

GÜNTER, CLOCKKEEPER

by Aaron Jones

Yesterday, when they buried Günter's father, few could say anything to young Günter, Jr., but, "Your father was a great man; if only he'd had more time," which was a perfectly normal thing to say when someone dies young. But it struck Günter as peculiar, considering that his father was the keeper of the town clock.

Two days earlier, both Günter and his father had aged another year, as they had been born on the same day, albeit twenty-four years apart. Until now, their shared birthday was handy to Günter, because he never forgot that he could add twenty-four to his own age to know exactly how old his father was. It was not handy anymore, because his father was dead.

Three days earlier, the day before their birthday, his father, with a mouthful of eggs and of mother's scones, told him what a big boy he was and that he'd soon have some clockworking tools of his own. When Günter came downstairs on the morning of his birthday, a large wooden box sat by his chair in the kitchen, which was no surprise to Günter because his father never lied to him. His father never lied to him until that evening, when, going for the nightly check on the clock, he said he'd be home for dinner and wasn't because drunks took his money and dragged him from the center of town behind their carriage, for no reason, really.

So Günter came, however prematurely, to be the new caretaker of the town clock, for no other man or boy could do it.

That is not to say, however, that others did not try. As if the splash of Günter, Sr.'s, body

in the town well that night was the crash of a great alarm bell, the bumbling Mayor Scholz and his Deputy Sheriff Zweigburger scrambled to find a suitable clockkeeper, the veritable Father Time of their town. They posted a hefty prize for anyone able to assume the position. While the fat old mayor had once been perfectly content to doze in his office, munching imported macaroons and sipping wine, he now scurried about, distraught at the prospect of losing the timely structure that his leisure depended on:

11:00 -- Nap.

12:00 -- Lunch.

1:30 -- Nap.

3:00 -- Afternoon Snack

And so on, in this fashion.

Albrecht, the butcher, came, a gnarled branch draped with pheasants spanning his shoulders, but could not convince Mayor Scholz of his clockworking talents. Neither could Emil, the baker, and his fresh Bienenstich, nor Gottfried, the winemaker, nor Fester and his three singing boys (who obviously did *not* understand the protocol).

After a pleasant lunch of pheasants and red wine and Bienenstich and more red wine for good measure, the mayor quickly called young Günter to audience, to discuss the integrity of the clock, its caretaker having “perished most prematurely,” he had said. The town clock was an invention of Günter’s father’s father’s father’s, and the family had kept the technology to itself for generations. Günter would have to “pick up the fork,” the mayor had said. Günter figured the mayor mispoke, his mind elsewhere. Mayor Scholz also managed to deny giving Günter the prize money, mumbling about age and family obligations, as he poured another glass of wine. Günter never did know if the mayor were talking about him or himself.

So for his first official clockkeeper duty, Günter was excused from his schooling to inspect the clock.

“With pleasure, Mr. Mayor, Sir,” Günter said, taking leave of the mayor.

“Boy?” The mayor stopped him in the doorway, “your father was a great man; if only he’d had more time.”

Again! This phrase chimed in Günter’s head like the noon bells as he made his way out of the town hall and across the square, lugging his tool kit. Some drunks (he swore it was Albrecht and Emil, maybe Gottfried) nearly obliterated him, giddyupping their horse cart down the sidewalk. Günter decided that he didn’t like men or drinking or horse carts, because they all had conspired to kill his father.

As he had done hundreds of times with his father, Günter walked past the well and around to the back of the tall clock tower. Here he unlocked the door, revealing a small rusty ladder that led straight up to the inner workings of the clock. Günter stepped into the ladder closet, the old metal door groaning as it closed behind him. He muscled his way up the ladder, his lanky arms straining slightly to support his negligible weight. Where most boys boast of venturing but actually never do, Günter climbed in darkness, past nesting spiders, sticky cobwebs, and slimy bricks, some of which threatened to leave potato-sized black-and-blue souvenirs on the heads of any intruders unfamiliar with the territory. But Günter maneuvered deftly and naturally, dancing the choreography passed down genetically through generations of family climbers. As his father always did, he sang quietly to himself, his thin voice reverberating in the tower:

Guardian angels God will send thee, all through the night.

