

Chapter 7

Report to Peter

"Not unless you put the clock back," Uncle Alan said carelessly, in answer to Tom's last question.

Tom doodled with his pen in the corner of the letter he was writing to Peter: a clock dial which he then enclosed at the top of a tall, rectangular case - a grandfather clock, in fact. He took some minutes to complete it; then he addressed his uncle again.

"What clock?"

"What did you say Tom?"

"You said a tree could not be lying fallen at one time, and then be standing up again as it was before it fell, unless you put the clock back. What clock?"

"Oh, no particular clock." Tom scribbled out his sketch of the grandfather clock. "It's just a saying, Tom - "to put the clock back". It means, to have the Past again, and no-one can have that. Time isn't like that."

His uncle returned to his reading; and Tom began doodling in another part of the writing-paper. After some time he found that he had drawn the shape of an angel-like creature with wings from his shoulders and with straddling legs. He had drawn the creature before he was aware, and then was startled at his own handiwork. He could not at once think whence the design had come into his mind. Then he remembered that it belonged to the grandfather clock and he scribbled that out too.

Then, "What *is* Time like, Uncle Alan?" asked Tom.

His uncle put his book down altogether; and his aunt nervously put down her mending too.

"Tom," she said, "you shouldn't always be asking such very odd questions of your uncle. He's tired after his day's work."

"No, no, Gwen. A child's questions should certainly be answered. All I would object to Tom's questions is their lack of connection, and sometimes of seriousness, too. Look at his first question: he asked whether it would be possible to go through a door - he actually asked *how* it would be possible!"

"Well!" cried Tom's aunt, with a relief that came from her not having paid attention to the earlier conversation. "Well, that seems a very sensible idea - so sensible that it's almost sill!"

Alan Kitson raised his eyebrows, and his wife went on hurriedly: "You know what I mean - going through a door's such an everyday happening."

"Not when the door is shut... Then Tom went on to ask about the invisibility - the *invisibility* - of a person like himself.'

"Sometimes, in fairy stories-" Aunt Gwen began.

Tom shook his head indignantly.

"And finally," his uncle continued, "we have this question about a tree's being able to lie fallen one day, and then, on the next day, against all the known laws of Nature-"

"It was a dream!" interrupted Aunt Gwen, "just a queer dream, wasn't it, Tom?"

"No, it wasn't!" Tom cried passionately. "It was real!"

"Indeed!" said Uncle Alan, with slow relish. "So this tree has really existed - this extraordinary incident has really happened! Tell us where, Tom, and when. Where and when, Tom?"

Tom remained silent. He dug his pen in a row of inky holes down the side of his paper.

"Come, Tom!"

"It was a fairy tree!" said Aunt Gwen, returning with desperate playfulness to her first suggestion. Goblin woodcutters laid it low, didn't they, Tom?"

Uncle Alan smiled and picked up his book again. "I am inclined to think you are right, after all, Gwen."

"It fell in a storm," Tom said in strangled voice. "Lightning struck it." He looked at his uncle as if he would willingly have seen him struck in the same manner."

His aunt intercepted the look, and saw her husband's mouth opening to speak. She rushed into the conversation again, and this time, won: "And now Tom mustn't speak again until he's finished his letter to Peter, nor be interrupted!"

So Tom went back to the letter, cramping his writing between the doodlings and the stab-marks.

'...All I have told you is true,' he wrote, 'about the door and being invisible and the fir-tree. It is all very strange, but I don't *mind* any of it, except perhaps being invisible to everybody. For instance, there are three boys that have come into the garden. Their names are Hubert and James and Edgar. Edgar is about my age, but I think I would like James better. There is a girl who tags round after them. She is very young and is called Hattie or something...'

Without appearing to detach his attention from his book, Uncle Alan spoke: "It's useless to write at length to anyone recovering from measles. After measles, the patient has to be particularly careful not to strain his eyes by overuse."

"If Tom's letter is too long for Peter, then no doubt his mother will read it aloud to him," said Aunt Gwen.

In alarm, Tom wrote 'PRIVATE' in the biggest capitals across the top of the letter, folded it intricately, and wrote 'Peter - PRIVATE' on

both sides. He had to undo it again, to sign it, having forgotten that, in his panic. He then put the letter into an envelope, addressed it and wrote 'CONFIDENTIAL' in the top left-hand corner.

He found his uncle's eyes watching him ironically over the top of his book. Tom felt defiant. He licked the flap of the envelope and pressed it down. Then he drew the outline of his long tom-cat across the edge of the stuck-down flap. Like a seal, it guarded against any tampering. Beneath the cat, Tom wrote: B.A.R.

Uncle Alan brought out his wallet. "Here's a stamp for your precious letter." Tom thanked him stiffly.

The letter finished, Tom had nothing more to do. He composed himself to wait patiently for bedtime. There was no real use in his going to bed early: he could not go down to the garden, anyway, until his aunt and uncle were in bed and asleep.

His thoughts ran on the garden, as they always did nowadays. He reflected how dangerously near he had been to betraying it, just now. Fortunately his uncle and aunt had only laughed at him: if they had been more attentive and sympathetic, he might have been trapped into telling more. They might have found out his secret. The very next time he visited the garden, they would have insisted on going with him...

Tom went chill at the idea.

"Are you feeling quite well, Tom?" asked his aunt.

"Yes, thank you, Aunt Gwen."

Nevertheless, she fetched the thermometer and made him put it into his mouth. "You were shivering just now, as if you had a chill."

Tom shook his head.

"I hope it's not the onset of measles, for your sake, Tom. It would mean your staying from home several days longer, perhaps, instead

of only ten days." She withdrew the thermometer and took it over to the light.

"Only ten days?" repeated Tom.

"I know you must be longing to get home," said Aunt Gwen sadly; she would have liked him to have stayed much longer. Uncle Alan was saying nothing.

Only ten days! Only ten days more for the garden!

"I think perhaps I have a temperature, and it is measles," said Tom. Surely, even with measles, he could still go down every night to the garden during those extra weeks while the disease ran its course.

"I can never find the thread of mercury at first," Aunt Gwen was saying. She twisted and twisted the thermometer; then, at last, she held it still. "No, Tom, you've no temperature, so you've no measles. That's a relief for you, isn't it? Home soon."

"But -"

"Yes, Tom?"

He dared not say it: that suddenly he found that he did not want to go home. He wanted above all to stay here - here where he could visit the garden. His home now seemed a long, long misty way away; even Peter was a remote boy with whom he could only correspond by letter, never play. The boys nearer to him now were called Hubert and James and Edgar - James especially. There was a girl too - but she was only a girl. What had her name been? Hatty...