

THE GREAT CLOCK

Langdon Jones

Langdon Jones is an English short-story writer, editor, and musician whose stories appeared in *New Worlds*. He was part of the New Wave of literary science fiction in the 1960s, along with Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, M. John Harrison, and several others. "The Great Clock" was first published in *New Worlds* #160 in 1966 and later appeared in his short-story collection *The Eye of the Lens*.

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The light of the sky could be seen dimly through the small slits in the ceiling of the Great Chamber.

The Great Clock worked.

The Pendulum swung slowly in its giant arc and with every tick the whole Clock shuddered. The Great Wheel rose above the rest of the Clock mechanism in a great and static arc and the Fast Wheel whirled, humming, its sound rising above the noises made by the workings of the Clock. The other wheels turned at their various speeds, some smoothly, while some advanced one notch with every tick of the Clock. Pins engaged, wedges dropped, springs uncoiled. On the floor was thrown a shadow of wheels which formed an abstract pattern.

And the man sleeping naked on the pallet at the Posterior Wall stirred a little.

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He was awakened by the whistle of the clock within the Clock.

It was fixed on one wall of the Great Chamber. It was made of wood and the sound of its ticking was lost in the constant sounds of the Great Clock. It was powered by a weight on a long chain, the other end of the chain having a metal loop through which projected the end of a lever coming through the wall. At this moment the lever, powered in some way by the Great Clock, was lowering itself smoothly, pulling down the free end of chain and winding up the clock. Below the clock, projecting upward from the floor was a four-foot metal flue pipe. The whistle was coming from this, a deafening note that was calling him to his duties. He covered his ears against the raucous sound. Eventually the note began to drop in volume and pitch, for a second broke down the octave to its fundamental, and then became quiet except for the hiss of escaping air. Behind the wooden wall could be heard intensive creaking as the giant bellows exhausted themselves.

The Clock ticked.

It was a thunderous sound, and it shook his body there on the pallet. It was a sound composed of a mosaic of sounds, some too high, others too low to be

heard. But the high sounds irritated the eardrums and the low ones stirred the bowels. The sounds that could be heard were a million. Metallic and wooden, high and low, muffled and clear, they all combined in a shattering rumble that made thought impossible. The tick was composed primarily of four separate groups of sound that peaked at intervals of about half a second. At the end of each tick, a creak from somewhere high in the building ran up the scale to silence.

When the echoes had died away he could hear the other sounds of the Clock. The whole Chamber was alive with noise. There were creakings all around; cogs met with metallic clashes; wooden parts knocked hollowly. From high in the Chamber on the opposite side to his pallet the Fast Wheel hummed loudly.

He opened his eyes. Light was filtering in dimly through the two tiny slits in the ceiling of the Great Chamber. He could see the black outlines of the Great Wheel where it vaulted overhead, partly obscured by a supporting column. He groaned, then sat up on the pallet, looking across toward the clock on the wall. The clock was made entirely of wood, and only one hand pointed toward the irregular marks scored around the edge of the dial. The marks indicated the times at which he had to perform his duties; they extended three-quarters round the face. When the hand reached any of the marks, the bellows, now filling slowly behind the wall, would drop a short distance and the metal flue pipe would give a short call. The hand was about five degrees from the first mark, and this gave him a short while to eat his breakfast. He wondered dully if there was a little man inside the wall-clock, just getting up, ready for his day's work maintaining the mechanism.

The Clock ticked.

When the floor had stopped vibrating, he got up and walked across the Great Chamber. Dust rose in acrid clouds about him, making him sneeze. He urinated in the corner, lifting his nose against the sharp smells that arose from the intersection of the walls that he always used for this purpose. Then he turned and walked back past the pile of bones in the other corner, skulls like large pieces of yellow putty, twigs of ribs, half buried by dust, and made his way to the door on the far side of the Chamber, moving among the bronzed supports of the Clock mechanism as he did so. He arrived at the low arched door and turned the iron handle, pushing open the wooden slab with effort.

The Clock ticked.

