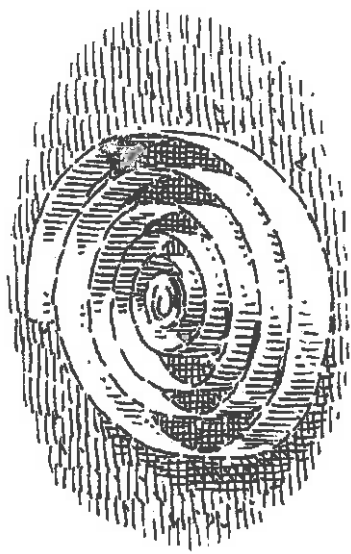

CLOCKWORK: A PREFACE



In the old days, when this story took place, time used to run by clockwork. Real clockwork, I mean, springs and cogwheels and gears and pendulums and so on. When you took it apart you could see how it worked, and how to put it together again. Nowadays, time runs by electricity and vibrating crystals of quartz and goodness knows what else. You can even buy a watch that's powered by a solar panel, and sets itself several times a day by picking up a radio signal, and never runs a second late. Clocks and watches like that might as well work by witchcraft for all the sense I can make of them.

Real clockwork is quite mysterious enough. Take a spring, for instance, like the mainspring

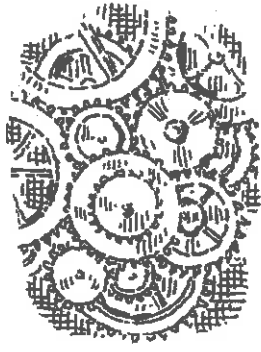
of an alarm clock. It's made of tempered steel, with an edge that's sharp enough to draw blood. If you play about with it carelessly it'll spring up and strike at you like a snake, and put out your eye. Or take a weight, the kind of iron weight that drives the mighty clocks they have in church towers. If your head were under that weight, and if the weight fell, it would dash out your brains on the floor.

But with the help of a few gears and pins, and a little balance wheel oscillating to and fro, or a pendulum swinging from side to side, the strength of the spring and the power of the weight are led harmlessly through the clock to drive the hands.

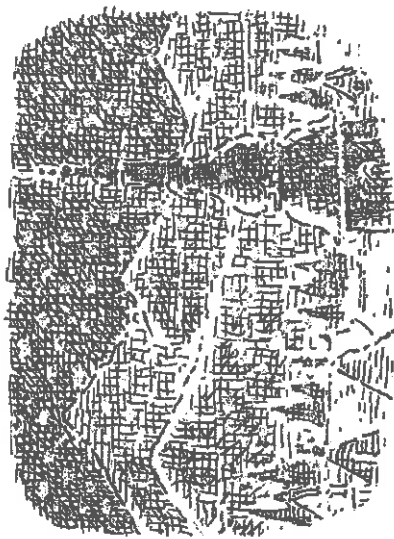
And once you've wound up a clock, there's something frightful in the way it keeps on going at its own relentless pace. Its hands move steadily round the dial as if they had a mind of their own. Tick, tock, tick, tock! Bit by bit they move, and tick us steadily on towards the grave.

Some stories are like that. Once you've wound them up, nothing will stop them; they move on forwards till they reach their destined

end, and no matter how much the characters would like to change their fate, they can't. This is one of those stories. And now it's all wound up, we can begin.



PART ONE



Once upon a time (when time ran by clockwork), a strange event took place in a little German town. Actually, it was a series of events, all fitting together like the parts of a clock, and although each person saw a different part, no-one saw the whole of it; but here it is, as well as I can tell it.

It began on a winter's evening, when the townsfolk were gathering in the White Horse Tavern. The snow was blowing down from the mountains, and the wind was making the bells shift restlessly in the church tower. The windows were steamed up, the stove was blazing brightly, Putzi the old black cat was snoozing

on the hearth; and the air was full of the rich smells of sausage and sauerkraut, of tobacco and beer. Gretl the little barmaid, the landlord's daughter, was hurrying to and fro with foaming mugs and steaming plates.

The door opened, and fat white flakes of snow swirled in, to faint away into water as they met the heat of the parlour. The incomers, Herr Ringelmann the clockmaker and his apprentice Karl, stamped their boots and shook the snow off their greatcoats.

'It's Herr Ringelmann!' said the Burgomaster. 'Well, old friend, come and drink some beer with me! And a mug for young what's his name, your apprentice.'

Karl the apprentice nodded his thanks and went to sit by himself in a corner. His expression was dark and gloomy.

'What's the matter with young thingamajig?' said the Burgomaster. 'He looks as if he's swallowed a thundercloud.'

'Oh, I shouldn't worry,' said the old clockmaker, sitting down at the table with his friends. 'He's anxious about tomorrow. His

apprenticeship is coming to an end, you see.'

