

THE DUEL: The Final Challenge

by Simon Cooke

It's my daily inventing lesson at Grandpa Sid's house, and as usual, he's distracted. Ever since he got the challenge from Baron von Spanner, his mind has been elsewhere. He doesn't even notice when my latest invention – a super-strong glue I've named Sticker Strongo – accidentally sticks his coffee mug to the table.

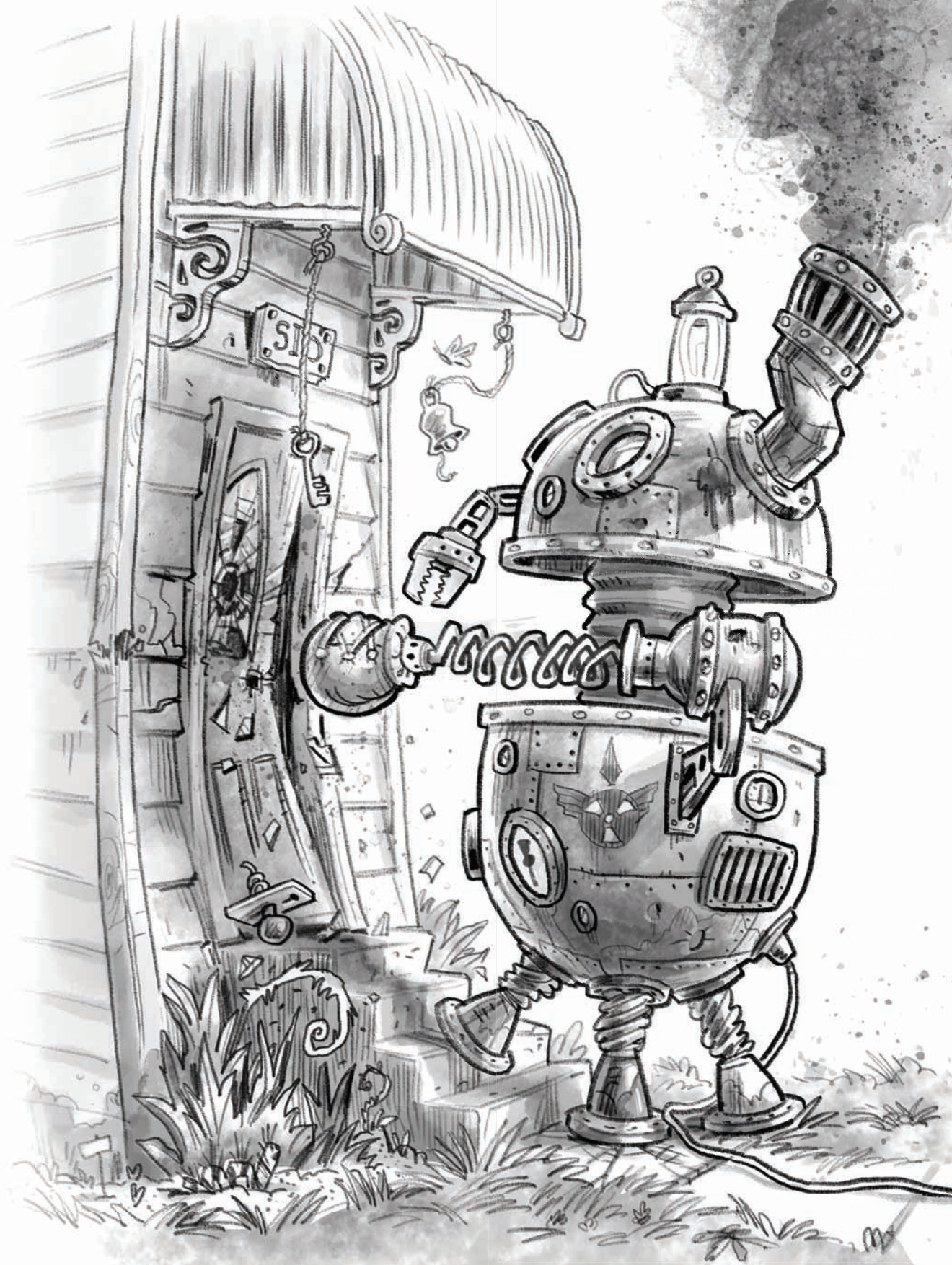


But he *does* notice the loud banging on the front door. That's because the whole house is shaking.