Now he was in the Small Chamber. The room was about nine feet long by seven wide, and was lined by wooden planks. The whole of the left-hand side of the Small Chamber was covered by a mass of wheels, thousands upon thousands, interlocking in frightening complexity. He had never tried to work out their arrangement and purpose; he just knew that they were an integral part of the workings of the Great Clock. The wheels were plain-rimmed—not cogged—and were of silver metal. They varied in size from about four feet down to one inch, and were all turning at varied rates. They whirled and clicked softly as they worked. The sounds of the Clock were muffled here in the Small Chamber, with the door closed, and only the tick was still just as disturbing, as disruptive to logical thought.

The Clock ticked.

He watched the chains from the wheels disappearing through the myriad

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The rest of the welfare, apart from and a small wood a spoon, and a he into the wall were to which worn w

The Clock ticked

He walked across it on the floor by the wheeled hand and slopped onto revolutions there the mouth. He spoon upright in and the other fa

The Clock ticked

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The Clock ticked

He walked were his tools ranged in size size of the first head and a the trolley was just left it. The tre a giant drum of the cupboard sweetly-smell

The Clock ticked

On a shelf was now filled from the rack down the oil

He grasped

holes in the wooden walls at either end of the Chamber. Some of the wheels were partly obscured, with just a tiny segment of their arc appearing through the space between the ceiling and the left-hand wall. Once, he had wondered whether he saw all the wheels or whether in fact there were more, many more, stretching away upward and downward.

The rest of the room was taken up mainly by the only compromise to his welfare, apart from the pallet in the Great Chamber. There was a wooden table and a small wooden chair. On the table were three objects, all of metal, a plate, a spoon, and a heavy goblet. At the far end of the Chamber by the cupboard set into the wall were two silver faucets. Above the faucets were two wheels of iron, to which worn wooden handles were attached.

The Clock ticked.

He walked across the Chamber and picked the plate off the table. He placed it on the floor below the nearer of the faucets. He stood up and began to turn the wheeled handle. A white mash poured out of the wide mouth of the faucet and slopped onto the plate. After he had turned the handle about ten complete revolutions there was a click, the handle spun free and no more mash came from the mouth. He picked up the plate and carried it back to the table, burying the spoon upright in the mash. Then he repeated the performance with the goblet and the other faucet, and filled the vessel with cold water.

The Clock ticked.

He settled down listlessly and began to spoon the mash into his mouth. It was completely tasteless, but he accepted it as he accepted everything else. The Clock ticked five times before he had finished his meal. He left half the mash and inverted the plate over the primitive drain in the floor. Rotting food from previous meals still remained, and at one time the stench would have appalled him.

A short, sharp blast from the pipe informed him that it was time for his duties to start. There was a lot of work in front of him. A vague memory came into his mind of when he used to eat all the mash and still have a little time to relax quietly before starting his work. Now he toyed with his food and needed less.

The Clock ticked and dispersed the thought.

He walked with heavy steps over to the cupboard and opened the door. Inside were his tools. To the left was a rack of hammers for testing the wheels. They ranged in size from a tiny hammer all of metal, the head of which was about the size of the first joint of his little finger, to a giant sledgehammer with a large iron head and a thick wooden shaft, which was used for testing the Great Wheel. The trolley was just as he had left it the previous night. Everything was just as he had left it. The trolley was made of black cracked wood with iron wheels. On it was a giant drum with an opened top. A great faucet extended down from the top of the cupboard above the drum, and now the container was filled with yellow sweetly-smelling grease. Every night it was the same.

The Clock ticked.

On a shelf on the right was a can, below yet another, small, faucet, and the can was now filled by the dark translucent beauty of thin oil. He lifted the hammers from the rack and slowly placed them on the trolley beside the drum. He lifted down the oil can and placed that on the rack designed for the purpose.

He grasped the pulling rail and began to heave the trolley backward out of the

cupboard. His body strained with the effort. Surely, at one time it had all been easier . . .

The Clock ticked.

The trolley was finally right out of the cupboard, and he walked round it, so that he would be able to push it from the back. Before he started pushing, he suddenly realized that he had forgotten to move the table out of the way. He sighed deeply and walked back to the table, folding up the legs and resting it on its side against the wall.