Soft the drowsy hours are creeping, hill and vale in slumber sleeping,

I am loving vigil keeping, all through the night.

Grease, metal, and hot brick flavored the air as he sat breathing at the top of the ladder. The clanking of springs and gears, metal on metal, calmed him until he recollected how much he would miss his father. The one o'clock chime of the great bells could not drown the voices of the townspeople: "He was a great man; if only he'd had more time... if only he'd had more time..."

Günter was lost in the incessant mental repetition of that phrase when the wrench his father had given him on his birthday slipped from his fingers into the gears below, bouncing and clanking all the way to the ground. Günter sprang up in terror, only to bump his head on the tower's low rafters. He listened intently, trusting years of conditioning to pick out any irregularities in the clock's mechanics. A minute came and went (he watched the shadow of the minute hand on the inside of the west face), and Günter decided nothing had gone wrong. But suddenly the great bells went into action again, this time chiming five o'clock.

Five o'clock?

Günter peeked out from the clock face on the south side visible to the school. The great bells rang out as he watched the other children pour out into the street and run home to reunite with their mothers, and wait patiently for their fathers to return from work at the mine, or the butcher's, or the bakery.

Puzzled, Günter pulled his head back inside the tower and thought for a minute. It couldn't be five o'clock already--why, it had just struck noon when he came to the mayor and one when he first climbed into the clock. Surely, four hours hadn't passed. But who was he to argue with the clock, the official and only timekeeper of the town? It was five o'clock.

In that case, Günter realized, he ought to be getting home too--his mother would miss him soon. Another even smaller ladder went down the center of the clock, right through all the

springs and gears, and Günter would have to climb down it to find his wrench.

Two-thirds of the way down he noticed his wrench wedged into the first of two timing springs, in effect disabling it. When the great bells rang out again six times, Günter realized what happened. With that one timing spring out of commission, time was in fact going *faster*.

The gears of the great clock had not clicked forward even once before Günter conceived and executed his plan. With the ease of a surgeon, he extracted the entrenched wrench from timing spring one, cut the spring off completely, and jammed the wrench between the great coils of timing spring two. With a heaving lurch, the gears of the clock ground to a halt and then, in an indescribably timeless moment, reversed direction. The clock accelerated into the past.

Shadows above Günter's head rotated as the sun flew overhead from west to east. Darkness soon enveloped the clock, only to again fade to light as yesterday replayed. Günter watched the shadow of a gear overhead grow on the wall next to him, then squish into the ground, only to regenerate on the other side as the sun backtracked overhead. The sun then sank below the eastern horizon (or rose backward if you like), and darkness enveloped the clock for a second time. Suddenly, there was a splash in the well, the sound of a carriage approaching, a heated argument among several men, and the creaking of the metal door of the tower. Worried, Günter yanked the wrench from timing spring two. The clock jammed and stopped with a terrifying screech, the gears wailing. Then: silence.

Günter crept back up the ladder to get a better look at the scene outside. He cupped his clammy hands to his face, and breathed slowly through them. The clockwork consistency of his breath warmed and calmed him. A sound drifted up from the main ladder shaft: singing.

...Hill and vale in slumber sleeping,

I am loving vigil keeping, all through the night.

Günter's father pulled himself up and over the final rung of the main ladder, and stood, staring into the eyes of his stunned son.

“Günter.”

Günter leaped into his father's arms, soaking his father's dirty work coat with his tears. They held each other, motionless as the air around them. Time literally stood still. But Günter could not contain himself and shattered the silence with questions.

“I knew you'd come, checking on the clock, but the men were there, oh Dad, oh Dad, I can save you now, fix it, you don't have to go! You'll have all the time you need!”

“I know what you think, Günter, I know. But I've had my time. It's your turn now.”

With that, his father stepped back into the darkness and the clock shuddered back into motion, now mysteriously running again. As the sunlight crept back into the tower, the shadows of gears growing on the walls, Günter slumped to the floor, broken and bewildered.