

Only a Question of Time

Hans Schickelmeyer was a little, ageing, slightly neglected, watch and clock mender, who lived above a little, old, slightly neglected shop in an older, slightly neglected street, which in turn was in an even older and more neglected part of the town.

He was, as I said, not very tall, perhaps five feet four inches, and slightly built, with a tendency to stoop, born of long hours spent poring over his watches and clocks. His hair, or at least as much of it as he still retained, had once been of a deep lustrous black, but was now of that shade of grey, flecked with occasional darker hairs, which is often referred to as 'salt and pepper'. He wore half-rimmed spectacles, which were perched on the end of his nose, and always seemed to be in danger of falling off, but somehow never did.

His clothes were old and worn, but always neatly washed and pressed, indicative of someone who had known hard times, but still had a quiet sense of pride in his appearance. In this, he had some cause, as his advancing years had brought with them a reputation for being more than merely a talented tinkerer, but a real craftsman; a man whose skill and dedication were widely known. If anyone had a timepiece in need of repair or restoration, and asked advice as to who might best carry out the work, the answer was always the same, "You couldn't do better than go to Schickelmeyer – he's a real genius," but always spoken in a hushed, almost reverential tone.

Hans had a tiny kitchen at the rear of the shop, to which he would retire at certain times of the day, to make himself a cup of tea. (I forgot to mention that he was also a creature of habit.) It was on one of these occasions that Hans emerged from the kitchen, cup of tea in hand, to find a large long-case clock, of the type usually referred to as a 'grandfather clock', standing in the shop.

This came as something of a surprise to Hans for three reasons: 1) it had not been there when he went into the kitchen; 2) he had not heard the shop bell ring – his hearing was still as sharp as ever and he always heard the bell and; 3) there did not seem to be anyone with the clock. He had just placed his cup and saucer (fine bone china, of course) on a table and was about to walk around the end of the counter to investigate, when an even older, smaller and, if that were possible, more neglected looking man than himself appeared from behind it.

"Herr Schickelmeyer?" he enquired, in a rather tremulous tone. Hans was amazed that this little man had apparently been able to carry the clock, and to open the door without causing the bell to ring, but his professional sense of discretion prevented him from asking the questions which might have elicited the answers. Instead, he simply smiled and said, "Yes, I am Schickelmeyer. What can I do for you?" This may seem like an unnecessary question, given the presence of the clock, but Hans never liked to make any assumptions. When I put this point to him, he smiled quietly and said, "Maybe he was on his way somewhere with the clock, and called in to buy a watch." I did not pursue the matter.

The man replied, "I should like you please to take a look at this clock. Just lately, it has not been working as well as usual. I have heard that you are the finest horologist in the town, and that is good, because this is an extremely rare; one might say unique, and valuable clock and must be treated with great care." Hans was naturally flattered by these remarks, but also a little concerned. He was by no means a rich man, and if anything should happen to the clock while he had it in the shop.....

Hans explained that it would not be possible to say how much the repair would cost, or how long it would take, until he had had an opportunity to examine the clock, but the man said hastily, "It is of no importance. I do not concern myself with matters of money. Only return the clock to its full working order and I shall be happy to pay you whatever is necessary." Reassured, Hans wrote out a receipt, in beautiful copperplate handwriting, and handed it to the man, who thanked him and left the shop, leaving Hans to muse about his strange new customer.

This was late in the day and, being a creature of habit, Hans always took his evening meal at the same time, so he ate at that time as usual, but the new clock was on his mind all the time. He never worked after he had eaten, and rarely did this cause him any difficulty, but that evening as never before, he was tempted break that rule. However, he was a man, not only of principle, but also of a determined nature, so he suppressed the growing desire to tackle the clock, until the following day.

The morning found him tired, having slept little, and strangely restless. After a meagre breakfast, he made his way downstairs to the little shop, and was drawn immediately to the clock. He walked slowly round it, examining it carefully from every angle, but from the outside, there was nothing to distinguish it from many another similar grandfather clock. Yet still there remained that heightened, rather uncomfortable, sense of curiosity, mingled with.....almost a feeling of apprehension, as though he was on the brink of something quite wonderful, and yet at the same time quite frightening.

Having discovered nothing from the outside, he stood in front of the clock. Being a man for whom timepieces, and therefore time itself, had great significance, he took great care to ensure that every clock and watch in the shop showed exactly the same time, to the second. Looking at the dial of this clock, which showed not only the time, but also the date and phases of the moon, he was surprised (and a little irritated) to see that it was running 10 minutes fast.

Hans glanced at one of the other numerous clocks to check the correct time, 9:31am and 25 seconds, opened the glass front of the new clock and gently moved the hands to the correct position, then glanced at another clock again to check that everything was as it should be – but it was not. The other clock was now showing 9:21am and 27 seconds; 10 minutes slow! He shook his head and looked at the original clock, which was also now 10 minutes slow. Not 9, or 11, but precisely 10 minutes.

