

5. Short Shrift

“Done what you’ve looked,” angrily shouted one of the salesmen. He meant to say “Look what you’ve done,” but the words had gotten so hopelessly mixed up that no one could make any sense at all.

“Do going to we what are!” complained another, as everyone set about straightening things up as well as they could.

For several minutes no one spoke an understandable sentence, which added greatly to the confusion. As soon as possible, however, the stalls were righted and the words swept into one large pile for sorting.

The Spelling Bee, who was quite upset by the whole affair, had flown off in a huff, and just as Milo got to his feet the entire police force of Dictionopolis appeared—loudly blowing his whistle.

“Now we’ll get to the bottom of this,” he heard

someone say. “Here comes Officer Shrift.”

Striding across the square was the shortest policeman Milo had ever seen. He was scarcely two feet tall and almost twice as wide, and he wore a blue uniform with white belt and gloves, a peaked cap, and a very fierce expression. He continued blowing the whistle until his face was beet red, stopping only long enough to shout, “You’re guilty, you’re guilty,” at everyone he passed. “I’ve never seen anyone so guilty,” he said as he reached Milo. Then, turning towards Tock, who was still ringing loudly, he said, “Turn off that dog; it’s disrespectful to sound your alarm in the presence of a policeman.”

He made a careful note of that in his black book and strode up and down, his hands clasped behind his back, surveying the wreckage in the market place.

“Very pretty, very pretty.” He scowled. “Who’s responsible for all this? Speak up or I’ll arrest the lot of you.”

There was a long silence. Since hardly anybody had actually seen what had happened, no one spoke.

“You,” said the policeman, pointing an accusing finger at the Humbug, who was brushing himself off and straightening his hat, “you look suspicious to me.”

The startled Humbug dropped his cane and ner-

vously replied, "Let me assure you, sir, on my honor as a gentleman, that I was merely an innocent bystander, minding my own business, enjoying the stimulating sights and sounds of the world of commerce, when this young lad——"



"AHA!" interrupted Officer Shrift, making another note in his little book. "Just as I thought: boys are the cause of everything."

"Pardon me," insisted the Humbug, "but I in no way meant to imply that——"

"SILENCE!" thundered the policeman, pulling him-

self up to full height and glaring menacingly at the terrified bug. "And now," he continued, speaking to Milo, "where were you on the night of July 27?"

"What does that have to do with it?" asked Milo.

"It's my birthday, that's what," said the policeman as he entered "Forgot my birthday" in his little book. "Boys always forget other people's birthdays."

"You have committed the following crimes," he continued: "having a dog with an unauthorized alarm, sowing confusion, upsetting the applecart, wreaking havoc, and mincing words."

"Now see here," growled Tock angrily.

"And illegal barking," he added, frowning at the watchdog. "It's against the law to bark without using the barking meter. Are you ready to be sentenced?"

"Only a judge can sentence you," said Milo, who remembered reading that in one of his schoolbooks.

"Good point," replied the policeman, taking off his cap and putting on a long black robe. "I am also the judge. Now would you like a long or a short sentence?"

"A short one, if you please," said Milo.

"Good," said the judge, rapping his gavel three times. "I always have trouble remembering the long ones. How about 'I am'? That's the shortest sentence I know."

Everyone agreed that it was a very fair sentence, and the judge continued: "There will also be a small additional penalty of six million years in prison. Case closed," he pronounced, rapping his gavel again. "Come with me. I'll take you to the dungeon."

"Only a jailer can put you in prison," offered Milo, quoting the same book.

"Good point," said the judge, removing his robe and taking out a large bunch of keys. "I am also the jailer." And with that he led them away.

"Keep your chin up," shouted the Humbug. "Maybe they'll take a million years off for good behavior."

The heavy prison door swung back slowly and Milo and Tock followed Officer Shrift down a long dark corridor lit by only an occasional flickering candle.

"Watch the steps," advised the policeman as they started down a steep circular staircase.

The air was dank and musty—like the smell of wet blankets—and the massive stone walls were slimy to the touch. Down and down they went until they arrived at another door even heavier and stronger-looking than the first. A cobweb brushed across Milo's face and he shuddered.