"Getting old . . ." he muttered, ". . . getting old . . ." Those were the first words he had spoken in a long time, and his voice sounded thin and weak. He pushed the trolley through the Small Chamber, past the whirring wheels. His last duty of the day would be to oil those wheels. He realized that he had forgotten to open the door, opened it, and pushed the trolley into the Great Chamber. He stopped the trolley at the point where he always stopped it.

The Clock ticked.

He went up to the nearest of the wheels. It was a large wheel, about five feet in diameter. Most of the wheel could be seen clearly, unobscured by other mechanism, and the black metal was pitted, as if by age. He selected the correct hammer, a large one, weighing several pounds, and swung it into contact with the edge of the wheel. The wheel shivered, and rang like a gong. Satisfied, he placed the hammer back on the trolley, and pushed it on a little further. On he went, wheel after wheel. Some of the wheels boomed hollowly, others tinkled like tiny bells. Never had they done otherwise.

When he came to the first supporting column, he selected the second largest hammer. The column was of a diameter of about a foot, and it was made of a golden metal, either copper or brass. Later these columns would have to be cleaned.

The Clock ticked exactly at the moment he swung the hammer. But after the sounds had died away, the column still reverberated with a shrill brightness. Now he had come to the Fast Wheel. There was a wooden ladder set against its supports, and he picked up the oil can and began to mount the ladder.

The Fast Wheel was different from most of the others. It was difficult to observe, owing to its rate of travel, but the lack of fuzziness at the edges indicated that it possessed no cogs. It appeared to be a double wheel, having two rims, its spokes tapering inward to the single hub. It was driven by a taut chain which was an insubstantial blur that stretched to a hole in the Anterior Wall, opposite his pallet. The ladder vibrated with the wheel's motion, and air fanned his face strongly as he climbed upward. The wheel ran in oil, and a reservoir arched above it with two ducts that fell past its eighteen-inch radius to the hub. The hum of the wheel was almost intolerable at this closeness.

The Clock ticked and for a couple of seconds drowned the hum of the Fast Wheel.

He poured half the contents of the oil can into the reservoir, then quickly descended the ladder. Now there was just the Great Wheel and then four smaller cogs over the other side of the mechanism. He picked the largest hammer from the trolley and dragged it across the floor. The Great Wheel was only exposed at one point, and then only about a foot of its surface. This was about the nearest

it was possible for a foot thick and disappeared into mechanism of the position and tens

The Clock ticked

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The Clock ticked

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it was possible for him to get to the Anterior Wall. The Great Wheel was about a foot thick and was constructed of matt black metal; a foot from where it disappeared into the space between the floor and the Anterior Wall the other mechanism of the Clock terminated. He dragged the hammer into a convenient position and tensed the muscles of his arms and stomach.

The Clock ticked.

He swung in an imaginary back stroke, the hammer not moving, then, reaching as far back as he could and starting to swing forward, transformed the stroke into actuality by dragging the hammer along the floor toward the wheel. The head lifted just before the hammer came into contact with the black metal. It hit, and his stomach was churned by the deep vibration of the Great Wheel. Along with the almost subsonic fundamental, an upper partial screamed briefly. The sounds almost made him vomit, but he checked this and instead coughed the dust from his throat. During the time when his duties had always seemed to be much easier and quicker, and there had been time to spare, he had watched the twenty-foot Great Wheel very carefully for long periods, and had never seen it move a fraction of an inch.

The Clock ticked as he walked away.

He went to his trolley and plunged his hands into the drum, withdrawing two gobs of grease. He went up to the Great Wheel again and slapped the grease into the reservoir at its side. There would be more points to grease later in the day.

Now there were just the other four cogs to test, and then it would be time to check the Meter.

The flue pipe blew piercingly.

Shock raced through his body, and the grunt he made was lost in the sounds of the Clock. *Had he been so slow?* He never remembered having a job unfinished when the time came to begin the next. He looked unbelievably at the clock on the wall; the hand stood unquestionably at the second of the scored marks.

