

❧ Cast of characters ❧

<i>Olive</i>	our heroine, clever, brave and true
<i>Mrs Groves</i>	our headmistress, befuddled and bonkers
<i>Pigg McKenzie</i>	our villain, a Pigg of Evil Intent
<i>Basil Heffenhüffenheimer</i>	our time traveller, keen but green
<i>The Ringmaster</i>	our circus trainer, dashing and blithe
<i>The Inspector of Schools</i>	an astonishingly unfortunate man
<i>The Narrator</i>	our talented wordsmith, witty and wise

❧ The talking animals ❧

<i>Wordsworth the grey rat</i>	lover of words
<i>Blimp the white rat</i>	large of appetite and bottom
<i>Chester the brown rat</i>	button enthusiast and thief
<i>Fumble the short-sighted moose</i>	gentle and shy
<i>Num-Num the dinosaur</i>	prehistoric babe
<i>Glenda the goose</i>	muddled of intellect and frayed of nerves

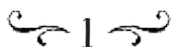
Reuben the rabbit	fluff-ball of magic and whimsy
Star the chestnut horse	arrogant and wild
Beauty the black horse	proud and prejudiced
Helga the hippo	bathing beauty
Steve and George the hermit crabs	intrepid explorers and home decorators
Scruffy the dog	mischievous mutt
Valerie the owl	studious, white of wing and tail
Elizabeth-Jane the giraffe	vain and long of neck
Wally the wombat	origami expert
Cracker the parrot	vulgar of thought and word
Flick the goanna	tetchy and tearful
Ginger the cat	Mrs Groves' pet

The circus performers

Anastasia, Eduardo and Alfonso	acrobats, skilful of limb and daring of heart
Bozo	clown of good cheer
Boffo	clown of despair
Bullet Barnes	human cannonball of battered brain
Jabber	knife thrower of dangerous mistakes
Sparky Burns	juggler of flames and breather of fire
Splash Gordon	fearless diver and chronic misser
Diana	tamer of lions, tigers and pussycats

↪ The naughty boys ↪

Frank	compulsive liar
Tiny Tim	putrid of sock and small of size
Carlos	explosives expert
Reginald	butter spreader
Hamish	booby trap engineer
Peter	graffiti artist
Tommy	nose picker and nostril packer
Doug	hole digger
Pewy Hughie	fruit guzzler
Ivan	fruit hater
Linus	shoelace knotter



In which we meet an astonishing visitor

Mrs Groves, headmistress of Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers, bumbled through the crowded hall. It was an important occasion and one had to stick to a schedule at such moments.

Of course, Mrs Groves did not actually *have* a schedule, but if she did, she would have stuck to it.

Maybe.

Well, probably not.

You see, Mrs Groves was a delightful woman, kind of heart and generous of nature, but she was not terribly organised. Of course, when I say *not terribly organised*, it is really a polite way of saying *just a teeny-weeny bit muddlesome*. And when I say *just a teeny-weeny bit muddlesome*, it is really a polite way of saying *completely*

confused, disorderly and bewildered.

‘Excuse me! Excuse me!’ she cried, her white mobcap wobbling back and forth on her head as she pushed her plump body through the horde of students. ‘Excuse me, Helga the hippo! I’ll just squeeze past. How *fascinating* that you have removed the tub from the upstairs bathroom and chosen the entrance hall in which to bathe. I always knew that hippopotami were fond of water, but this certainly takes the cake!’

Mrs Groves’ cheeks glowed a rosy red as she blundered forth.

‘Oh my, Tiny Tim,’ she gasped. ‘That is a *phenomenal* odour billowing from your socks. I can smell mouldy garlic, sweaty basketball shorts, boiled cabbage *and* festering fish heads. Four bad smells in one pair of socks. That’s quite an achievement!’

She waved a lace handkerchief before her face, coughed and stumbled on.

‘Goodness gracious me, Hamish!’ she cried. ‘Haven’t you made a marvellous booby trap there? Valerie the owl looks completely trussed beneath that heavy rope netting. And those bushy eyebrows that Peter has drawn upon her face with black permanent marker are quite fetching. Well done, Peter. Well done. Full marks for creativity.’

Mrs Groves trotted around the trapped owl and tripped over the Persian rug.

‘Wally, my dear wombat!’ she babbled, straightening her little round glasses. ‘Why, you have managed to fold the rug into an enormous origami crane. Remarkable! Almost as impressive as the two hundred and fifteen origami penguins you made from the pages of your geology textbook yesterday.’

Mrs Groves picked herself up and yelped. ‘Bozo! Boffo! That is *astonishing* the way you can ride your unicycles back and forth along the bannister of the first-floor landing while throwing cream pies down at the Ringmaster! And Jabber! It is quite thrilling to see you juggle Ginger the cat, Cracker the parrot and three sharp knives all at once. Although I am not sure how well Cracker will be able to fly now that his tail feathers have been sliced off.’