"There's only one thing that can make a racket like that," says Grandpa Sid.

"A rhinoceros delivering pizza?" I ask.

"No, Baron von Spanner's Thump-u-lator. He invented it for people too lazy to do their own door knocking. But like all his inventions, there are unfortunate side effects. If the door isn't opened in five seconds ..."



And there, right before me, stands the evil inventor himself. Grandpa Sid's nemesis. "I am Baron von Spanner," he announces. "Inventor of colds and tears and the colour grey. Inventor of prickles and stings and unscratchable itches." He grins like a shark that's just smelt blood.

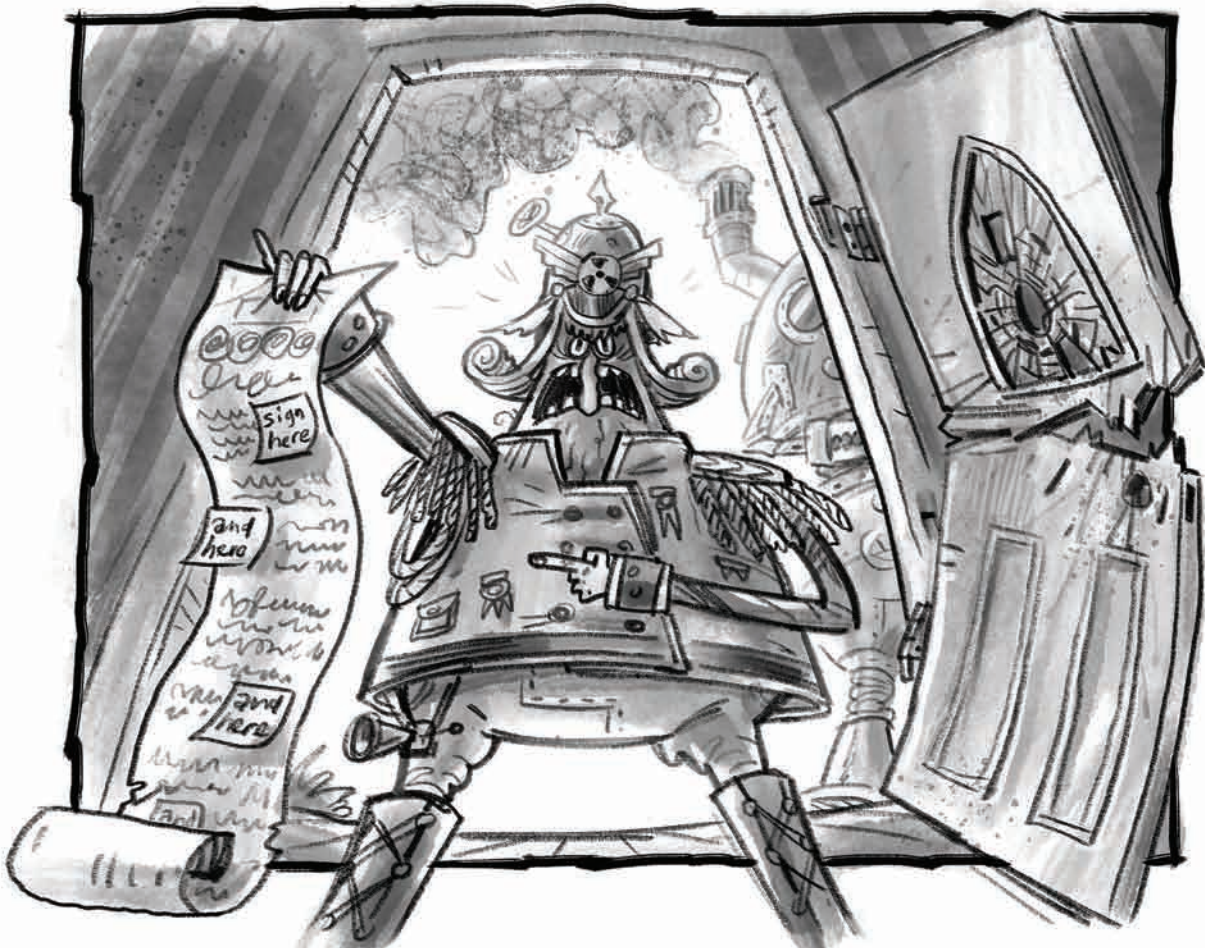
"And you are?"