For a moment he was lost; his knees trembled and his body shook. What should he do? Should he finish his job or hurry to check the Meter? Normally he liked checking the Meter; there was rarely any need to make an adjustment, the pointer always resting at the zero position. This meant that he would have at least fifteen minutes to himself. But now he was in an agony of uselessness, for the first time being faced with a decision. A thought began to bubble up through his shock, and forced itself into consciousness for a fraction of a second.

Why?

The Clock ticked, dissolving the thought in a torrent of sound.

He decided to check the Meter. He could always come back and sound the remaining four wheels; it would mean losing a little of the precious spare time, but that didn't matter.

He wiped his greasy hands on his thighs and walked across to the Posterior Wall and the little panel behind which lay the Meter. He pulled aside the wooden panel with effort, and then groaned in dismay. The pointer stood at minus two.

He was plunged into panic; an adjustment would have to be made. When would he have time to sound the remaining four wheels? He would have to hurry. He pulled aside the adjacent panel with trembling hands. He stepped inside the lift and began to turn the large wheeled handle. The Great Chamber was lost to

view as the lift began to travel down the shaft. Little light filtered down from the Chamber, but he was able to see the joints in the wood of the shaft. Going down, he was fighting the counterweight and the work was much more difficult. He wished that he was coming up, the adjustment having been made.

After what seemed like hours, the dim light of the Pendulum Well traveled up the open front of the lift and he stopped.

The Clock ticked, very slightly muffled at this depth.

He clambered out of the lift and then finally stood upright in the Pendulum Well. The Well was vast. It stretched up and up, many times his own height, and the top was marked by a light rectangle where the mouth of the Well met the lighter Great Chamber at the very front of the Clock. Cogs jutted blackly above, and the tall cylinder of the Pendulum Rod inclined itself gracefully and slowly toward one side of the Well. Once he had wondered on the unusual nature of the Escapement Mechanism. The Escapement itself appeared to be almost independent of the Pendulum, its action only being triggered by the Pendulum's motion. The Pendulum swung freely for almost its whole arc, and the Escapement Lever only inclined at the extremes of its swing. At the top the Escapement Lever quivered, preparing for its giant pivoting movement, and its sound came to him like a clanking of great chains. The Pendulum had a wide arc, about forty-five degrees, and at the moment it was reaching the peak of its swing. The Pendulum was so vast that at this point of its swing it scarcely seemed to be moving. It was only when the Bob was whistling past his head at the bottom of its swing that he could really appreciate how fast it was moving.

At the top of the Clock the Escapement quivered again. The Pendulum had slowed now and seemed to be poised impossibly, hanging without movement, a vast distance from him. There was a rumble and, with a screech of metal, the Escapement Lever roused itself and began to pivot its great weight. With a shattering crash, it fell heavily into its new position.

And the Clock ticked.

Now the Pendulum was moving back again, increasing speed second by second.

The walls of the Pendulum Well were, like the Small Chamber, lined by planks of wood, although black. The sounds of the clock came to him here with a wooden consistency as they were reflected and diffused by the Well. On the near side of the Well, iron rungs were set into the wall, which would enable him to reach the giant bulk of the Weight. He glanced up, looking at the dark shadow that loomed overhead. He stepped forward into the path of the rapidly approaching Pendulum Bob, which would pass about a foot above his head. At the far end of the Well was another ladder which led up to a platform far above, which would enable him to meet the Bob as it rose up to the top of its swing, and from which he would step on to the Bob to carry out the adjustment.

From its highest point, above the Escapement Mechanism, to a point about one sixth of the way down the Well, the Pendulum Rod consisted of a cylinder of shining golden metal, probably brass, with a diameter of about four feet. From there to the Bob, a distance of at least fifty feet, it was made up of a frame of several smaller tubes of various colored metals, probably some kind of temperature compensation. The Bob itself was a ten-foot lens of gray metal, tapering at the edges to knife-blade-thinness. As the Pendulum rushed through

the air, eddies formed, setting the Pendulum

And the Pendulum

A deep, clear ringing chiming quality. He there on the wooden touched together the same note.

The Bob was now was past him and away

With a shock he realized were still four wheels ladder. There was a always came this way climbing the iron rungs vast bulk to his rear; often the Weight was painful maneuvering

He turned and looked two feet deep and for supported by thin wires and culminated in hub of the Weight was a across, the smallest a rapidly. The fine wires some of them. These and the vast Weight was be seen.