"You'll find it quite pleasant here," chuckled the policeman as he slid the bolt back and pushed the door

open with a screech and a squeak. "Not much company, but you can always chat with the witch."

"The witch?" trembled Milo.

"Yes, she's been here for a long time," he said, starting along another corridor.



In a few more minutes they had gone through three other doors, across a narrow footbridge, down two more corridors and another stairway, and stood finally in front of a small cell door.

“This is it,” said the policeman. “All the comforts of home.”

The door opened and then shut and Milo and Tock found themselves in a high vaulted cell with two tiny windows halfway up on the wall.

“See you in six million years,” said Officer Shrift, and the sound of his footsteps grew fainter and fainter until it wasn’t heard at all.

“It looks serious, doesn’t it, Tock?” said Milo very sadly.

“It certainly does,” the dog replied, sniffing around to see what their new quarters were like.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do for all that time; we don’t even have a checker set or a box of crayons.”

“Don’t worry,” growled Tock, raising one paw reassuringly, “something will turn up. Here, wind me, will you please? I’m beginning to run down.”

“You know something, Tock?” he said as he wound up the dog. “You can get in a lot of trouble mixing up words or just not knowing how to spell them. If we

ever get out of here, I'm going to make sure to learn all about them."

"A very commendable ambition, young man," said a small voice from across the cell.

Milo looked up, very surprised, and noticed for the first time, in the half-light of the room, a pleasant-looking old lady quietly knitting and rocking.

"Hello," he said.

"How do you do?" she replied.

"You'd better be very careful," Milo advised. "I understand there's a witch somewhere in here."

"I am she," the old lady answered casually, and pulled her shawl a little closer around her shoulders.

Milo jumped back in fright and quickly grabbed Tock to make sure that his alarm didn't go off—for he knew how much witches hate loud noises.



"Don't be frightened," she laughed. "I'm not a witch—I'm a Which."

"Oh," said Milo, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'm Faintly Macabre, the not-so-wicked Which," she continued, "and I'm certainly not going to harm you."

"What's a Which?" asked Milo, releasing Tock and stepping a little closer.

“Well,” said the old lady, just as a rat scurried across her foot, “I am the king’s great-aunt. For years and years I was in charge of choosing which words were to be used for all occasions, which ones to say and which ones not to say, which ones to write and which ones not to write. As you can well imagine, with all the thousands to choose from, it was a most important and responsible job. I was given the title of ‘Official Which,’ which made me very proud and happy.

“At first I did my best to make sure that only the most proper and fitting words were used. Everything was said clearly and simply and no words were wasted. I had signs posted all over the palace and market place which said:

Brevity Is the Soul of Wit.

“But power corrupts, and soon I grew miserly and chose fewer and fewer words, trying to keep as many as possible for myself. I had new signs posted which said:

*An Ill-chosen Word
Is the Fool’s Messenger.*

“Soon sales began to fall off in the market. The people were afraid to buy as many words as before, and hard times came to the kingdom. But still I grew more

and more miserly. Soon there were so few words chosen that hardly anything could be said, and even casual conversation became difficult. Again I had new signs posted, which said:

