A RIDDLE FOR A KING

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The Etymologicon



A Riddle for a King

Mark Forsyth



Illustrated by Matthew Land

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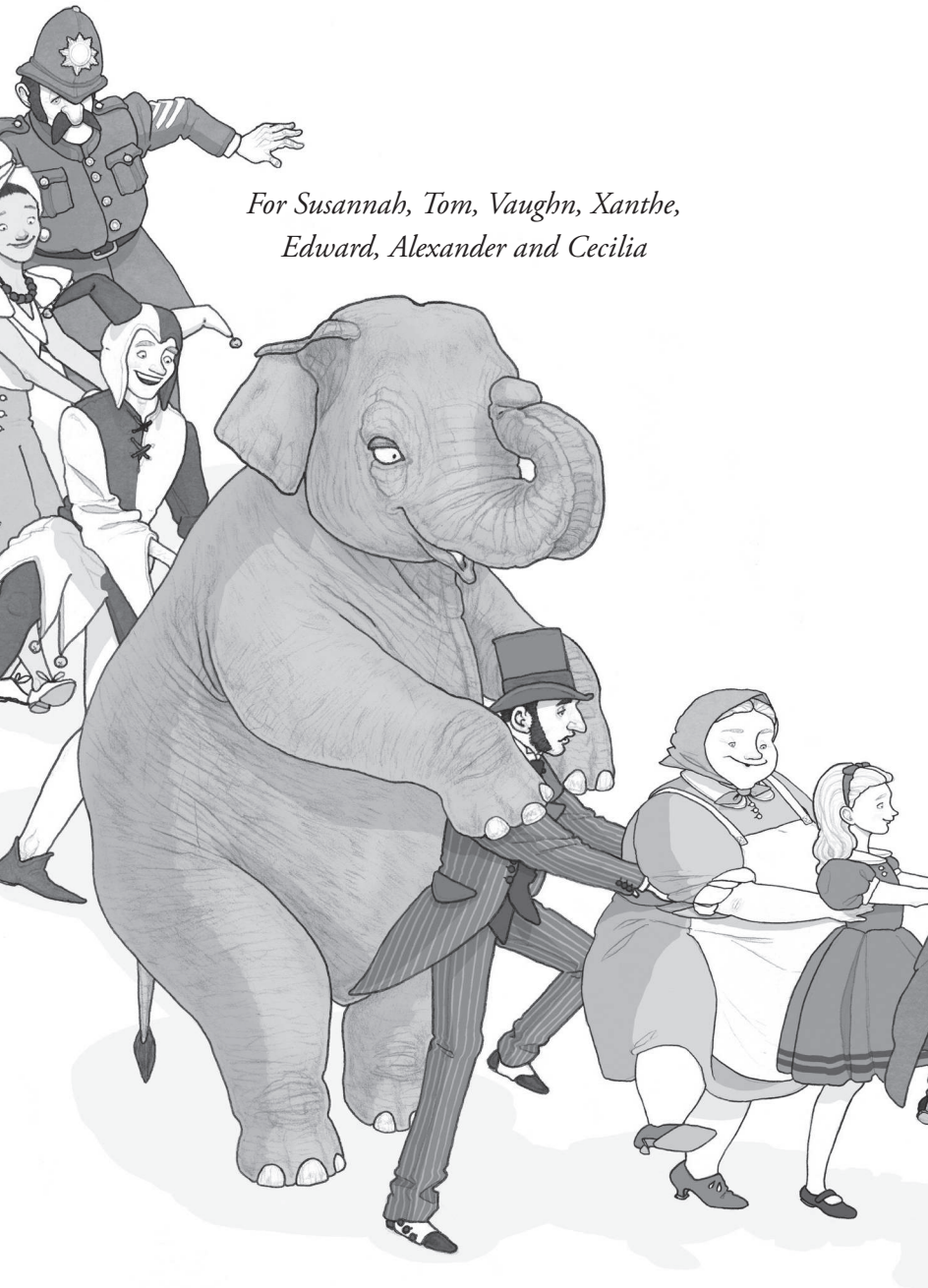
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For Susannah, Tom, Vaughn, Xanthe,
Edward, Alexander and Cecilia





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 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.

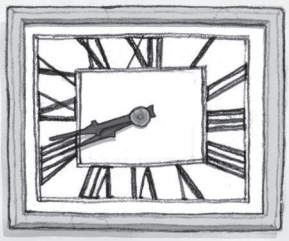
'By which point it will be time for sandwiches,' said Uncle Harry.

'Sandwich time,' said Aunt Harriet.

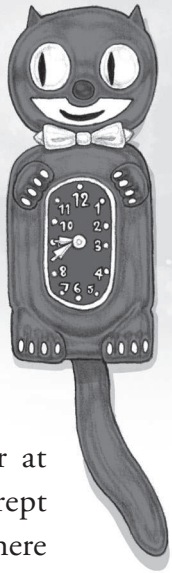
The problem was that Philo could never quite remember the schedule, and whether it was four minutes seventeen seconds to eat the sandwiches or seventeen minutes and four seconds to do up your seatbelt. And there never seemed to be an hour for dilly-dallying or shilly-shallying or pretending to be an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







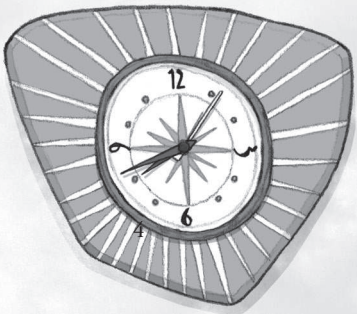


In fact, he had never received a letter at all. There had been a time when he had crept downstairs early in the morning to check. But there was never anything for him. And even if there had been an invitation to adventure, he knew that there wouldn't have been time.

'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?'