"I'm Emma. I'm an inventor, just like Grandpa Sid."

"Just like Grandpa Sid?" he says. "How very dull." Von Spanner turns to Grandpa Sid. "You've been expecting me. I am here to finish what we started. The final challenge, winner takes all. The loser will never invent again. Agreed?"

Grandpa Sid nods. You'd think he'd be angry, wouldn't you? But instead, he's like a man who has lost a friend and can't figure out why.

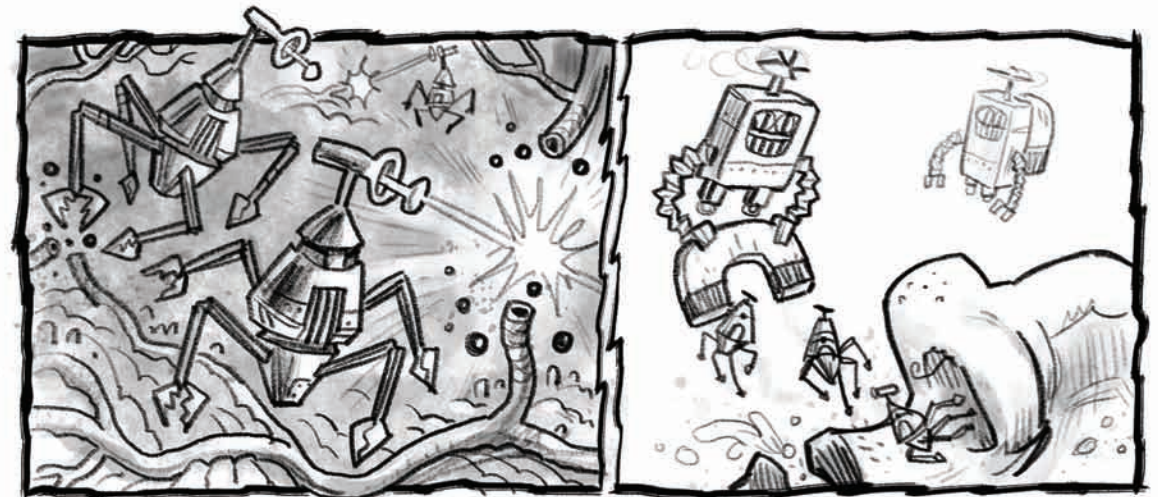
"Good." Von Spanner looks pleased. "Now this is the official duelling contract," he says. "Sign here."



The rules are simple. Baron von Spanner has to invent something, and Grandpa Sid has twenty-four hours to counter it with his own creation. If Grandpa Sid can't do it, he loses. If he can, they swap over: Grandpa Sid has to invent something, and von Spanner has twenty-four hours to neutralise it ... On and on it goes until one of them can't thwart the other.