Mrs Groves smoothed her apron, jostled past the remaining students and trotted up onto the grand staircase. ‘Good evening!’ she cooed, even though it was a quarter past ten in the morning. ‘We are here today to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the invention of oxygen.’

‘Or perhaps,’ announced the Ringmaster, wiping a large dollop of cream from his eye, ‘we are here to announce the new school captain of Groves.’

Mrs Groves fluttered her eyelashes. ‘Really?’ she cried. ‘How simply splendid!’

Olive, our delightful ten-year-old heroine, skipped up onto the steps. ‘It’s me, Mrs Groves,’ she said. ‘Remember? You said I would make a wonderful school captain ... now that Pig McKenzie, head boy and all-round Evil Swine, has gone.’

‘Of course! Of course!’ babbled Mrs Groves. She cast a nervous upwards glance at the crystal chandelier from which the acrobats, Eduardo, Alfonzo and Anastasia, were swinging.

The Ringmaster ducked to avoid another cream pie.

‘Olive,’ chirped the headmistress. ‘I now pronounce you school captain of Groves.’ She pinned a small strip of paper to Olive’s collar. Upon it was written: *tea, milk, apples, peppermints, shampoo, cat food.*

Mrs Groves stared at the shopping list for a moment, then muttered, ‘Oh, silly-billy me!’ She replaced the note with a beautiful, shiny silver school-captain badge. ‘I now pronounce you head boy of Groves!’ she cried.

Olive stood on her tippy toes and whispered into the headmistress’ ear, ‘But I’m not a boy.’

‘Ooh! Indeed you are not!’ Mrs Groves blinked rapidly, then sang, ‘I now pronounce you man and wife!’

A stunned silence filled the entrance hall.

Olive whispered, 'Try *school captain* again.'

'I now pronounce you school captain!' declared Mrs Groves, thrilled at finding the right words at last. 'Three cheers for Olive!'

The entrance hall of Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers rumbled as the students obliged with shouts and stomps. The windowpanes rattled, the cracks in the walls grew a little longer and five crystals dropped from the chandelier, shattering across the floorboards.

Olive was, you see, a great favourite amongst her fellow students.

She was not tall and beautiful.

Nor was she athletic and graceful.

No.

Our heroine was something far better.

She was brave and clever and the kindest friend one could ever hope for.

'Speech! Speech! Give us a speech!' cried Fumble the moose.

Fumble was dreadfully short-sighted and was, in fact, talking to the coat stand. But as the coat stand could not speak, Olive decided that *she* might as well say a word or

two.

She climbed up to the tenth step so that she could look down upon the gathering. She clasped her hands together, smiled and cleared her throat. 'I love it here at Groves.'

What a *brilliant* speech! Short and to the point. The very best kind.

Of course, Olive might have said more, but at that very moment there was a loud knock on the front door.

Rat-a-tat-tat!

'Goodness gracious me!' cried Mrs Groves, clutching Olive's arm. 'Who could that possibly be at this unearthly hour of the night?'

'It's twenty-two minutes past ten in the morning!' declared Elizabeth-Jane the giraffe.

'Goodness gracious me!' cried Mrs Groves. 'Who could that possibly be at this unearthly hour of the morning?'

'Maybe it's a policeman,' said Carlos, 'come to ask about the lily pads that were blown out of the pond in the park last night.' He stuffed a stick of dynamite up his jumper and began to whistle a jolly tune.

'Or the priest,' mumbled Linus, 'come to ask about all the people who tripped over at mass yesterday when their shoelaces were mysteriously tied together.' He smiled up at Mrs Groves from the floor, where he was busy tying Ivan's

shoelaces together.

‘Or the mayor,’ said Peter, ‘come to ask about the enormous black moustache that has been drawn on the statue of Queen Victoria in the city square.’ He finished drawing a pair of thick round glasses on Valerie’s face and stood back to admire his work.

‘You could open the door and find out,’ suggested Olive.

‘Oh my! What a sensible idea!’ cooed Mrs Groves. ‘What an exceptional school captain you will be, young Olive.’ And she trotted across to the door and flung it open.

Her hand flew to her chest. ‘Goodness gracious me!’ she gasped. ‘It can’t be!’

Mrs Groves removed her little gold glasses and polished them on her apron. She returned them to her nose, peering out through the door once more.

‘Oh deary, deary me!’ she cried. ‘It really is! Right here! On the front porch of my esteemed Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers!’

She was quite flabbergasted at the sight of it.

Finally, however, she managed to get the words out.

‘It’s a ... a ... What is it? Not a naughty boy. Not a talking animal. Not even a circus performer. Oh me, oh my! It’s a *time traveller*!’