Increasingly worried, he looked at another, and another, until he had looked at every clock in the shop. Each showed 9:21am plus the extra seconds it took to look from one to the

other. Convinced now that he was losing his reason, he looked back to the new clock, and saw that it showed 9:32 exactly!

Thoughts were racing around in his brain and his head was beginning to spin with the speed of them, but he forced himself to stand very still, close his eyes, take several deep breaths, and then open them again. He looked slowly and disbelievingly round all the clocks again, hoping against hope that he had been dreaming and that all would now be well, but no, the new clock now showed 9:33am and 30 seconds, whilst every other clock showed 9:23 and the appropriate seconds.

Shaking his head in wonder, Hans reached out his hand, this time towards the hands which showed the date, but when it was almost there, he rapidly drew it back, as though from an electric shock, afraid of what might happen if he went ahead. He stood, eye to eye with the clock, in a manner of speaking, for a minute or so, then curiosity overcame fear, and he moved the hands back two days and waited for the world to end.

There was no crash of thunder and no final trumpet; the light through the window darkened, then brightened again, but that was all. At least, he thought that was all, and laughed, a high pitched, nervous laugh, with relief....until he looked round at his other clocks, and saw that each one which showed the date, now showed a date two days earlier!

This was too much for Hans to cope with, so he closed the glass and retired to the little kitchen to make himself a cup of strong, sweet tea and try to make sense of what had just happened. As often happens in unusual situations, he found himself holding a mental conversation with another part of himself; let us say Hans 2. The gist of the conversation was along these lines,

Hans; "I must be dreaming. Things like this don't happen to ordinary horologists."

Hans 2; "But you are no ordinary horologist."

Hans; "That may be true, things such as this do not happen to **any** horologist!"

Hans 2; "But you **are** an horologist, and this **is** happening to you."

Hans; "Then I must be dreaming, and I shall soon wake up."

Hans 2; "Then pinch yourself – you'll soon see if you are dreaming."

Hans; "OUCH! Ok, so I am not dreaming and this is really happening. What now?"

Hans 2; "If it is happening, then you will just have to face up to it. Drink your tea and go see what else will happen!"

And that is exactly what Hans did; he finished drinking his tea, slowly put down the cup and reluctantly went back into the shop to face the clock. Taking his courage in both hands, he slowly and very deliberately moved the date hands back 60 years! This time, he could detect no sign of movement, but when he checked the other clocks, sue enough, they had also moved back 60 years. Everything else in the shop seemed unchanged, and

then it occurred to him that he had not examined the clock case and inner workings. Standing in front of it, very slowly and carefully he opened the door to look inside. At first, as the shop was small and the only illumination was the small amount of daylight which filtered through the small panes of 'bullseye' glass (and not many of these), which formed the front window, he was able to discern nothing other than the general darkness of the interior.

After a few moments though, he gradually noticed that there were tiny points of light in the overall darkness, and that they appeared to be flickering, very gently and really quite hypnotically. The strain of staring into the case made his eyes feel suddenly very tired, and his eyelids very heavy, but, try as he might, he was unable to look away. When he told me all this, some years later, he found that he was unable to recall with any certainty whether he remained awake and really saw what came next, or whether he had closed his eyes and was dreaming, but he said that it seemed to be real.

As Hans watched the point of light which was furthest from him, or at least, which seemed to be furthest from him, it began to expand, slowly and gently, from a tiny pinpoint to the size of a tennis ball, and kept on expanding at the same inexorable pace until the sight of it filled his entire field of vision, and indeed his entire consciousness. To say that this was outside the realm of Hans' normal everyday experience would be like saying that someone had seen a pink elephant riding a unicycle down the High Street whilst juggling with red-hot coals; in short, he was completely amazed by it.

However, as he later told me, what he found even more amazing was what the light revealed to him. He saw himself as a young boy, with his mother, who had been dead many years when all this took place. There was his childhood home, perfect in every detail! There was his mother's favourite chair, the fireplace, the mantelpiece and, on it, the elaborate clock and family photographs which every week his mother would lovingly take down, dust, and replace with infinite care and tenderness.

As his eyes (or was it his imagination?) took in all these fondly remembered details, his eyes filled with tears, which rapidly overflowed and coursed down his timeworn cheeks to drip onto the floor, making a little pool in the dust. It was this which later persuaded him that **something** had happened – he just wasn't sure what that something had been.

The tears came faster and faster until he felt his heart was breaking and he could bear it no more, so with a final, sad, lingering look, he slowly closed the door, convinced that he had been staring at the scene for hours. By now, he felt completely exhausted and emotionally drained, so he was forced to abandon his usual routine. He turned the notice on the shop door to read 'Closed', pulled down the blind, locked the door and went upstairs, where he undressed and went to bed without eating.