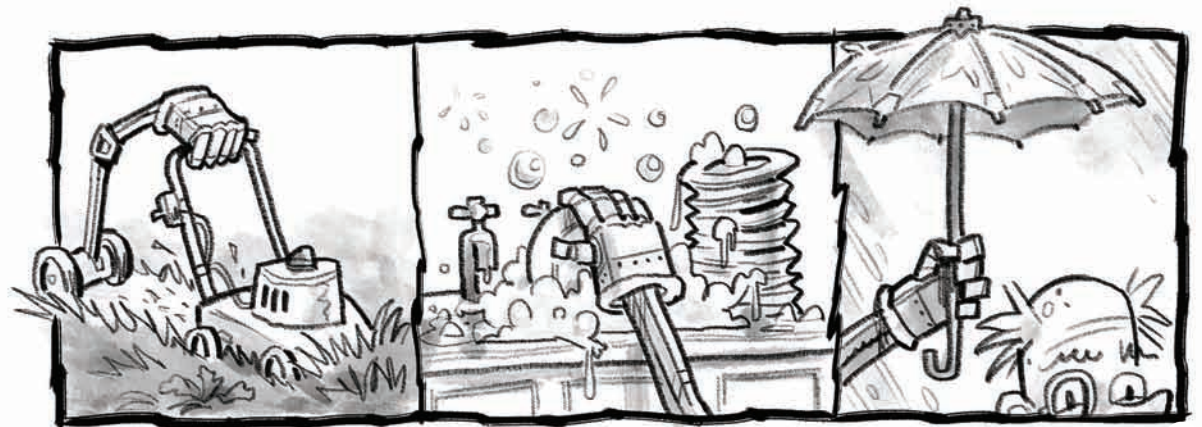
I signal the start of the duel with a drumroll. Grandpa Sid invented drumrolls. He also invented clapping and cheering. I'm going to do all those things when he wins.

Round 1: Baron von Spanner's first invention is Sick-o-bots – microscopic nasties that travel through the body causing chaos.



Grandpa Sid makes Well-o-bots. They use magnets to pull the Sick-o-bots out of the nose.

Round 2: Grandpa Sid invents the Helping Hand.



In no time, Baron von Spanner has created his own version: the Hindering Hand.



Round 3: Baron von Spanner invents a ... um. It's definitely a ... no, hang on, it's not. Actually, I have no idea what it is, apart from the obvious. And it turns out that neither does Grandpa Sid, apart from the obvious.

"It's a big red button," he says. "But what for?"

"I don't know, but we have twenty-four hours to find out," I say.

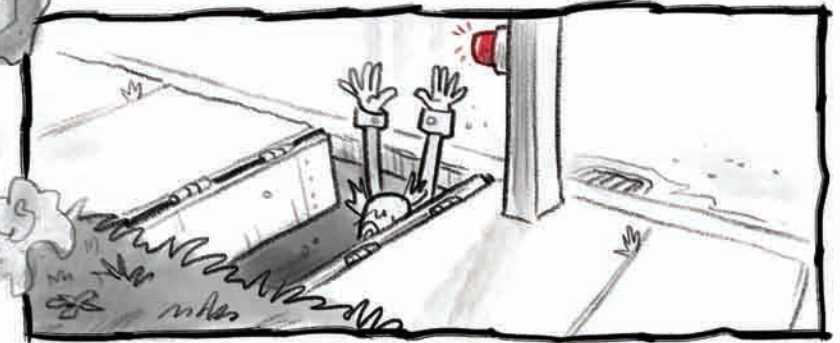
"Actually twenty-three," says Grandpa Sid, consulting his watch.

The big red button is on a lamp post outside Grandpa Sid's house. We search for a clue ... anything ... that will help us to figure out what it's for. We take scans and readings with every measuring device under the sun. Nothing works.

"If we don't know what it does, how can we invent something to beat it?" I wail.



"You'll never figure it out!" gloats Baron von Spanner. "Your only option is to push the button – and by then, it'll be too late. And if *you* don't push it, someone else will. It's human nature. All big red buttons must be pushed, even if nine times out of ten, they do something nasty like ..."



