

The Clock That Got Embarrassed

by Marguerite Mullin

It was thundering. Rain poured down, and lightning occasionally streaked through the air, illuminating the battered face of the town clock. Midnight had passed, and the clock was almost completely happy, or at least as happy as clocks ever get. There were three facts which accounted for that state of mind in this particular clock; first, he would have to strike only once next time. Nobody knew how he rejoiced when it was almost one o'clock again, and he had to strike just once. Second, it was night—his face could not be seen; and, third, the frequent rolls of thunder would make that one stroke almost inaudible.

Please don't misunderstand. This clock was not lazy—that was not why he hated having to strike twelve times. Nor was he unduly modest, that he sought to hide his face from the passersby in the streets below. You see, his voice was too loud. It was entirely too loud. When he struck to let people know the time, the violent noise produced such strong vibrations that he shuddered all over. But the hapless clock could not help this state of affairs. He had no control over the mechanism inside him which caused the heart-breaking strikings every hour. Why, even if he had been able to subdue the sound, it would not have been long until some repairman climbed laboriously to the place where the clock was, and fixed things so that the clock could again be heard far and wide. The clock knew all this. He knew that he served a purpose in the community, that many people depended on him to know when it was time to eat their lunch, or when it was time to lock up their place of business and return to their warm homes and their families. He knew all this; hasn't that always been the life work of clocks?

But even knowing that he was aiding all these people and that perhaps he was the only sure thing in the lives of some did not do much to-

ward alleviating the blinding pain that ripped through him when he had to strike.

So, on this rainy night he struck once, just as a clap of thunder shook the air.

"That was all right," he murmured to himself, and weakly closed his eyes in relief. This time his face did not become the color of a ripe tomato, and his hands remained in position.

But, of course, it isn't always night, and it doesn't always rain. This makes most living creatures happy, but not the clock; he hated morning. There was an extra pain to striking at six and seven and eight A. M. Besides nearly dying of embarrassment at his own raucous voice, he knew that he dragged many people from their beds and shoved them off to work. And things grew steadily worse up until noon. His face became redder after each striking, and his hands flew regularly from their rightful places to attempt to cover his distorted and quivering face. Tears streamed clockwise down his face.

But afternoon brought relief, as usual, because, aside from his having to strike fewer times, people below were less anxious to know the time, and glanced less often at the clock's apprehensive face.

At six o'clock at night he came closer to having no regrets about being that true slave of time, a clock. He knew that, at six, most people were at home and happy. He was a sensitive clock and really felt very deeply about the little beings that raced around below him. But he was figuring also that, at six, most people would be inside their homes, probably eating, and all the family would be making a lot of noise, so that nobody would hear him strike!

Well, by eleven at night, when he always went through his worst agony, most people had gone to bed. He was looking forward to a slight period of rest, which he deserved, he believed, in view of the hectic day he had spent.

"But I wish it were raining," he thought. "If it were only thundering and lightning as it did last night!" But there was really very little he could do about that, so he rested his chin gently in his hand, and gazed out over the dark little city he guarded and advised. It was a tranquil moment, and he felt at peace with the world, not worrying too much even about the next time he would have to announce the hour, though he would have to bear twelve strikes.

He looked north toward the river. Not a light to be seen. His gaze traveled east, lingering lovingly over the little black houses with their chimneys silhouetted against the dark blue sky. To the south—OH! His mouth popped open, and his hands flew into the air, as the horrified clock watched little tendrils of flame curl possessively around the roof of the orphanage on South Baxter Street.

With hardly a thought, he caused a roaring volley of sound, to beat against the windows of the nearby homes. He struck once, twice, three times, finally twelve, furiously, and louder than any clock had ever struck before.

Soon the fire truck sped down

the street, and water spurted over the flames, while unharmed and sleepy little children were handed through windows to men on ladders. The orphanage was saved from the tragedy that had come so close to engulfing it.

A fireman passed by on the street below the clock.

"Some man phoned me," he said to his companion. "Some man who said the clock had awakened him. Said he'd glanced out the window, and had seen the red haze in the sky, and he wanted to know where the fire was. If it hadn't been for that, there's no telling when somebody would have known. Funny, though—that clock doesn't usually wake people up when it strikes. We're all used to it. Though there were several others who told me tonight that the clock woke 'em up striking twelve. Well, guess they're just light sleepers. Good thing we caught the fire though—those kids—," and the men passed on down the

street.

The clock's hands rested, raised to the sky. Something happened in the metallic heart. He did not say a word. But soon he struck once, a deep, melodious sound that spread through the night with silver beauty. His face remained a placid, weathered grey, and his hands still pointed skyward.

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