When he woke, he yawned, stretched and rubbed his face – and was surprised to find that he had a day's growth of stubble. He had slept for 36 hours and it was now late afternoon on the day after! At first, he was annoyed to think that he had lost a day, but then he thought, "Maybe, and maybe not!"

He felt strangely elated as he washed, dressed and had a hearty breakfast, then went down to the shop, half expecting that he had been dreaming the whole episode, but the clock was still there. Walking briskly up to it, he turned back the date hand a day, and the hour hand back to 9am, and hung on tightly to the clock case.

A brief interplay of light and dark, a slight feeling of dizziness, and then stillness; silence interrupted only by the ticking of his many clocks. One glance at another clock was sufficient to confirm what he had expected to see – time had indeed moved back to the morning of the previous day.

It was now very clear why his mysterious customer had said that this was a very special and valuable clock. Others merely recorded the passage of time; this one had the power to alter its direction! The acceptance of this fact opened up to him a wealth of possibilities, but also made him wonder how long it would be before ‘Herr Schmidt’ came to reclaim it.

Then he realised that he could ensure that the man could never claim it back, and that he (Hans) need never grow a even a day older. All he needed to do was turn the date hand back a day before he went to upstairs, and he could have the day again and again.

He was now as excited as he had been frightened earlier. Why, with such a clock as this, the possibilities would be endless. He felt a pang of conscience at the thought that this would amount to stealing the clock, but soon got rid of the feeling, by deciding that he would keep it only for a while and then put the hands back to the correct time and day. It did not occur to him that, since moving the hands on this clock moved those on all the other clocks, he would have no way of knowing the real time without leaving the shop.

The thought which did crush his elation was that if he had the same day over and over again, it would be the **same** day – there would be no new customers, no new interest; just the same routine repeated endlessly until it drove him mad. Faced with this unedifying prospect, Hans decided that instead of mechanically repeating the past, he would see whether the clock could also give him a glimpse of the future; to be precise, the winning numbers for the State Lottery.

He would need to be careful not to be observed, so he controlled his rising eagerness until the evening. At 6pm exactly, as he did each day, he locked the shop door, turned the sign to ‘Closed’, and pulled down the blind before going upstairs for his evening meal.

At 7:30pm, he went down to the shop, opened the door and checked that there was no-one about in the little street, then went back into the shop and locked the door again. Wasting no further time, he crossed to the clock. He reasoned that if the point of light furthest away had shown him the past, it would be the lights nearest to him which **might** show the future.

Bearing this in mind, he turned the date hand of the clock forward one week. Again the change of light and dark and again the dizziness, but less this time, as he was becoming more used to it. As soon as everything was still, Hans opened the door of the case and

stared into the darkness, waiting, with a fair degree of impatience, for the lights to appear as before.

After what seemed like an eternity, the lights started to appear, dimly at first, but gradually becoming brighter. He tried his best to concentrate on the light nearest to him, but found his eyes being irresistibly drawn to one slightly further away. As before, he felt the light expand into his mind and resolve itself into a picture. As you may well imagine, by the time that Hans reached this point in his narrative, I was filled with a mixture of disbelief and eagerness to know more; to learn what he had seen.

I was to be disappointed, as no doubt you will be; I cannot tell you what he saw, for he refused to tell me, but I shall never forget the look on his face as he abruptly ended his telling of the events – a look of deep sadness, mixed with a slight element of fear.

Hans told me the story when I called into the shop three days later. I had known him for many years, and was the nearest thing to a best friend which he had. After he had finished, he said to me, in a voice trembling with emotion, “Josef, you are the person I have known longer than anyone else living, and I have no family. If anything should happen to me, I wish you to have the shop and all its contents.”

I was embarrassed by this unusual show of emotion and laughingly said, “You’re not so old, Hans. Why should anything happen to you for many years?” With the same sadness and emotion, he said, “Josef, I was never more serious. I want you to have the shop and **all** its contents – including **the** clock.” At this, he indicated the clock, which by then he had moved to a corner of the shop, where it stood, looking to all intents and purposes just like any other long-case clock.

I started to protest, “But I can’t take the clock. It belongs to your mysterious customer, Herr Schmidt, and surely he will come back for it?” Hans was adamant, “You must have **everything**, including that clock. As for Herr Schmidt coming back for the clock,” he said, with a nervous laugh, “I suppose that is....only a question of time!”

I did not argue further. Four days later, Hans was found dead in the shop by a customer, having apparently fallen and struck his head. This was 10 years ago and now I live in the flat over the shop, and so far, Herr Schmidt has not returned to claim his clock.

One thing I forgot to mention is that Hans begged me never to touch the clock. Did I heed his warning plea? All I can say in reply is that I can see by the look on your face that you don’t believe a word of what you have read!