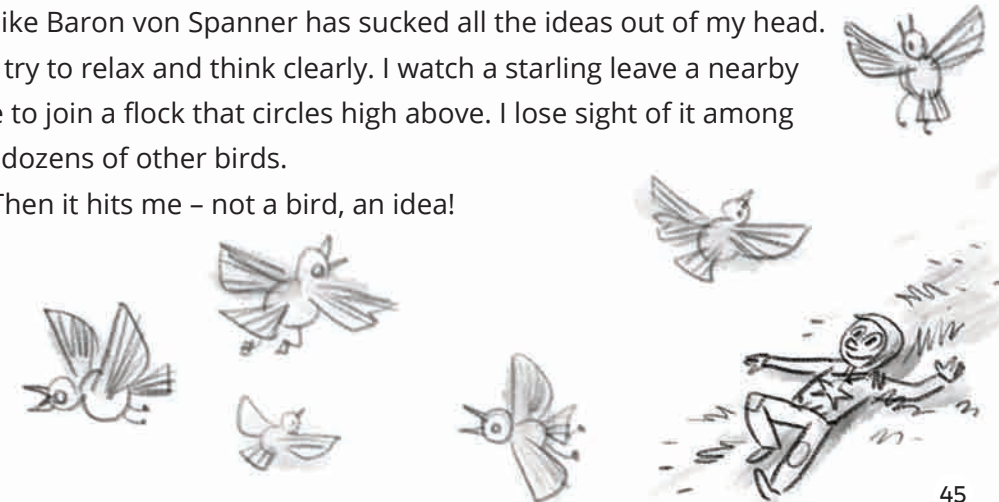
"Haa-hah!" cackles Baron von Spanner. "I've got you this time!" He roars off gleefully, leaving a black cloud of exhaust fumes.

Grandpa Sid turns to me. I don't like the look on his face. "This is serious, Emma," he says. "I need inspiration, and I need it now! I'm going to my thinking room. I need to be alone."

As Grandpa Sid's newly appointed apprentice, I'm feeling the pressure. I need to think, too. I lie down on the lawn and look up at the sky. This usually helps, but not today. Today there's nothing. It's like Baron von Spanner has sucked all the ideas out of my head.

I try to relax and think clearly. I watch a starling leave a nearby tree to join a flock that circles high above. I lose sight of it among the dozens of other birds.

Then it hits me – not a bird, an idea!



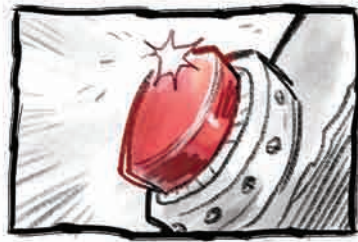
I run inside to tell Grandpa Sid. "Remember rule number one?" I ask him. The three fundamental rules of invention were the first things Grandpa Sid taught me, and he nods straight away. As I explain my premise, he starts to smile. It goes like this:



This is a bird.



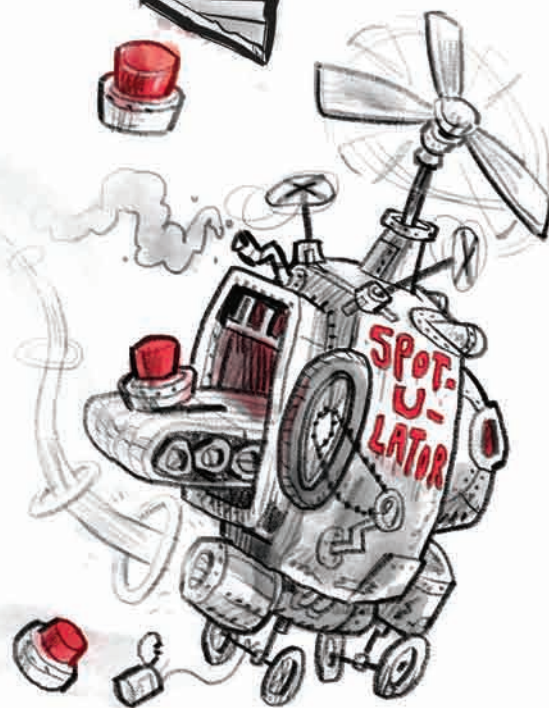
And this is a bird in a flock of birds.



This is Baron von Spanner's big red button.