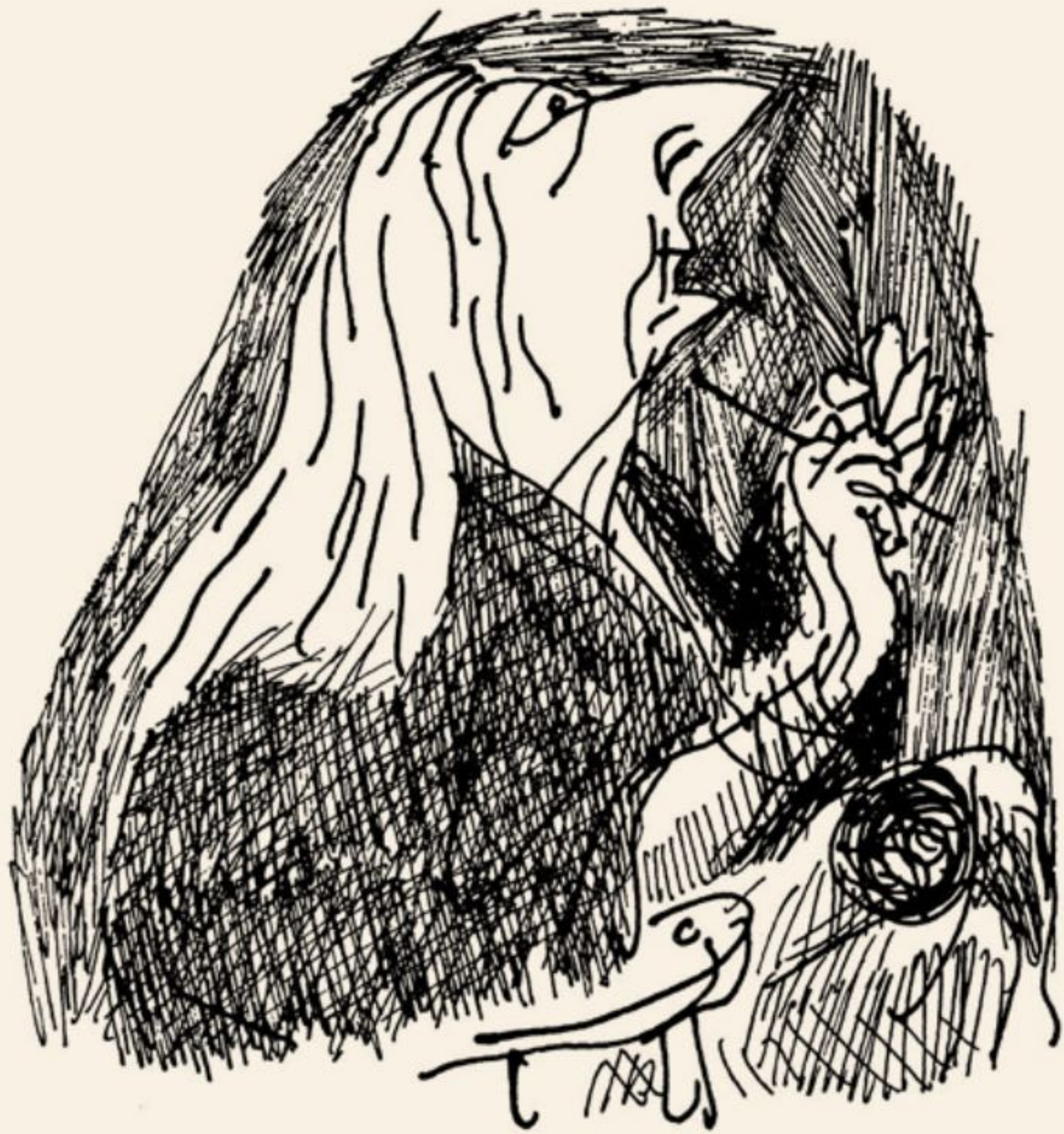
Speak Fittly or Be Silent Wisely.

“And finally I had even these replaced by ones which read simply:

Silence Is Golden.

“All talk stopped. No words were sold, the market place closed down, and the people grew poor and disconsolate. When the king saw what had happened, he became furious and had me cast into this dungeon where you see me now, an older and wiser woman.

“That was all many years ago,” she continued; “but they never appointed a new Which, and that explains why today people use as many words as they can and think themselves very wise for doing so. For always remember that while it is wrong to use too few, it is often far worse to use too many.”



When she had finished, she sighed deeply, patted Milo gently on the shoulder, and began knitting once again.

“And have you been down here ever since then?” asked Milo sympathetically.

“Yes,” she said sadly. “Most people have forgotten me entirely, or remember me wrongly as a witch, not a Which. But it matters not, it matters not,” she went on unhappily, “for they are equally frightened of both.”

“I don’t think you’re frightening,” said Milo, and Tock wagged his tail in agreement.

