Name: _____ Date: _____

Otto and the Spell That Counted Backwards

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1129 words

At ten past four on a Thursday afternoon, the tea in the wizard's study began to climb out of the carpet and back into the cup. It rose slowly and with great dignity, like a very small brown waterfall running uphill. The cup, which had been lying on its side by the fireplace, sat up and settled on its saucer. Otto stood in the doorway with his mouth open. He had cast a great many spells as an apprentice, and not one of them had ever tidied anything.

The trouble had started a minute earlier. Madame Vesper had gone to the market in the next valley, and she had left three instructions: light the reading lamp, keep the kettle off the tower's cat, and never touch the east cupboard. She would be home by five. Otto had obeyed all three perfectly. Then he stood before the lamp, drew a breath, and began the word Kindle, which is the first word any apprentice learns, and which he had said wrongly only four hundred times.

Bismuth chose that moment to sneeze. Bismuth was the tower's cat, a sleek silver animal the color of a spoon, who had never sneezed quietly, politely or at a sensible time. This sneeze knocked the teacup off the mantelpiece, and it startled Otto so thoroughly that the word came out scrambled: not Kindle, but Eldnik. He said it, naturally, three times, because he always did. The lamp lit three times over. And then, to the apprentice's horror, the study began to run backwards.

Backwards was the only word for it. The clock, which had said 4:10, ticked once and said 4:09, then 4:08, its hands creeping counterclockwise like a crab. The kettle un-boiled itself with a long sigh of steam going the wrong way. Bismuth, halfway across the carpet, sucked his sneeze back in and walked backwards onto the cushion. The corridor behind Otto went on exactly as usual. Only the study had slipped its moorings, and it was floating down the river of the afternoon the wrong way.

It would not have mattered if the room had stopped there, because a cat who has un-sneezed is merely a cat. But it did not stop. The clock said 3:40, then 3:10, and the shadows crept away from the window. By midnight the room would be in the middle of last night, and by Tuesday it would be a room before the tower had a roof. Madame Vesper would come home at five and find an apprentice, a cat, and a drafty hole in the history of her house.

Otto did what every sensible apprentice does in a crisis, which is to look for something written on a wall. Above the study door hung the sampler Madame Vesper had stitched for her first apprentice. It said: MEND A MISTAKE AS YOU WOULD A KNOT: UNDO THE LAST LOOP FIRST. Beneath it, in smaller thread, it said: (socks before shoes going on; shoes before socks coming off.) "The last thing first," he murmured. "What was the last thing? The sneeze?

No. The word." The last loop, he thought, was a word said backwards. Perhaps it needed another one.

He tried the obvious cure, which was to say the word correctly. He leaned into the doorway, filled his lungs and called, "KINDLE!" From inside the room came a thin, tinny voice, like his own played in a mirror: "Eldnik, eldnik, eldnik." The clock leaped from 2:50 to 1:50 to 12:50. Bismuth shrank into a startled kitten, and somewhere in the cupboard a dozen tea biscuits turned back into flour. Otto sprang away from the doorway and could do nothing for a moment but breathe.

Then he listened, which is what Madame Vesper always said an apprentice should do before and after everything. "STOP!" he called into the room. "POTS!" the room replied. "BISMUTH!" he called, and the room said "HTUMSIB!" in a voice as thin as a whistle. Every word he sent in came back reversed. "So the study says everything backwards," said Otto slowly. "Then if I say a thing backwards, it will come out right."

He drew himself up in the doorway and put one hand on the frame. Then he said the wrong word on purpose, exactly as the sneeze had made him say it. "ELDNIK!" The word went off three times, one breath after another. Three times the room turned it round and handed it back: "Kindle, kindle, kindle." The study had been going the wrong way ever since the wrong word. Now it heard the right one at last, and it turned around.

The first Kindle stopped the clock dead, just before it reached the middle of the night. The second turned the hands round, and the biscuits made themselves out of flour again, and Bismuth swelled to his proper size with a look of offended dignity. The third carried the whole room forward over the long hill of the afternoon, tick, tick, tick, until the clock said 4:09, then 4:10, and stopped being surprised. The lamp burned with a steady yellow flame, three times over, and for once nobody minded.

Bismuth, who remembered none of this, sat up on the cushion and looked at Otto. Then he sneezed again, a small sneeze that broke nothing, though it knocked the cup off the mantelpiece once more and onto the rug. Otto picked it up and set it on its saucer. It seemed a fair result for an afternoon like that one. He glanced at the sampler over the door. "I shall not be stitching this one on you," he told it.

When Madame Vesper came home at five, she found her tower very quiet and her study very tidy. She stood a long time in the middle of the carpet, sniffing. "It smells," she said at last, "of an afternoon that has been taken apart and put together again." "I only lit the lamp," said Otto. "Three times." "Hmm," said Madame Vesper. She looked at the clock, and at Bismuth, who had a very small sneeze left over, and at her apprentice. For the first time in forty years, she decided to ask nothing at all.

That night, when the tower was dark and the lamp had been put out three times over, Otto lay in bed and listened to the walls tick. Somewhere below him the clock was keeping the right

time, forwards, the way a clock is supposed to. He had a feeling that if you stood in the study doorway at ten past four, you might still hear a word going the wrong way and coming out right. On the pillow beside him, Bismuth turned over in his sleep, and down in the corridor the clock, for just a moment, hesitated.

Questions

1. Why did Otto say "Eldnik" instead of "Kindle"?

A. He read it wrong on a card
B. Bismuth's sneeze startled him
C. Madame Vesper taught it that way

2. What happened when Otto first called "KINDLE!" into the study?

A. The room ran backwards faster
B. The room went back to normal
C. The lamp went out

3. How did the room answer when Otto called "STOP!"?

A. It said nothing
B. It said "POTS!"
C. It said "STOP!" twice

4. Why did saying the wrong word again put the room right?

A. Words in the study came out reversed, so a wrong word arrived right
B. The lamp needed a second try
C. Madame Vesper's sampler was magic

5. When the room "slipped its moorings," it means it

A. broke its window
B. came loose from the normal flow of time
C. grew too small

6. At the end, why did Madame Vesper ask nothing at all?

A. She was too tired
B. She did not notice anything
C. She could tell the afternoon had been mended and chose to leave it

Words to know

dignity: calm pride
counterclockwise: opposite way round
moorings: anchor ropes
sampler: stitched saying
tinny: thin and metallic

Answer key: Otto and the Spell That Counted Backwards

1. B. Bismuth's sneeze startled him
2. A. The room ran backwards faster
3. B. It said "POTS!"
4. A. Words in the study came out reversed, so a wrong word arrived right
5. B. came loose from the normal flow of time
6. C. She could tell the afternoon had been mended and chose to leave it