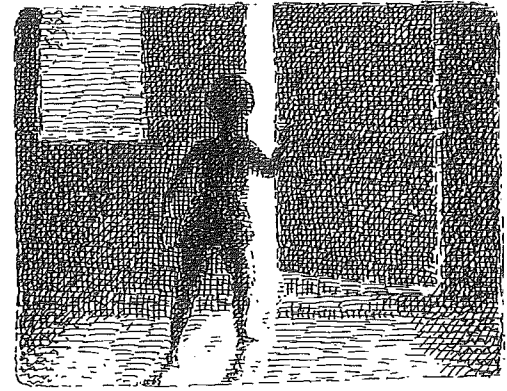


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PART THREE



Sir Ironsoul stopped at once, with a whirr and a click. His sword was inches from Gretl's throat. The prince's song rang out sweetly through the parlour.

Gretl could only stare: in horror at Sir Ironsoul and his sword, in wonder at the prince.

'Where did you come from?' she said. 'Are you the little prince in the story? I think you must be. But how cold you are! And who is this? How sharp his sword is! I don't like him at all. Oh, what must I do? I feel I'm supposed to do something, but I don't know what it is!'

There was no-one to help. She was alone



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with the two little figures, one all malice, the other all sweetness. Gretl touched the prince's cheek gently, and found it cold, but her touch awoke something in his machinery for an instant, and he turned his eyes to hers and smiled.

'Oh, you poor thing!' she cried.

He opened his lips, and sang one or two notes.

'I know what it is,' said Gretl. 'You're not well. And I don't like that little knight one bit, and I don't want to leave you here with him, but I know whose fault this is. It was Fritz who made the story up. If only we could find out how it finished ...'

She looked at the stove, where Fritz had thrown the sheets of paper on which his story was written. She had thought they were all destroyed, but crumpled up on the floor, in the shadow, there was one piece left unburnt.

She picked it up and straightened it out. It was the very page he had been reading when the stranger had come in. On it were the words:



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*He was very tall and thin, with a prominent nose and jaw. His eyes blazed like coals in caverns of darkness. His hair was long and grey, and he wore a black cloak with a loose hood like that of a monk; he had a harsh grating voice and his expression was full of savage curiosity. And that was the man who —*

There was no more. The story stopped at that point.

'That was exactly when he came in!' said Gretl to herself. But there were another few words scribbled below, and, peering closely, she managed to make them out.

*Oh, this is impossible! How can I write an ending to this story? I'll have to make it up when I get there, and hope I do it well. If I come up with something good, the devil can have my soul!*

Gretl's eyes widened, and she bit her lip in horror. People shouldn't say things like that! 'Well,' she said to herself, 'he started it all off, and I'm going to make him finish it. You sit in here and keep warm, Prince Florian, if that's



who you really are, and I'll go and fetch Fritz. He's the only one who can sort it out.'

So she threw on her cloak, and set off to the house where Fritz the storyteller had his lodging.

Meanwhile, Karl had been preparing the place in the mechanism of the great clock that was set aside for his masterpiece. Feverish with excitement, he hurried down the staircase of the clock tower and across the square to the inn. The old cat Putzi was still outside, sitting on the windowsill, watching everything as he licked his paws and cleaned his ears. It was cold out there, and he was wondering about coming in for a snooze by the stove.

But Karl didn't notice him. He had other things than cats on his mind. He went in quietly and shut the door, and then he stopped in alarm, for there was the canvas, thrown aside, and there was Sir Ironsoul, sword upraised, on the other side of the room.

Karl's heart missed a beat. Had someone else come in and disturbed the little knight? There was no-one dead, at least, but why had the fig-



ure moved? Karl looked around, and then he saw the little prince sitting politely in his chair, watching him. A thousand strange fears ran over his skin.

Karl opened his mouth to speak, and then realized that the child wasn't alive after all. It was another clockwork figure like Sir Ironsoul! And a far finer one, by the look of it. He peered at it closely. The hair, the finest gold wires he had ever seen; the bloom on the silver cheeks, like a butterfly's wing; the eyes, bright blue jewels, almost alive in the way they seemed to look at him!

Only Dr Kalmenius could have created this. And he must have brought it for Karl. What did the figure do?

Karl reached out and lifted the prince's hand from his lap. With a little flicker of his energy, Prince Florian shook Karl's hand, and sang a bar of music for him. Karl's hair stood on end, for an idea had just come to him. Why not put *this* figure in the clock instead of Sir Ironsoul? It was more finely finished, and a handsome little boy who sang a pretty tune would be far



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more popular with the crowds than a faceless knight who did nothing but threaten people with a sword.

And then he could keep Sir Ironsoul for himself.

And then ... Oh, how his mind raced. He could travel the world. He could become famous giving exhibitions and demonstrations.