“I thank you very much,” said Faintly Macabre. “You may call me Aunt Faintly. Here, have a punctuation mark.” And she held out a box of sugar-coated question marks, periods, commas, and exclamation points. “That’s all I get to eat now.”

“Well, when I get out of here, I’m going to help you,” Milo declared forcefully.

“That’s very nice of you,” she replied; “but the only thing that can help me is the return of Rhyme and Reason.”

“The return of what?” asked Milo.

“Rhyme and Reason,” she repeated; “but that’s another long story, and you may not want to hear it.”

“We would like to very much,” barked Tock.

“We really would,” agreed Milo, and as the Which rocked slowly back and forth she told them this story.

6. Faintly Macabre's Story

“Once upon a time, this land was a barren and frightening wilderness whose high rocky mountains sheltered the evil winds and whose barren valleys offered hospitality to no man. Few things grew, and those that did were bent and twisted and their fruit was as bitter as wormwood. What wasn't waste was desert, and what wasn't desert was rock, and the demons of darkness made their home in the hills. Evil creatures roamed at will through the countryside and down to the sea. It was known as the **land of Null**.

“Then one day a small ship appeared on the Sea of Knowledge. It carried a young **prince** seeking the future. In the name of goodness and truth he laid claim to all the country and set out to explore his new domain. The demons, monsters, and giants were furious at his **presumption** and banded together to drive

him out. The earth shook with their battle, and when they had finished, all that remained to the prince was a small piece of land at the edge of the sea.

“‘I'll build my city here,’ he declared, and that is what he did.

“Before long, more ships came bearing settlers for the new land and the city grew and pushed its boundaries farther and farther out. Each day it was attacked anew, but nothing could destroy the prince's new city. And grow it did. Soon it was no longer just a city; it was a kingdom, and it was called the kingdom of **Wisdom**.



“But, outside the walls, all was not safe, and the new king vowed to conquer the land that was rightfully his. So each spring he set forth with his army and each autumn he returned, and year by year the kingdom grew larger and more prosperous. He took to himself a wife and before long had two fine young sons to whom

he taught everything he knew so that one day they might rule wisely.

“When the boys grew to young-manhood, the king called them to him and said: ‘I am becoming an old man and can no longer go forth to battle. You must take my place and found new cities in the wilderness, for the kingdom of Wisdom must grow.’

“And so they did. One went south to the Foothills of Confusion and built Dictionopolis, the city of words; and one went north to the Mountains of Ignorance and built Digitopolis, the city of numbers. Both cities flourished mightily and the demons were driven back still further. Soon other cities and towns were founded in the new lands, and at last only the farthest reaches of the wilderness remained to these terrible creatures—and there they waited, ready to strike down all who ventured near or relaxed their guard.

“The two brothers were glad, however, to go their separate ways, for they were by nature very suspicious and jealous. Each one tried to outdo the other, and they worked so hard and diligently at it that before long their cities rivaled even Wisdom in size and grandeur.

“‘Words are more important than wisdom,’ said one privately.

“‘Numbers are more important than wisdom,’

thought the other to himself.

“And they grew to dislike each other more and more.

“The old king, however, who knew nothing of his sons’ animosity, was very happy in the twilight of his reign and spent his days quietly walking and contemplating in the royal gardens. His only regret was that he’d never had a daughter, for he loved little girls as much as he loved little boys. One day as he was strolling peacefully about the grounds, he discovered two tiny babies that had been abandoned in a basket under the grape arbor. They were beautiful golden-haired girls.

“The king was overjoyed. ‘They have been sent to crown my old age,’ he cried, and called the queen, his ministers, the palace staff, and, indeed, the entire population to see them.

“‘We’ll call this one Rhyme and this one Reason,’ he said, and so they became the Princess of Sweet Rhyme and the Princess of Pure Reason and were brought up in the palace.

“When the old king finally died, the kingdom was divided between his two sons, with the provision that they would be equally responsible for the welfare of the young princesses. One son went south and became Azaz the Unabridged, king of Dictionopolis, and the

other went north and became the Mathemagician, ruler of Digitopolis; and, true to their words, they both provided well for the little girls, who continued to live in Wisdom.