The Clock ticked.

He glanced at the far end of the Well. He strokes, by which time it. He began to move planks. There was no about twenty feet from the Bob dropped to far

The Clock ticked but

Past the corner he was of only about thirty feet out on it, waiting for beside him, that stretched that his weight was on iron ring at the end of applied to the Pendulum had no effect on the a its return swing and v Pendulum was a diffic

the air, eddies formed on alternate sides like the ripples running along a flag, setting the Pendulum, as it rode the turbulence, into vibration.

And the Pendulum sang.

A deep, clear ringing vibration filled the Well, like an organ note, but with a chiming quality. He felt the vibration through the soles of his feet as he stood there on the wooden floor. He kept his mouth slightly slack, for if his teeth touched together they would buzz unpleasantly with a higher version of the same note.

The Bob was now rushing down upon him, and with a sudden gust of air, it was past him and away, climbing rapidly toward the peak of its swing.

With a shock he realized that there was no time to stand here watching. There were still four wheels left unsounded. He turned and began to climb the nearer ladder. There was a catwalk leading round the Well past the Weight, and he always came this way to check on the Weight as he passed. After a long time of climbing the iron rungs he eventually arrived at the catwalk. The Weight was a vast bulk to his rear; he was fortunate that he had come down at this time, for often the Weight was further toward the floor, or too high, which necessitated painful maneuvering on the rungs.

He turned and looked at the Weight. It was a block of black metal, about two feet deep and four feet high, and it stretched the length of the Well. It was supported by thin wire, which branched out from a single strand far up the Well and culminated in hundreds of strands spread out in an angular delta. At the top of the Weight was a complex of cogs, the largest of which was about six inches across, the smallest about half an inch, and some of them were revolving quite rapidly. The fine wire passed up and down in the complex of wheels, circling some of them. These grooved wheels turned as the wire moved round them, and the vast Weight was lowering itself, so slowly that its motion could scarcely be seen.

The Clock ticked.

He glanced at the Pendulum, now at the fullest extent of its swing at the far end of the Well. He would be able to get to the platform in one-and-a-half strokes, by which time the Bob would be in the correct position for him to mount it. He began to move along the catwalk, his bare feet pattering on the wooden planks. There was no safety rail and he kept close to the wall, as he was now about twenty feet from the floor. As the Pendulum overtook him on its way back, the Bob dropped to far below his level, and then began to climb past him.

The Clock ticked before he reached the corner of the Well.

Past the corner he went, and he walked across the width of the Well, a distance of only about thirty feet. The platform projected out from the wall, and he stood out on it, waiting for the Bob to arrive. There was a long, thin chain hanging beside him, that stretched up into the mechanism of the Escapement. He guessed that his weight was computed by the strain on the platform, and pulling the iron ring at the end of the chain caused some kind of weight compensation to be applied to the Pendulum, so that his weight on the Pendulum for one whole swing had no effect on the accuracy of the Clock. The Bob was now at the bottom of its return swing and was rising, apparently slowly, toward him. Mounting the Pendulum was a difficult feat, one that had caused him trouble in the early days.

The early days? He dismissed the distracting thought: he must concentrate on mounting the Pendulum. The difficulty was in the apparent motion of the Bob. When one stood in the center of the Well at the bottom, at the higher points of its swing the Pendulum scarcely seemed to be moving, while at its center its true speed could be appreciated. Here, at the high point of its swing, the opposite illusion occurred, but was made more complex by the fact that the Pendulum *did* actually slow at this point of its arc.

The apparent speed of the Bob was increasing rapidly as it approached him. His muscles tensed as its bulk loomed up toward him. He slipped his hand into the iron ring, and pulled the chain downward. Then, as the Bob was almost on him it suddenly appeared to slow. Now he could see the corresponding platform that jutted out from the Bob. He watched the platform and nothing else. The edges of the two platforms came smoothly together. There was a pause. He stepped swiftly across on to the other surface. There was a brass rail on the inside of the platform with a strap looped from it. With fumbling fingers he hurriedly buckled the strap about his waist and pulled it tight, just as the Pendulum began to move downward.

