Tales of Tickton and Tockville



The Case of the Missing Morning

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The Case of the Missing Morning

In the tiny hamlet of Tickton, deep in a valley between the hills and the River Meridian, morning usually arrived with great regularity. It happened each and every day, in fact, not long after dawn and quite a few hours before dusk, and lasted until midday. Normally, you could rely on the morning with absolute certainty.

Always, at precisely eight o’clock, the bell of St. Chronos Church rang out across the valley. Its chimes rolled over the hedgerows, echoed through the trees, bounced off the windows of Longcase Manor, and drifted all the way down to the River Meridian. Everyone in Tickton depended on it to start their day.

The whole village needed to set itself right, just in case anyone had slowed down or speeded up in the night, because, you see, the villagers of Tickton were a most unusual lot; every single inhabitant of the village was a timepiece – they were clocks, watches, sundials, water clocks – all manner of time-telling devices.

It was Monday. Everyone was sure of that; the sun had come up, after all. The ducks on the river woke up. The roses in the vicarage garden reached up, stretched their petals and opened themselves to the sun. Father Thyme, the vicar, strolled into his churchyard, took a deep breath of fresh air and nodded cheerfully to the verger, Re Peter, who was making his way from his little cottage at the end of the drive.


ST.
CHRONOS

On this particular Monday morning, though, something seemed to be wrong. Everything

looked

perfectly normal. The village green was still where it had been when the village had gone to bed. The grass was bright with dew as usual. The benches were waiting beneath the great oak tree, as they had done for years. The sign outside the Moving Hands swung gently in the breeze. It seemed to be just a normal day in Tickton.

But something was different. Father Thyme couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew something was different.

"Nice and quiet," he said to Re Peter.

"Quiet," the verger agreed. "Quiet."

Re Peter always said everything twice. Father Thyme was quite used to that. He knew that Re Peter's reply would be two 'Quiet's.

But then – "That's it," he said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "Of course! It's TOO quiet!" He looked up at the clock tower. "There have been no chimes!"

Sure enough, the clock's hands showed two minutes past eight, but of the sound of the bell there had been no sign.

At Longcase Manor Lord Longcase was in the morning room, standing straight and tall as usual. He glanced out of the French window that overlooked Tickton Green. “That’s strange,” he mused.

“What is?” asked his daughter, Klepsydra, who was leafing through yesterday’s copy of the Tickton Times, as today’s, most unusually, had not yet been delivered.

“The bell,” his lordship answered. “The curious incident of the bell in the daytime.”

“What curious incident of the bell in the daytime?” she asked.

“It did not ring,” he explained.

Klepsydra gasped and clutched at her pearls. “This cannot be!’ she cried. “The church bell details the course of our lives; it defines our days. We can neither rise nor retire without its regular punctuation of our hours! This is a wrong that must be righted!”


TICKTON TIMES

“Perhaps I had better look into the matter,” said Lord Longcase.

The lord and his daughter walked together down to the church, where they arrived just after Colonel Half-Hunter, who had hurried across from the Old Manse.

“Dashed odd,” the colonel observed. “It’s gone eight o’clock, and eight o’clock has not gone.”

“Very unusual,” agreed Longcase. “What time is it now?” He peered closely at the colonel’s moustache, which told him it was twelve minutes past eight.

The two men turned to the vicar. “Father Thyme,” said Longcase, “will you be so kind as to explain what you have done with eight o’clock?”



“I have neither seen nor heard it,” the vicar protested.

“Nor has anyone else,” said the colonel. “You have lost an hour.”

“Lost it, lost it,” muttered Re Peter.

“Perhaps,” put in Klepsydra, “eight o’clock is not lost, but simply unavoidably delayed. Poor hour, it must be terribly confused.”

“Or,” said the colonel heavily, “it has been stolen.”

All five stood in shocked silence for a moment as this thought sank in, and then, as one, they all said a single word. “Pocket.”

Re Peter could not restrain himself. “Pocket,” he repeated.

It has to be said that almost every petty crime in Tickton was likely to be laid at the door of Pocket.

It was almost a tradition of the village that suspicion of every minor misdemeanour should automatically fall on him. In fact, even if suspicion had not fallen on Pocket he would almost certainly have tripped over it, as indeed he did with temptation, which frequently lay in his path. He was small and insignificant, but he was able to carry a heavy weight of suspicion.