He became quite dizzy as he thought of the uses to which he could put the metal knight. The gold he could steal, the forbidden treasures that could be his, if he had a secret accomplice, like Sir Ironsoul, who could be relied on always to kill and never to give him away! All he would have to do would be to trick his intended victim into saying the word 'devil', and leave Sir Ironsoul nearby to play his part. He, Karl, could be somewhere else entirely, playing cards with a dozen witnesses, or even in church surrounded by the faithful. No-one would ever know!

So excited did he become that he lost all sense of what was right. The church, his father and mother and brother and sister, Herr Ringelmann, every influence for good he'd ever



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known was whirled away into the darkness, and all he could see was the wealth and power that would be his if he used Sir Ironsoul in that way.

And before he could change his mind, he threw the canvas over the knight, tucked the stiffening figure of Prince Florian under his arm, and set off back to the clock tower.

Meanwhile, Gretl was struggling through the snow towards the house where Fritz lodged. She could see from the end of the street that all the windows were dark except one in the attic where Fritz often used to work throughout the night. She had to knock half a dozen times before the landlady came grumbling to open the door.

'Who is it? What do you want at this time of night? Oh, it's you, child; what in the world are you after?'

'I've got to speak to Herr Fritz! It's very important!'

Mumbling and frowning, the old lady stepped aside and said, 'Yes, I heard all about that business at the inn. Making up wicked stories! Frightening people! I'll be glad when he's gone.'



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In fact I've got half a mind to give him notice. Go on up, child, top of the stairs and keep going. No, you can't have a candle, this is the only one I've got and I need it myself. You've got sharp eyes; make do.'

So Gretl climbed the four staircases to the top of the house, each one darker and narrower than the one below, and came at last to a tiny landing where a line of light glowed beneath a door. There she knocked, and a nervous voice answered:

'Who is it? What do you want?'

'It's Gretl, Herr Fritz! From the inn! I've got to speak to you!'

'Come in, then – as long as you're by yourself ...'

Gretl opened the door. She found Fritz standing in the light of a smoky lamp, throwing paper after paper into a leather bag which was bulging with his clothes and books and other bits and pieces. A glass of plum brandy stood on the table beside him. He had already drunk quite a lot, by the look of him, for his eyes were wild, his cheeks were flushed, and his hair was standing on end.



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'What is it?' he said. 'What do you want?'

'That story you told us,' Gretl began, but she got no further, for the young man put his hands over his ears and shook his head violently.

'Don't speak of it! I wish I'd never begun it! I wish I'd never told a story in my life!'

'But you've got to listen to me!' she said. 'Something dreadful's going to happen, and I don't know what it is because you didn't finish writing the story!'

'How do you know I didn't finish it?' he said.

She showed him the sheet of paper she'd found. He groaned, and put his face in his hands.

'Groaning won't help,' she said. 'You've got to finish the story properly. What happens next?'

'I don't know!' he cried. 'I dreamed the first part of it, and it was so strange and horrible that I couldn't resist writing it down and pretending it was mine ... But I couldn't think of any more!'

'But what were you going to do when you got to that part?' she said.

'Make it up, of course!' he said. 'I've done that before. I often do it. I enjoy the risk, you see.'





THIS IS FRITZ: USELESS, YOU SEE. QUITE IRRESPONSIBLE. BUT THEN FRITZ WAS ONLY PLAYING AT BEING A STORYTELLER. IF HE WAS A PROPER CRAFTSMAN LIKE A CLOCKWORK-MAKER HE'D HAVE KNOWN THAT ALL ACTIONS HAVE THEIR CONSEQUENCES. FOR EVERY TICK THERE IS A TOCK. FOR EVERY ONCE UPON A TIME THERE MUST BE A STORY TO FOLLOW, BECAUSE IF A STORY DOESN'T, SOMETHING ELSE WILL, AND IT MIGHT NOT BE AS HARMLESS AS A STORY.



I start telling a story with no idea what's going to happen at the end, and I make it up when I get there. Sometimes it's even better than writing it down first. I was sure I could do it with this one. But when the door opened and the old man came in, I must have panicked ... Oh, I wish I'd never begun! I'll never tell a story again!

'You must tell the end of this one, though,' said Gretl, 'or something bad will happen. You've got to.'

'I can't!'

'You must.'

'I couldn't!'

'You *have* to.'

'Impossible,' he said. 'I can't control it any more. I wound it up and set it going, and it'll just have to work itself out. I wash my hands of it. I'm off!'

'But you can't! Where are you going?'

'Anywhere! Berlin, Vienna, Prague – as far away as I can get!'

And he poured himself another glass of plum brandy and swallowed it all in one go.



So Gretl sighed and turned to leave.

At the same time as she was feeling her way down the dark stairs in Fritz's lodging-house, Karl was going back into the inn. He had taken little Florian up to the clock tower and fastened him to the frame, ignoring the prince's helpless struggles and his musical requests for mercy. When morning came, there he would be, Karl's masterpiece, on show as everyone expected. And Karl would receive everyone's congratulations, and his certificate of competence from Herr Ringelmann, and he'd be entered in the roll of master clockwork-makers; and then he could leave the town and make his way with Sir Ironsoul into the wide world, where power and fortune awaited him!

