Uncle Harry had banished the grandfather clock to a dark corner behind the stairs. And that's where Philo was. He was gazing at the big white face like the moon, when, quite without warning the narrow oak door at the front opened, and a strange little creature poked its head out, gave Philo a funny look, and asked 'Are you the King?'



CHAPTER 2

In which Philo meets Mr Spronkel

It's not every day that a little creature looks out of a grandfather clock and asks you whether you're the king. In fact, it's very few days. In fact, this is the only day I've ever heard of when that particular thing happened. Philo was so surprised that he didn't know what to say.

'Three minutes!' called Uncle Harry.

Also, the creature was rather peculiar to look at. He was a bit like a giraffe, and a little like a human, and rather like an elephant, and almost exactly like a monkey, and very like a rabbit, and not at all like a duck.

And he was wearing a suit.

Or at least he seemed to be wearing two suits of different colours both at once, and at least three

ties, and he had handkerchiefs coming out of every pocket and a shiny black shoe on one foot, and a shiny brown shoe on the other.

He didn't look frightening to Philo, though. Perhaps because he was so little. He only came up to Philo's shoulders. And he had asked 'Are you the King?' in a polite sort of way, as though he were a little lost, and maybe a little bit impatient.

Philo didn't know what to say.

Above them, the grandfather clock was ticking. The hands were pointing at ten to three, which made it look as though the clock was smiling. Or smirking.

Philo felt that he had to say something, and the only thing he could think of to say was the truth, so he said it (very slowly).

'I'm . . . not . . . the . . . King.'

'That's a pity,' said the little creature, and in an instant he had jumped back into the grandfather clock and shut the door.

All was normal again. The rain was pattering on the windows, the clock ticked. Philo was almost inclined to believe that he must be imagining it. He was sure that nobody would believe him if he told anybody what had happened. Uncle Harry would say 'Tosh'. Aunt Harriet would say 'Fiddlesticks', and everybody at school would call him a lying liar.

Philo reached his hand towards the little door in the clock. And then he decided not to.

'Two minutes!' called Aunt Harriet.

Then, suddenly, the little oak door opened again. The creature jumped out, looked at Philo, and said, 'Are you sure?'

'Of what?' asked Philo.

'That you're not the King.'

'Yes. I mean . . . I think I'm sure,' said Philo.

'Hmmm,' said the creature. 'Well if thinking is a half and sure is a whole, then thinking you're sure must be half of a whole, which is half. So that's no good. But I suppose that if you were sure that you think you're not the King that would be a whole of a half, which is the same as half of a whole. So we're back where we started, wouldn't you agree?'

Philo tried to understand what the creature had just said. But he couldn't.

'Do you ever wear a crown?' asked the creature.

'No.'

'Sit on a throne?'

'No.'

'Dole out just laws to your grateful subjects?'

'No.' Then, so as not to seem rude he added: 'I'm Philo. It's pronounced like high-low, but with an F sound.'

‘Hmmm . . .’ said the creature. ‘Then it’s becoming increasingly unlikely.’

‘I’m sure I’m not the King.’

‘Disappointing, very disappointing, but I suppose I should have known that. No crown, after all. No regal bearing.’ He looked around. ‘We’re not in the Flying Castle are we?’

‘No,’ said Philo.

‘No it’s not the Flying Castle or no we’re not not in the Flying Castle? Because if we weren’t not in the Flying Castle, then it would stand to reason that we actually were in the Flying Castle, and then the King would be here.’

‘This isn’t the Flying Castle,’ said Philo. ‘Definitely.’

‘How very disappointing. Oh well, it looks like it’s going to be one of those days when I’m disappointed. I don’t like those days. I much prefer the ones when I’m appointed. But thank you for your time. If you do see the King, I mean if he should suddenly turn up, could you tell him that Mr Spronkel wanted to see him?’

‘Are you Mr Spronkel?’ asked Philo.

‘Of course,’ said the creature, ‘or at least I think so, which is just as good as knowing when it comes to your own name. After all, if I think I’m Mr Spronkel, then who’s to say otherwise?’

‘Perhaps the King,’ said Philo.

‘Perhaps, but he’s not here, which means he must be somewhere else. Must dash. Adieu. Farewell. So long. So short. Goodbye.’

As he said these words his head sank and his shoulders sagged and his face grew sadder and sadder. But now, all of a sudden he jumped back into the grandfather clock and slammed the door behind him.

‘One minute!’ shouted Aunt Harriet.

The clock ticked, the rain lashed the windows.

Philo couldn’t help himself, he reached for the oak door, which he had never looked behind, and tried to open it.