And the Clock ticked, shaking the Pendulum.

He looked over his shoulder and watched the other platform and the catwalk moving rapidly upward and away from him. The acceleration became greater, and he felt his stomach lift within him as he traveled yet faster. The air rushed past his face, and he tried to draw his attention from the distressing physical sensations. The bulk of his body, tiny though it was in relation to the Bob, disturbed the flow of the air, breaking the current into smaller eddies. As the new vibration tried to impose itself on the old, the Pendulum groaned with tearing dissonance. Then, abruptly, the note broke up to its second partial, and the sound was now bright, ringing and intense. As the Bob began to level out, his stomach felt a little more normal, and he squatted down to make the adjustment. The platform on which he was squatting was slung at the lowest part of the Bob, and hung down below. At the very lowest point of the Bob was fitted the Adjustment Weight, for making the incredibly small adjustments to the frequency of the Pendulum's swing. A piece of thin metal rod was fixed from the Bob, hanging downward. This rod was scored across at regular intervals, about a quarter of an inch apart, and attached about halfway down was a small weight, of about an ounce, with a sprung clip that attached to one of the grooves in the rod. The Meter had read minus two; this meant that the weight had to be slid two spaces upward. Obviously the Clock was running slow by an infinitesimal amount, and this adjustment would correct its running. As he put out his hand the Pendulum began to rise on its upward swing, and his arm felt heavy and approached the weight much lower than it should have done.

He paused as the nausea gripped him again. After a few seconds the feeling began to diminish as the Pendulum reached its high point. He knew better than to attempt to adjust the weight at this moment.

The Clock ticked, vibrating the Pendulum, and almost throwing him on to his back. He gripped the brass rail and waited for the wrenching of his stomach as he fell in the sweeping arc. The Pendulum began to move downward. The adjustment would have to be made this time; he knew that he would be incapable of

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standing more than one complete swing of the Pendulum. Air rushed past him as he dropped with the Bob and he gritted his teeth against the sickness that rose inside. At least the new high note of the Pendulum did not buzz in his head as would have done the fundamental. As the Pendulum leveled out, he reached out and grasped the weight. He pushed upward, and the weight moved up slowly with a double click. He tested it with a light pull, and then sighed with relief and began to stand, fighting the downward push caused by the upward motion of the Bob.

At the top of the swing he stepped on to the platform before the tick of the Clock commenced its vibration. His legs were shaking as he began to climb down the iron rungs.

As he walked across the floor of the Well his mind was feverishly calculating. Would he still have time to sound the wheels before his next task? He clambered down the narrow tunnel into the lift. His next task was the Winding, and he tried not to think of this. It was a task that took about an hour of his time every day, and left him a weak, trembling old man. Even so, he still sometimes wondered how it was that such a comparatively small amount of energy could sustain the vast mechanism all about him. From his fuddled memory he vaguely recalled that on similar occasions, the whistle had blown shortly after he had arrived in the Great Chamber.

As the lift arrived at the top of its shaft, the Clock ticked, the sound of it jangling afterwards in his ears, contrasting with the sounds of the Pendulum Well. Here, the noises were all about him again; the grinding of the cogs, the humming of the Fast Wheel; the oil smells and the sharp tang of metal were in his nostrils again. His trolley was there, as he had left it. He began to walk across the floor, dust rising in clouds about him as he moved. He reached the trolley and grasped his hammer, ready for sounding the next wheel, and he used a small hammer that could comfortably be held in one hand. He swung the hammer and struck the wheel.

The whistle screamed, drowning all other sounds. He groaned out loud. The whistle stopped, and he stood there, hammer in hand, wanting to strike the wheel again. Why could not the whistle have blown one second later? At least he would have been able to hear this wheel. He almost swung at the wheel again, but he could not; it was time for the Winding. He felt tears springing to his eyes at the unfairness of it all. He was old, and tired . . . He walked across to the Posterior Wall and slid open the panel that led to the Winding Room.

The Clock ticked.

