

ALPHABETTER

A is for Agamid

B is for Beluga

C is for Chittagong...

Well, you know the old games. The Minister's Moose is a Reactionary Moose... I-Spy with my little eye something beginning with Horse... Ape-Emu-Urson-Noctule-Elephant-Tarantula-Agama-...

This, of course, was no game any more. Young Master Axel Palladian Prentice was in real trouble. Trouble he could not even tell his parents about, let alone the Ancient Crone, whose house he was visiting.

This was how it all started. Axel Prentice had been abandoned by his parents with his paternal grandmother for the day, while they went off on some jaunt to the shops. Well, the first five minutes had been quite bearable, until the Ancient Crone, as

she was called by his father (or more respectfully 'Granny' by Axel himself) started to go on about reading aloud and dusting the mantelpiece and sitting with her to look at ancient dog-eared brown and white photographs of his ancestors. Time passed at a snail's pace then, and Axel was horrified to find that he had only been there for quarter of an hour, and still had about 7 hours and 12 minutes to go.

Luckily, just then, one of the Crone's equally ancient cronies had turned up and, after the usual drooling match between them on the plumpness of Axel's checks and a ritual pinching of his ribs to confirm that he was not being fed properly, they left him alone while they got on with a very loud conversation about tradesmen nowadays and how people just got away with anything they wanted and whispered especially about ***Mrs MacInagin from two doors along*** and...

Axel crept away to Grandpa's old bedroom. There was always something interesting in there. The room was as cold as an ice-cave, since the

Crone never went in any more. It was left just as it had been when Grandpa had lived. There were dusty old corners with piles of outlandish books, photographs, old cameras, a chest of drawers with buttons from uniforms, boxes of pencils, out-of-date passports.

This day, Axel P. Prentice came across an old brown parcel, with an address written in faded ink and a stamp with the face of some long-lost king. When he prised apart the string and opened it up, the paper almost fell apart in his hands; the dust got up his nose and made him sneeze. Inside there was a most strange object: a shallow black bowl with the letters of the alphabet embossed in gold around its rim; in the centre a single pointer, like the minute-hand of a clock, was held in place by a golden handle. Etched into the top of the handle were some tiny characters. He peered and puzzled over them, and eventually made out the words

*This is the magic
ajbyaqeffel*

but could not understand them. ‘This is the magic...?’ The magic ajbyaqeffel? What on earth was an ajbyaqeffel? What did it do? He was about to give up and return the object to its parcel when he suddenly realised that the strange word was in fact

alphabetter

upside down and back to front. ‘The magic alphabetter? This sounded more promising.

Axel twiddled with the handle, then pressed it down. With a spark and a whirr, the pointer suddenly started whirling around and around, like a compass-needle gone mad. Round and round it went. Axel watched, fascinated. From through in

the living room he could hear the ancient ones getting worked up about something.

Then, gradually, the pointer slowed down and the whirring noise lessened. At last, with a clatter, the pointer came to rest, firmly fixed to the rim at the

letter **P**. And then there was silence. Not much magic there, then. Axel was disappointed. He turned away to find something more interesting, when something caught his eye on top of his grandpa's desk. It was a white bird, plump, its neck stretched out like some fat snake, its beady eye examining him. Luckily for Axel, who was hopeless at naming birds, his grandpa had a picture of a Ptarmigan hanging on the wall; and now here was one in the feather.

It was difficult to tell who was more surprised – Axel or the ptarmigan. (My money is on the ptarmigan). They studied each other for some minutes, neither daring to move. Amongst all the thoughts rapidly coursing through the boy's mind, he suddenly remembered the word 'magic'. Slowly

his hand reached down and he pressed the golden handle again. Again the pointer raced and whirred. As it did so, the ptarmigans started up and flew off out of the window.

This time the pointer came to rest on the letter **C**. Axel cautiously looked around. Nothing on the desk. Nothing on the bookshelves or hanging from the hook at the back of the door. Nothing except a huge fish in the aquarium which had apparently been lodged next to the bed. This fish was one of which Axel had seen pictures in the museum: a Coelacanth. Its gills and mouth worked away, obviously a little put out to find itself in a tank.

Axel pressed the handle again. The coelacanth in its tank vanished as if into a cloud and finally with

a clatter, **L** llama appeared from behind the curtains tossing its head nervously. Before it could eat the bedspread, as it seemed inclined to do, Axel's hand came down sharply, and the pointer stopped against **R** , at which point a huge brown

rat scuttled under the desk, up the bookshelves, and sat preening its whiskers beside a dusty old dictionary. The next revolution of the pointer ushered in a **B** Bison, whose huge bulk made the floorboards creak and set a cloud of flies buzzing.

Rapidly, Axel shooed it off, but the replacement **M** for mammoth was even worse. Sweat pouring from his brow, the boy pressed down on the alphabetter again and again, before feeling that the giant turtle – which was fast asleep and almost invisible in the huge dark leather armchair – was an acceptable place to pause for thought.

Not a moment too soon. His grandmother came hobbling down the passage and poked her head round the door: ‘Do you want your milk and biscuit now, Axel? Come and get it in the kitchen’. Luckily, she did not notice the recent addition to the household. Axel breathed a sigh of relief – even she could not have missed the gnu, or the elephant-seal; and what she would have said about

the anaconda did not bear thinking about! Meekly he followed her into the kitchen to retrieve his elevenses, and then retired once more to puzzle it out.

If every turn of the magic alphabetter created a new beast, and the beast stayed until the next turn, he had two choices: either to keep the magic object spinning until it came to an animal he could smuggle out of his grandmother's flat without her noticing, or until it lighted on an animal he could safely leave in the bedroom. Either way, it would have to be small and easily hidden or smuggled. So far he had not had much luck – the smallest had been the giant rat, the most docile and hide-able had been the three-toed sloth. But neither of those really fitted the bill. Was he going to have to spend the rest of his days with this infernal device? Or would he strike lucky sometime soon?

From through the thin walls of the flat, he could hear the two old ladies droning on and on, talking about completely different things since both of

them were hard of hearing. Axel applied himself once more to the alphabetter.

N brought a narwhal, whose tusk threatened to destroy the curtains.

D ushered in a dodo, which was all very interesting, since a live one had not been seen walking the planet for many years. But it left messes on the carpet, and Axel could not hide it under his coat. Even if he got it onto the bus, could he smuggle it into the zoo without some busybody stopping him and asking awkward questions?

The Yak came, of course.

Then a rather dopey-looking Lemur.

A Musk-ox.

It went on. The light outside was beginning to fade, but not – apparently – the strength of the alphabetter.

Would the ancient crone settle for a Crane standing in her hallway like a hat-stand? If he left

the Wolf here, would it eat her up, and then maybe Axel could get away with some implausible tale about having met it on his way here?

Night fell. But Axel was locked into the spell of the alphabetter, which spun and spun and spun...

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