But when he opened the door of the inn to collect the little knight and hide him in his lodgings, he felt a shiver of fear. He stood on the threshold, afraid and unwilling to enter. And once again he took no notice of Putzi the cat, who jumped down from the windowsill when he saw the door open. There's no need to be superstitious about cats, but they are our fellow



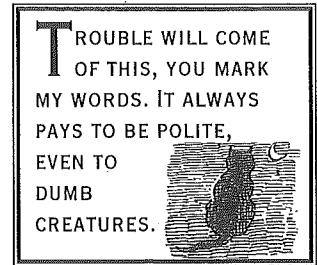
creatures, and we shouldn't ignore them. It would have been polite of Karl to offer his knuckles for the old cat to rub his head against, but Karl was wound up too tightly for politeness. So he didn't see the cat stalking in past his legs.

Finally Karl gathered his courage and went in. How still the room was! And how sinister that little figure under the canvas! And that sword-point: how wickedly sharp! Sharp enough to have pierced the canvas already, and be glinting in the lamplight ...

Some coals settled in the stove, sending a little flare of red out on the floor, and making Karl jump nervously. The glow made him think of the fires of hell, and he sweated and mopped his brow.

Then the long-case clock in the corner began to whirr and wheeze, preparing to strike. Karl leapt as if he'd been discovered in the act of murder, and then leant weakly against the table, his heart beating like thunder.

'Oh, I can't bear this!' he said. 'I've done



nothing wrong, have I? Then why am I so nervous? What is there to be frightened of?’

Hearing his words, old Putzi decided that here was someone who might give him a little milk, if he asked nicely; so the cat jumped up on the table beside him, and rubbed himself on Karl’s arm.

Feeling this, Karl turned in shock to see a black cat who had appeared, as it seemed, out of nowhere. Naturally, this was too much for Karl. He leapt away from the table with an exclamation of horror.

‘Oh! What the devil —?’

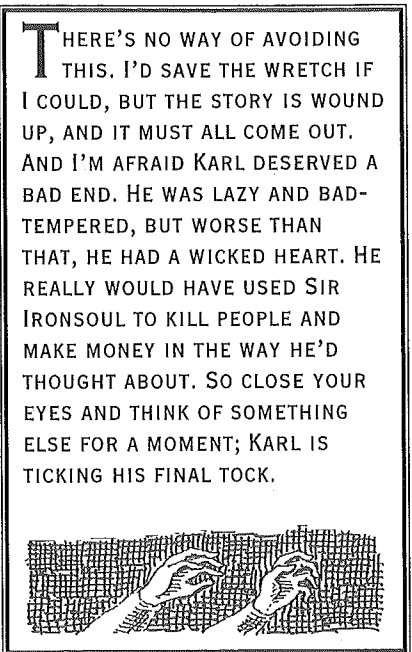
And then he clapped his hands to his mouth, as if trying to cram the word back inside. But it was too late. In the corner of the room, the metal figure had begun to move. The canvas fell to the floor, and Sir Ironsoul raised his sword even higher, and turned his helmet this way and that until he saw where Karl was cowering.

‘No! No! Stop – wait – the tune – let me whistle the tune—’

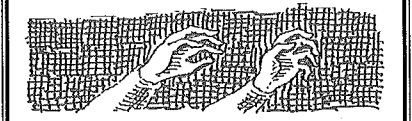
But his lips were too dry. Frantic, he licked



them with a dry tongue. No use! He couldn’t produce a sound. Nearer and nearer came the little knight with the sharp sword, and Karl stumbled away, trying to hum, to sing, to whistle, and all he could do was cry and stammer and sob, and the knight came closer and closer.



THERE’S NO WAY OF AVOIDING THIS. I’D SAVE THE WRETCH IF I COULD, BUT THE STORY IS WOUND UP, AND IT MUST ALL COME OUT. AND I’M AFRAID KARL DESERVED A BAD END. HE WAS LAZY AND BAD-TEMPERED, BUT WORSE THAN THAT, HE HAD A WICKED HEART. HE REALLY WOULD HAVE USED SIR IRNSOUL TO KILL PEOPLE AND MAKE MONEY IN THE WAY HE’D THOUGHT ABOUT. SO CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE FOR A MOMENT; KARL IS TICKING HIS FINAL TOCK.



When Gretl got back to the inn she heard Putzi miaowing inside, and said as she opened the door, ‘How did you get in, you silly cat?’

Putzi shot out into the square as Gretl came in, and wouldn’t stop to be petted. She shut the door and looked around for the prince, but she didn’t see him anywhere. Instead, a horrid sight met her eyes, and made her shiver and clutch her breast. There in the middle of the room