This was only a small room and it was lined with planks like the others. It was completely featureless save for the Winding Handle which was set into the far wall and projected out into the room. He stepped inside and grasped the Handle. He put his weight on to it and it gradually moved downward, a ratchet clicking rapidly somewhere behind the wall. When the Handle was at its lowest extent, he slightly released the pressure and it rose up under his hands to its original position. He pressed down again. He would wind until the whistle blew again, a period he estimated to be about an hour, but a very long hour indeed. After the Winding he would be allowed a short time from his labor for lunch. Perhaps he could sound the remaining wheels in his lunch time?

The Clock ticked.

This would mean that he would miss his mash. He didn't mind about that too much; what really worried him was that he would miss his valuable rest period. The handle rose under his hands to its highest position. He was worried about the afternoon; how could he work if he missed his rest? He was weak enough now. He pressed down the handle. Sweat was beginning to run down his forehead; he felt terrible. Surely, at one time he had not felt so weak and tired. At one time?

At what time? For a second he was distracted from his task.

He slipped.

His foot went from under him and he fell forward, toward the handle. His hands slid from it and it swung up, catching him under the chin and throwing him backward on to the floor.

Lights flashed under his eyelids and his head buzzed, cutting out all other sound. When he came to he found that he was standing in the Great Chamber, swaying slightly.

Where was he?

For the first time his routine had been upset. The blow had jogged his mind from its well-worn paths. He realized that all the events of this day had conspired to open his senses to this apocalypse.

He looked about himself in amazement.

All was as it had been; the Fast Wheel hummed to itself and the cogs moved round at their various speeds.

But now the Clock mechanism looked alien and frightening to him as he regarded it with eyes unclouded by time.

How had he got here?

The stench of his own excrement arose from the corner of the Great Chamber, mixed with the acrid tang of the metal that surrounded him.

His head moved from side to side as he tried to see everything at once.

The Clock ticked, unexpectedly, causing him to clap his hands to his ears.

He had been so frightened; what had forced him to carry out these awful duties that had wasted so much of his life? He walked across to the far end of the Great Chamber and looked at the bones in the corner. He could see about four complete skeletons among the crumbling fragments of many others. They were all supported on a billowing pile of dust that came from innumerable others. Were these the bones of the others, who, before him, had tended the Clock? Did they, one day, suddenly know that their time was up, and did they, obeying a dim and contrived instinct, slowly, painfully drag themselves over to the pile and quietly lie upon it? And then did the next person come here and immediately settle into his ritual of duties, ignoring the twitching bundle in the corner, and later the odor of its corruption?

He walked back to his pallet and sat on it, burying his face in his hands. When *he* came to the Clock, was there a body in the corner? Did he sit in the Small Chamber eating his mash whilst the air was full of the taint of death?

What was his life before he came here?

Who was he?

He could not remember. Nor could he remember how long he had been here.

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He felt round the back of his head; his hair was hanging down almost to his shoulders. He estimated from this that he had been inside the Clock for a whole year of his life. He remembered something else. His age. He was twenty-five years old.

Twenty-five?

Then why was he so weak and tired?

Something wrong made a shudder crawl its way down his back. His hands had been registering something for some time, and now he consciously accepted their message. His hands told him that the skin hung loose and wrinkled round his face. His hands told him that his features were covered by wrinkled and flaccid parchment.

He sat up on the pallet in fear. He suddenly pulled out a little clump of hair, bringing tears to his eyes. But the tears did not obscure his vision completely, and he could see that the hair was snowy white. He looked up in agony.

"I'm old!"

The Clock ticked.

"I'm old . . ."

He looked down at his body. It was the body of an old, old man.

He slowly stood and then staggered to one of the supporting columns. He embraced the column, resting his cheek against the golden surface. His hand stroked the smooth metal of the column's surface, almost as if he were caressing a woman. He giggled.

"Look at me," he muttered to the Clock. "Look what you've done to me!"

The Fast Wheel hummed; the cogs turned.

"You've taken my life! I was young when I came here a year ago! Young! What have you done?"

His voice had become high and quavering and was swallowed in the sounds of the Clock.

"Oh God!" he said, and slumped against the column. He stayed there a long time, thinking. He was going to have his revenge. The Clock would run down, with no one to wind it. It would die, without him.

