

Tom's Midnight Garden

by Philippa Pearce

Slow silence, and then the grandfather clock struck for twelve. By midnight his uncle and aunt were always in bed, and asleep too, usually. Only Tom lay still open-eyed and sullen, imprisoned in wakefulness.

And at last – One! The clock struck the present hour; but, as if to show its independence of mind, went on striking – Two! For once Tom was not amused by its striking the wrong hour: Three! Four! 'It's one o'clock,' Tom whispered angrily over the edge of the bedclothes. 'Why don't you strike one o'clock, then, as the clocks would do at home?' Instead: Five! Six! Even in his irritation, Tom could not stop counting; it had become a habit with him at night. Seven! Eight! After all, the clock was the only thing that would speak to him at all in these hours of darkness. Nine! Ten! 'You are going it,' thought Tom, but yawning in the midst of his unwilling admiration. Yes, and it hadn't finished yet: Eleven! Twelve! 'Fancy striking midnight twice in one night!' jeered Tom, sleepily. Thirteen! proclaimed the clock, and then stopped striking. Thirteen? Tom's mind gave a jerk: had it really struck thirteen? Even mad old clocks never struck that. He must have imagined it.

'But it just can't be true,' said Tom aloud. The house, which appeared to have been following the argument, sighed impatiently. 'At least, I think it isn't true; and anyway it's muddling.' Meanwhile you're missing your chance, whispered the house. 'I can't honourably take it,' said Tom, 'because I don't believe the grandfather clock was telling the truth when it struck thirteen.'

Oh, said the house coldly, so it's a liar, is it?

Tom sat up in bed, a little angry in his turn. 'Now,' he said, 'I'm going to prove this, one way or the other. I'm going to see what the clock fingers say. I'm going down the hall.'