And **THIS** would be Grandpa Sid's invention, a Spot-u-lator, creating big red buttons all over the place. Try spotting von Spanner's button among this lot!

Grandpa Sid and I spend the night in his inventing room. We finish the Spot-u-lator in the nick of time. As we stand back to admire our handiwork, the sky fills with choking exhaust. Baron von Spanner has returned, and he's so furious he crashes into a tree.



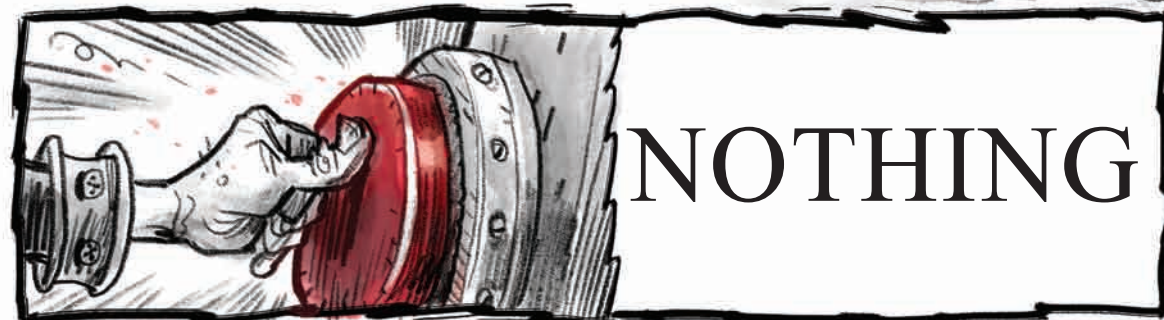
"What have you done?" he yells.

Grandpa Sid grins. "Everything and nothing. All *my* big red buttons are absolutely pointless. People might press one or two, but then they'll stop. After all, why push buttons that don't respond?"

Baron von Spanner fumes. I think there's even smoke coming out of his ears. "But I know which one is my button," he growls, although it's obvious he's bluffing. "I'll push it myself!"

"Fine," says Grandpa Sid, "but you only get one chance. Fair?"

Baron von Spanner grumbles and nods. And what happens next is this:



Baron von Spanner stares daggers at Grandpa Sid.

"The duel is over," Grandpa Sid says. "Go and never return."

Baron von Spanner looks like he's going to explode, and then suddenly ... he's gone, just like that. Grandpa Sid has won! He gives me the biggest-ever victory hug, followed by a high-five.





We're celebrating with a cup of tea and Anzac biscuits when the phone rings. "That's probably the mayor wanting to congratulate us for beating Baron von Spanner," says Grandpa Sid proudly.

But he's wrong. It seems the mayor isn't happy about her town being covered in big red buttons. She says it looks like a case of chicken pox. And the mayor isn't the only one who's displeased.



illustrations by Gavin Mouldey

"Don't worry, Emma," says Grandpa Sid.
"I have a couple of inventions perfectly suited to situations like this."
"What are they, Grandpa Sid?" I ask.
"Disguises and long, relaxing holidays in far-off places," he replies, grinning.

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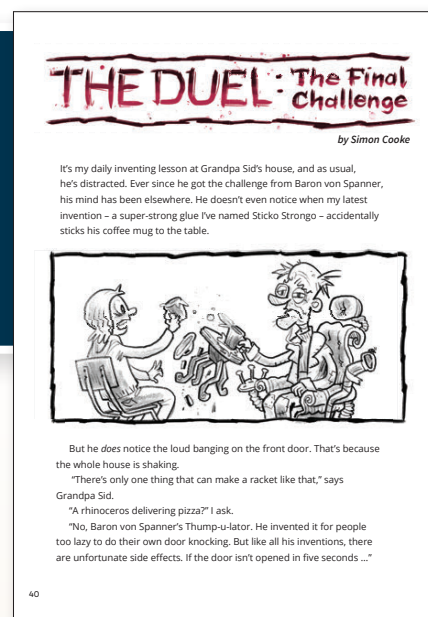
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