CHAPTER ONE

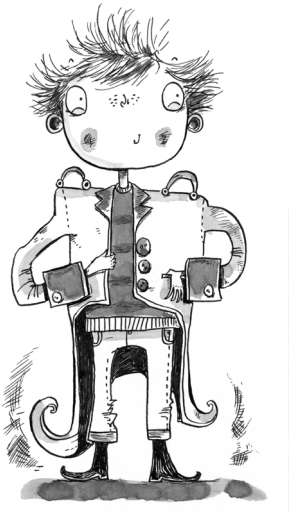
in which the hero is introduced and in which he is described

There are many boys in the world, all slightly different from one another, and most of them are referred to by names. These are often John or Jack or Desmond, but sometimes they are James or Philip or Simon. Once, and once only, there was a boy whose name was Fizzlebert. (In actual fact, because, like most boys, he had a surname that came

after the Fizzlebert bit, he was known in full (for example, when someone was cross with him) as Fizzlebert Stump.) Most often he was just called Fizz.

So that you can get an idea of what this particular boy looked like, I'll tell you that he had unruly red hair. (To be fair, most boys have unruly hair, but only the especially brilliant ones have red hair.) He wasn't short for his height, and he knew how to juggle four balls at once, though not for very long. Usually he wore jeans and a t-shirt like most kids, but over the top he pulled on an old coat that the circus Ringmaster had outgrown. (Did I mention Fizz lived in a circus?) It was red with brass buttons, unpolished now, and in the rear it dangled down to the backs of his knees. It fitted pretty well because his

mother had taken it in at the waist and shortened the sleeves, but the shoulders with their gold brocade epaulettes were still a bit broad on him. To my mind (and to Fizzlebert's) it made him look dashing, but to most people it looked a bit . . . well, shall we say, silly?



Fizzlebert's mother was a clown. That's not to say she messed about and made jokes

all the time (although she did), but rather that her job, the thing she was paid to do, was being a clown. The sort with a painted face, big trousers, long shoes, a bucket of white-wash, a ladder and an unfortunate sense of timing.

It was because his mother was a clown that Fizz lived in a circus. And also probably why he was called Fizzlebert, which is the sort of name only a clown would think of.

His father, on the other hand, was the circus strongman. A strongman is a chap who dresses up in a little leopardskin off-the-shoulder loincloth outfit, twirls his pointy oiled black moustache and lifts things up above his head to the marvelling applause of the audience. These things are usually awfully heavy things (the heavier the better), such as

great weights or huge boulders or bemused sea lions or particularly fat children from out of the audience who have been volunteered by their parents who believe such experiences are 'character building'. Occasionally he tried doing the act while lifting up smaller things, such as bunches of flowers, handkerchiefs or imaginary balloons, but the audience's reaction on those nights was never quite the same as when he picked up a child in one hand and a cannonball in the other, and started juggling them while whistling and dancing the cancan. (The cancan is a dance from France that involves kicking each of your legs up in the air one after the other. The best way to get the idea is to ask your parents or some other suitable grownup to demonstrate. There, see? Got it now? Super. I'll continue.)

Where have we got to?

There's a boy and he lives in a circus. What could possibly be wrong with this life?

Wrong? Why should something be wrong? Aha, well, here's something interesting about a story: if everything is alright, then there *is* no story: it's just a happy boy with happy parents. It's a good thing, for sure, of course, without

doubt, but it's not particularly exciting. So, let me share a secret with you . . .

Fizzlebert wasn't happy.

What? Living in a circus, getting to join in with the acts when they needed help? Hanging out backstage with clowns and acrobats and jugglers, with conjurors and fire-eaters and trapeze artistes, with escapologists and magicians and beautiful girls in sequins who ride the white horses with dazzling feathered headdresses, with performing parrots and dancing dogs and prancing ponies all jumping through flaming hoops at the poot of their trainer's whistle? Getting to travel from place to place with the whole gang, waking up in a different town each day? How could he not enjoy that? The excitement! The thrills! The magic! The thrills! The excitement! (And so on!)

Well, truth be told, he wasn't very happy because there weren't any other kids living in his circus. He was the only one. His best friend was a sea lion. And not only are sea lions unable to play cards (instead of hands they have flippers, which are rubbish at picking things up) and are even worse at playing catch (they never throw the ball back, just balance it on their nose), but they're also lousy conversationalists. And they smell of fish.

And so this introduction opens (eventually) with Fizzlebert Stump sat out the back of the Big Top late one evening looking dolefully (which means sadly, miserably, gloomily and also slightly boredly) at a sea lion who has just burped a tuna-flavoured burp in poor Fizzlebert's face. And that's also where the

introduction closes, now that you've met the hero.

Let's hope the rest of the story gets more exciting.