The five villagers marched down to Pocket's little hut, which lay in a side lane off Tickton's main street. To their surprise, when they knocked on the door he opened it fully dressed; normally he was known to be a late riser.

"Why are you up at eight o'clock?" the colonel asked suspiciously.

"I don't know," answered Pocket. "That's a silly riddle. Why am I a potato clock?"

"Don't try to be clever with me," warned Lord Longcase, "or the police shall hear of it."

"They don't need to hear of it," Pocket replied. "They already know I am clever."



“My son,” said Father Thyme in an attempt to dissolve the tension, “have you stolen...no, let us say, borrowed eight o’clock from the church tower?”

“No I have not,” asserted Pocket. “Do you honestly think that I would be bothered taking a single hour? No, if I wanted to take time I’d take as many as I could.”

“He does have a point, Father,” Klepsydra pointed out. “I mean, Pocket doesn’t do things by half...”

“Quite right. Miss,” Pocket said. “People are always wasting time. They spend it as if it were money. They spend an hour here and waste an hour there and the next thing you know they have no time left for anything. ‘There’s no time!’, they shout, or ‘I haven’t got time!’, and run about all excited, telling everyone ‘We’re losing time’. So, if I had an inclination to steal some time, I’d take as much as I could manage. I’d take all day if I could; it’s easily got rid of, you know – everyone wants more of it. However – this time I’m not guilty, squire.”

“Well, thank you for that lecture on philosophy,” said Lord Longcase stiffly. “If not you, then whom?” He opened his mouth to ask more, but he found that Pocket’s door was shut.

“Perhaps eight o’clock just wanted to be free,” gushed Klepsydra. “Perhaps he’s run away with midday to spend a rare enchanted evening together. Perhaps they’ll get married and have lots of lovely little hours. That will make the days seem longer.”

“Well, that’s certainly true,” the lord agreed, looking at his daughter.

“How utterly romantic,” she continued.

“Bish bosh,” her father said. “Time doesn’t run away.”

“No, it flies,” said the colonel.

Re Peter nodded sagely. “Time flies,” he said. “Time flies.”

“We need new ideas,” Klepsydra said. “We need to think outside the box. I know – Cuckoo.”

Re Peter found this irresistible. “Cuckoo, Cuckoo,” he said.

But Klepsydra was not talking about a bird. Cuckoo was the village eccentric; he was very educated, very intelligent and very wise, but he was also very odd.

“He may be able to help,” admitted Lord Longcase.

The five villagers trooped down the street and then onto a track through the woods. Cuckoo lived in a Swiss chalet-type house deep in the forest. It looked exactly like a giant Swiss cuckoo clock, and from the small balcony above the door a wooden bird popped out to chirp every hour.

When they knocked on the door Cuckoo answered.


CUCKOO

As usual, he had been somewhat careless about his attire. Nothing matched. He had on a pair of trousers with one leg shorter than the other, a sock on one foot and a shoe on the other and a tie and jacket but no shirt. On his head perched a cuckoo, which told him the time every quarter of an hour.

Lord Longcase explained the problem.

“Did the bell sound at eight-thirty?” Cuckoo asked.

“We don’t know,” admitted Father Thyme. “We weren’t listening.”

“No wonder eight o’clock ran away,” Klepsydra said. “He feels ignored and unwanted. I ask you, would you bother carrying on making a noise if no one was listening?”

“Well, you do,” said her father.

Cuckoo looked at the Colonel’s moustache, which told him that the time was a minute to nine. “Let us listen now, then,” he said.

Five of them stood quietly, watching the sixth, the colonel, become cross-eyed as he tried to focus on his moustache as it moved round to nine o'clock. They waited, but as the moustache swept past the hour there was still silence in Tickton.

Lord Longcase grunted. "Two hours lost," he muttered.

"Did the bell know," asked Cuckoo, "that it was meant to ring?"

They all looked at him. "It does so automatically," Father Thyme said. "There is a mechanism."

"'The parson told the sexton, and the sexton tolled the bell,'" Cuckoo quoted. "That's from a poem. The bell needs to be told."