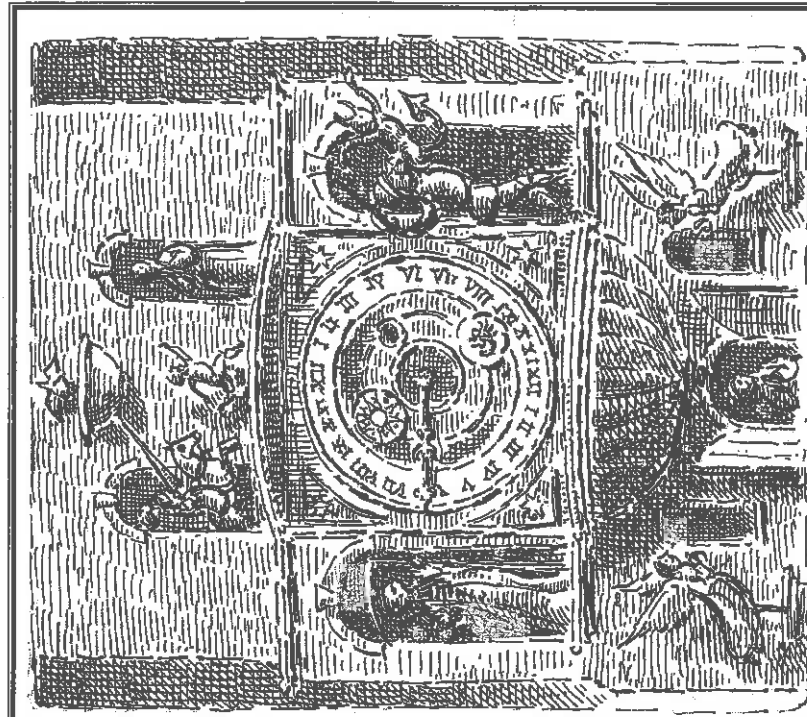
'Ah, of course!' said the Burgomaster. It was the custom that when a clockmaker's apprentice finished his period of service, he made a new figure for the great clock of Glockenheim. 'So we're to have a new piece of clockwork in the tower! Well, I look forward to seeing it tomorrow.'

'I remember when my apprenticeship came to an end,' said Herr Ringelmann. 'I couldn't sleep for thinking about what would happen when my figure came out of the clock. Supposing I hadn't counted the cogs properly? Supposing the spring was too stiff? Supposing — oh, a thousand things go through your mind. It's a heavy responsibility.'

'Maybe so, but I've never seen the lad look so gloomy before,' said someone else. 'And he's not a cheerful fellow at the best of times.'

And it seemed to the other drinkers that Herr Ringelmann himself was a little down-hearted, but he raised his mug with the rest of them and changed the conversation to another topic.

'I hear young Fritz the novelist is going to



THE GREAT CLOCK OF GLOCKENHEIM WAS THE MOST AMAZING PIECE OF MACHINERY IN THE WHOLE OF GERMANY. IF YOU WANTED TO SEE ALL THE FIGURES YOU WOULD HAVE TO WATCH IT FOR A WHOLE YEAR, BECAUSE THE MECHANISM WAS SO COMPLEX THAT IT TOOK TWELVE MONTHS TO COMPLETE ITS MOVEMENT. THERE WERE ALL THE SAINTS, EACH COMING OUT ON THEIR OWN DAY; THERE WAS DEATH, WITH HIS SCYTHE AND HOURGLASS; THERE WERE OVER A HUNDRED FIGURES ALTOGETHER. HERR RINGELMANN WAS IN CHARGE OF IT ALL. THERE NEVER WAS A CLOCK LIKE IT, I PROMISE.

read us his new story tonight,' he said.

'So I believe,' said the Burgomaster. 'I hope it's not as terrifying as the last one he read to us. D'you know, I woke three times that night and found my hair on end, just thinking about it!'

'I don't know if it's more frightening hearing them here in the parlour, or reading them later on your own,' said someone else.

'It's worse on your own, believe me,' said another. 'You can feel the ghostly fingers creeping up your spine, and even when you know what's going to happen next you can't help jumping when it does.'

Then they argued about whether it was more terrifying to hear a ghost story when you didn't know what was going to happen (because it took you by surprise) or when you did (because there was the suspense of waiting for it). They all enjoyed ghost stories, and Fritz's in particular, for he was a talented storyteller.

The subject of their conversation, Fritz the writer himself, was a cheerful-looking young man who had been eating his supper at the other end

of the parlour. He joked with the landlord, he laughed with his neighbours, and when he'd finished, he called for another mug of beer, gathered up the untidy pile of manuscript beside his plate, and went to talk to Karl.

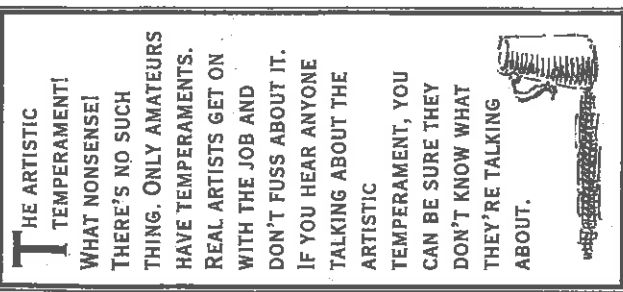
'Hello, old boy,' he said cheerfully. 'All set for tomorrow? I'm looking forward to it! What are you going to show us?'