The Clock ticked, and he pushed his shoulders from the column, standing erect. He began to walk round the Great Chamber, putting out his hand here, stroking a wheel there. He blew kisses to the Fast Wheel and ran his flat hand gently over the surface of the Great Wheel. Wheedling, coquettish, he minced extravagantly through the Great Chamber, quietly talking to the Clock.

"Why?" he said. "Why? I've given you my life; what have you given in return? You have taken eighty years from me—what have you done with them? Are they stored vilely away in a cupboard? If I searched long enough, could I find them, stacked on a shelf? Could I put out my hands and slip them on, like clothes? Eh? Why did you steal them?"

His muttering suddenly became ominous in tone.

"I'll fix you; I won't even give you the pleasure of running quietly down, as you would have done with me. Oh no, my friend, you shall die violently; I'll show you no quarter."

He moved across to the trolley. He painfully lifted off the largest of the hammers and dragged it to the floor. A wheel of moderate size, about four feet across,

was quite near to him. With all his strength he swung the hammer in a low arc and relaxed only as it smashed into the wheel. The giant hammer broke off one of the cogs completely, and bent part of the wheel at an impossible angle. He dropped the hammer, and, filled with emotion, crammed his fists against his opened mouth.

The Clock ticked.

He found that he was weeping; why, he didn't understand.

The cog turned slowly, the damaged section moving nearer to its inevitable interaction with another wheel. He screwed up his eyes, and felt the warm tears running freely down his face.

"I've killed you," he said. He stood, thin, bleached and naked, paralysed and sobbing. Something would happen soon.

The damaged section interacted.

The wrecked cog spun suddenly and rapidly before its teeth engaged again. A shower of sparks flew out, burning his flesh. He started, both at the pain and at the sheer noise of that dreadful contact. At the threshold of his hearing, far below the other sounds of the Clock, he could hear the buckling of metal, the scraping of part on part. The other wheel buckled and spun in its turn. A spring burst from somewhere behind the wheel and scattered metal splinters all over the Chamber. Strange smells were in the air; the death-smells of the Clock.

A trail of damage was running across the mechanism of the Clock like an earthquake fissure running across land. It could not be seen, and outwardly practically everything was normal, but his ears could hear the changes in what had been familiar sounds. The grinding and destruction spreading like a canker could be heard clearly enough.

The Clock ticked, and even the tick sounded slightly weaker.

Louder and louder came the sounds of invisible destruction. He stood, still weeping, shaking as if with fever. The changed sounds of the Clock plunged him into a new and unfamiliar world.

A different sound made him look up. Above him the Fast Wheel was running eccentrically. It was wavering from side to side in its supports, oil spurting from its reservoirs. As it spun, it whined, jarringly.

Abruptly it broke free of its supports and, still whining, it dropped to the floor. It screamed as it hit the floor and was covered by the roaring flame of its friction. And then it was gone, only the hint of a bright streak in the air indicating its trajectory. It smashed into the far wall scattering dust from the bones as the wooden wall dissolved into splintering wreckage.

An ululation came from the Small Chamber. Inside, the mass of wheels screamed as they were tortured by the new disorder spreading through their myriad ranks. The Clock shook in its ague, shivering itself to death. Suddenly through the open door of the Small Chamber came the wheels, thousands of them. The Great Chamber was full of smooth silver wheels, some broken and flying through the air, others rolling lazily.

The Clock ticked, gratingly, and then screamed again. The Escapement Mechanism jammed rigid, but the Pendulum wanted to continue its swing. It did, bending its great four-foot-diameter column in a grotesque shape.

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Dust was everywhere, flying metal whistled about his ears. As the sound became unbelievable the destruction became complete.

His last sight was of light streaming brightly in as the whole Clock collapsed in a mass of falling wood and metal cogs.

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And it was everybody else's last sight, too. They may, for a brief period, have seen their world freezing itself in grotesque lack of activity. They may have seen water, solidifying in its fall to complete immobility; they may have seen birds flying through air that was like treacle, finally coming to rest above the ground; they may even have seen their own faces beginning to register terror, but never completing the expression . . .

But after that, there was no time to see anything.