"That's as may be," said Lord Longcase, "but this is a different type of 'told'. It's spelled differently, for one thing..."

“In the poem, yes, but the bell can’t spell. All that it knows is that if isn’t told, it can’t toll; it won’t toll again until it’s told to.”

“I don’t understand,” admitted Father Thyme.

“I do,” said Klepsydra. “The bell didn’t ring because it didn’t know it should. It would not have the information if no one told it.”

Everyone stared at her.

“How does the bell get its information?” she asked.

“It’s wound up once a week,” Father Thyme said. “Every Sunday evening after service.”

“Who winds it?” asked Cuckoo.

Father Thyme turned to look at Re Peter.

Re Peter looked back at him and then turned bright red. “Oops!” he said. “Oops.”


CUCKOO

Cuckoo smiled. “It looks as if this time, perhaps nobody wound it.”

The group thanked Cuckoo for his wisdom and made their way back to the church, where all together they climbed the narrow staircase inside the tower, the ancient wooden steps creaking gently beneath them. At the top they found the bell mechanism. The gears were quiet; the hammer rested peacefully against the bell.



Colonel Half-Hunter bent forward and inspected the mechanism closely. “Seems to be perfectly intact,” he said.

They looked around, and sure enough the winding key was resting on a nearby shelf.

“Re Peter?” asked Father Thyme.

“I forgot,” Re Peter said, “I forgot. Sorry, sorry.”

“It was the Tickton picnock, I thonk,” Father Thyme said.

“The what?” the rest chorussed (except Re Peter, who already knew).

“The Tickton picnic, I think,” Father Thyme said, a little more slowly. “I think Re Peter spent a little too much time in the Moving Hands after the village picnic yesterday.”

“Ah,” said the colonel.

The day before had been the annual Tickton Picnic, attended by the entire village.

There had been sandwiches. There had been lemonade. There had been a three-legged race, a coconut shy and an egg and spoon race, and visitors had come from Tockville across the river to enjoy the fun, but in all the excitement, one small task had been forgotten.

The bell had not been stolen. It had not been unavoidably delayed. It had not eloped. It had not had a sulk. It had simply run down.

Father Thyme put his arm around Re Peter. “Can you explain?” he asked softly.

Re Peter replied, equally softly, twice, and then Father Thyme nodded and said, “Re Peter says after the picnic he was too...ahem...’ He coughed politely and then went on, “Er...tired to climb the ladder, so he decided to wind the clock this morning, but that when he awoke he had a hang...I mean, a headache, and so forgot.’

“Easily done, easily done,’ said Colonel Half-Hunter briskly. “We shall remedy the situation.’



He picked up the winding key, inserted it into the keyhole and turned it. The mechanism responded with a satisfying click. When the spring was fully wound, everyone stepped back.

Then Klepsydra stepped forward and whispered to the bell, “We promise that we won’t forget you again, faithful old friend. Do your job as you have always done. We love and appreciate you for it.”

Then the Colonel gently pulled the rope.

The bell rang – once, twice, three times, and soon the chimes were echoing all across the valley. They rang out eight times—just as they should have done earlier, although it was now nearly ten o’clock.

No one minded. Down on the village green the ducks quacked happily. The sign outside the Moving Hands swung cheerfully. The benches sat where they were. The grass greened happily.



“Well,” Father Thyme said kindly, “it seems that no harm has been done. Everyone has had a post-picnic sleep-in, which they probably needed, and we have shown that time does not belong just to clocks. It belongs to us all.”

So the village of Tickton began its day at last—slightly late, but perfectly content, for in Tickton everyone knows that clocks might measure time, but it is people who truly keep it.



“Time works best when we work with it together,” said Klepsydra.

Re Peter nodded, “Yes,” he said, “yes. Together, together.”

THE END



LOOK OUT FOR MORE

TICK TOCK TALES

COMING SOON

MORE TALES FROM TICKTON AND TOCKVILLE

The Case of the Missing Morning

The Case of the Late Lunch

The Day That Would Not Move On

The Day That Missed an Hour

The Incident of Hesitation

Pendulum and the Perfect Day

Thunder in the Hills

Whiling Away the Hours

Happy Birthday, Lord Longcase!

Time for Christmas

Ring in the New

Organising Tom Purdue

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