Karl scowled and turned away.

'The artistic temperament,' said the landlord wisely. 'Drink up your beer, and have another on the house, in honour of tomorrow.'

'Put poison in, and I'll drink it then,' muttered Karl.

'What?' said Fritz, who could hardly believe his ears. The two of them were sitting right at the end of the bar, and Fritz moved so as to turn his back on the rest of the company and speak to Karl in private. 'What's the matter, old



fellow?' he went on quietly. 'You've been working at your masterpiece for months! Surely you're not worried about it? It can't fail!'

Karl looked at him with a face full of savage bitterness.

'I haven't made a figure,' he muttered. 'I couldn't do it. I've failed, Fritz. The clock will chime tomorrow, and everyone will be looking up to see what I've done, and nothing will come out, nothing ...' He groaned softly, and turned away. 'I can't face them!' he went on. 'I should go and throw myself off the tower now and have done with it!'

'Oh, come on, don't talk like that!' said Fritz, who had never seen his friend so bitter. 'You must have a word with old Herr Ringelmann - ask his advice - tell him you've hit a snag - he's a decent old fellow, he'll help you out!'

'You don't understand,' said Karl passionately. 'Everything's so easy for you! You just sit at your desk and put pen to paper, and stories come pouring out! You don't know what it is to sweat and strain for hours on end with no ideas at all, or to struggle with materials that break, and

tools that go blunt, or to tear your hair out trying to find a new variation on the same old theme – I tell you, Fritz, it's a wonder I haven't blown my brains out long before this! Well, it won't be long now. Tomorrow morning you can all laugh at me. Karl, the failure. Karl, the hopeless. Karl, the first apprentice to fail in hundreds of years of clockmaking. I don't care. I shall be lying at the bottom of the river, under the ice.'

Fritz had had to stop himself interrupting when Karl spoke about the difficulty of working. Stories are just as hard as clocks to put together, and they can go wrong just as easily – as we shall see with Fritz's own story in a page or two. Still, Fritz was an optimist, and Karl was a pessimist, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Putzi the cat, waking from his snooze on the hearth, came and rubbed his back against Karl's legs. Karl kicked him savagely away.

'Steady on,' said Fritz.

But Karl only scowled. He drank deeply and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before banging the mug on the counter and

calling for more. Gretl the young barmaid looked anxiously at Fritz, because she was only a child, and wasn't sure whether she should be serving someone in Karl's condition.

'Give him some more,' said Fritz. 'He's not drunk, poor fellow, he's unhappy. I'll keep an eye on him, don't you worry.'

So Gretl poured some more beer for Karl, and the clockmaker's apprentice scowled and turned away. Fritz was worried about him, but he couldn't stay there any longer, because the patrons were calling for him.

'Come on, Fritz! Where's that story?'

'Sing for your supper! Come on! We're all waiting!'

'What's it about this time, eh? Skeletons, or ghosts?'

'I hope it's a nice bloody murder!'

'No, I hear he's got something quite different for us this time. Something quite new.'

'I've got a feeling it's going to be more horrible than anything we could imagine,' said old Johann the woodcutter.

While the drinkers ordered more mugs of beer

to see them through the story, and filled their pipes and settled themselves comfortably, Fritz gathered up his manuscript and took up his place by the stove.

To tell the truth, Fritz was less comfortable himself than he had ever been before at one of these storytelling evenings, because of what Karl had just told him, and because of the theme of his story — of the start of it, anyway. But after all, it wasn't about Karl. The subject was really quite different.

(There was another private reason for Fritz to be nervous. The fact was, he hadn't actually finished the story. He'd written the start all right, and it was terrific, but he hadn't been able to think of an ending. He was just going to wind up the story, set it going, and make up the end when he got there. As I said just now, he was an optimist.)

'We're all ready and waiting,' said the Burgomaster. 'I'm looking forward to this story, even if it does make my hair stand on end. What's it called?'

'It's called —' said Fritz, with a nervous

glance at Karl — 'it's called "Clockwork".' 'Ah! Very appropriate!' cried old Herr Ringelmann. 'Did you hear that, Karl? This is a story in your honour, my boy!'

Karl scowled and looked down at the floor.

'No, no,' said Fritz hastily, 'this story isn't about Karl, or the clock in our town, no, not at all. It's quite different. It just happens to be called "Clockwork".'

'Well, set it going,' said someone. 'We're all ready.'

So Fritz cleared his throat and arranged his papers and began to read.

FRITZ'S STORY

'I wonder if any of you remember the extraordinary business at the palace a few years ago? They tried to hush it up, but some details came out, and a bizarre mystery it was, too. It seems that Prince Otto had taken his young son Florian hunting, together with an old friend of the royal family, Baron Stelgratz. It was the dead of winter — just like now. They'd set off in a sledge for the hunting lodge up in the moun-