“Everyone loved the princesses because of their great beauty, their gentle ways, and their ability to settle all controversies fairly and reasonably. People with problems or grievances or arguments came from all over the land to seek advice, and even the two brothers, who by this time were fighting continuously, often called upon them to help decide matters of state. It was said by everyone that ‘Rhyme and Reason answer all problems.’



“As the years passed, the two brothers grew farther and farther apart and their separate kingdoms became richer and grander. Their disputes, however, became more and more difficult to reconcile. But always, with patience and love, the princesses set things right.

“Then one day they had the most terrible quarrel of all. King Azaz insisted that words were far more significant than numbers and hence his kingdom was truly the greater, and the Mathemagician claimed that num-

bers were much more important than words and hence his kingdom was supreme. They discussed and debated and raved and ranted until they were on the verge of blows, when it was decided to submit the question to **arbitration** by the princesses.

“After days of careful consideration, in which all the evidence was weighed and all the witnesses heard, they made their decision:

“‘Words and numbers are of equal value, for, in the cloak of knowledge, one is warp and the other woof. It is no more important to count the sands than it is to name the stars. Therefore, let both kingdoms live in peace.’

“Everyone was pleased with the verdict. Everyone, that is, but the brothers, who were beside themselves with anger.

“‘What good are these girls if they cannot settle an argument in someone’s favor?’ they growled, since **both were more interested in their own advantage than in the truth.** ‘We’ll banish them from the kingdom forever.’

“And so they were taken from the palace and sent far away to the Castle in the Air, and they have not been seen since. That is why today, in all this land, **there is neither Rhyme nor Reason.**”

“And what happened to the two rulers?” asked Milo.

“Banishing the two princesses was the last thing they ever agreed upon, and they soon fell to warring with each other. Despite this, their own kingdoms have continued to prosper, but the old city of Wisdom has fallen into great disrepair, and there is no one to set things right. So, you see, until the princesses return, I shall have to stay here.”

“Maybe we can rescue them,” said Milo as he saw how sad the Which looked.

“Ah, that would be difficult,” she replied. “The **Castle in the Air** is far from here, and the one stairway which leads to it is guarded by fierce and black-hearted demons.”

Tock growled **ominously**, for he hated even the thought of demons.

“I’m afraid there’s not much a little boy and a dog can do,” she said, “but never you mind; it’s not so bad. I’ve grown quite used to it here. But you must be going or else you’ll waste the whole day.”

“Oh, we’re here for six million years,” sighed Milo, “and I don’t see any way to escape.”

“Nonsense,” scolded the Which, “you mustn’t take Officer Shrift so seriously. He loves to put people in prison, but he doesn’t care about keeping them there.

Now just press that button in the wall and be on your way.”

Milo pressed the button and a door swung open, letting in a shaft of brilliant sunshine.

“Good-by; come again!” shouted the Which as they stepped outside and the door slammed shut.

Milo and Tock stood blinking in the bright light and, as their eyes became accustomed to it, the first things they saw were the king’s advisers again rushing toward them.

“Ah, there you are.”

“Where have you been?”

“We’ve been looking all over for you.”

“The Royal Banquet is about to begin.”

“Come with us.”

They seemed very agitated and out of breath as Milo walked along with them.

“But what about my car?” he asked.

“Don’t need it,” replied the duke.

“No use for it,” said the minister.

“Superfluous,” advised the count.

“Unnecessary,” stated the earl.

“Uncalled for,” cried the undersecretary. “We’ll take our vehicle.”

“Conveyance.”

“Rig.”

“Charabanc.”

“Chariot.”

“Buggy.”

“Coach.”

“Brougham.”

“Shandrydan,” they repeated quickly in order, and pointed to a small wooden wagon.

“Oh dear, all those words again,” thought Milo as he climbed into the wagon with Tock and the cabinet members. “How are you going to make it move? It doesn’t have a——”

“Be very quiet,” advised the duke, “for it goes without saying.”

And, sure enough, as soon as they were all quite still, it began to move quickly through the streets, and in a very short time they arrived at the royal palace.