

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.

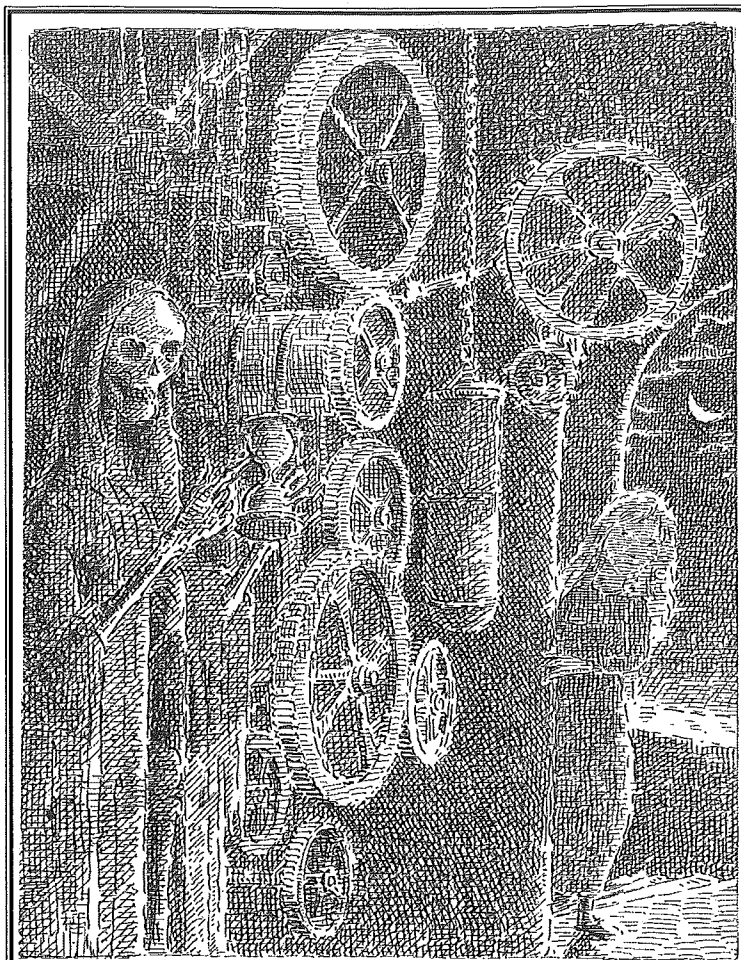
THERE’S NO WAY OF AVOIDING THIS. I’D SAVE THE WRETCH IF I COULD, BUT THE STORY IS WOUND UP, AND IT MUST ALL COME OUT. AND I’M AFRAID KARL DESERVED A BAD END. HE WAS LAZY AND BAD-TEMPERED, BUT WORSE THAN THAT, HE HAD A WICKED HEART. HE REALLY WOULD HAVE USED SIR IRONSOU TO KILL PEOPLE AND MAKE MONEY IN 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





TIME IS RUNNING OUT, LIKE SAND IN THE HOURGLASS, WHICH IS ANOTHER KIND OF CLOCK, AFTER ALL. WILL GRETL GET TO THE PRINCE IN TIME? SHE'S IN TIME NOW: SHE'S RIGHT INSIDE THE CLOCK, AT THE VERY HEART OF TIME. SHE'LL GET THERE.



stood Sir Ironsoul, with his helmet shining blankly and his sword slanting down. He was holding it like that because the point was in the throat of Karl the apprentice, who lay stark dead beside him.

Gretl nearly fainted, but she was a brave girl, and she had seen what lay in Karl's hand. It was the heavy iron key of the clock tower. With her mind in a whirl, she was still able to guess part of what had happened, if not all of it, and she realized what Karl must have done with the prince. She took the key from his hand and ran out of the inn and across the square to the great dark tower.

She turned the key in the lock and began to climb for the second time that night, but these stairs were higher and steeper than those in Fritz's lodging. And they were darker, too; and there were bats that flitted through the air; and the wind groaned across the mouths of the mighty bells, and made their ropes swing dismally.

But up and up she climbed, until she came to the lowest of the clock-chambers, where the



✻

oldest and simplest part of the mechanism was housed. In the darkness she felt her way around the huge iron cog-wheels, the thick ropes, the stiff metal figures of St Wolfgang and the devil, but she didn't find the prince; and so she climbed on. She ran her hands over the Archangel Michael, and in his armour he reminded her of Sir Ironsoul, and she took her hands away quickly. She felt up the side of a figure in a painted robe, and her fingers explored his face until she realized that it was the skull-face of Death, and she took her hands away from him, too.

The higher she climbed, the more noise the clock made: a ticking and a tocking, a clicking and a creaking, a whirring and a rumbling. She clambered over struts and levers and chains and cogwheels, and the further she went, the more she felt as if she, too, were becoming part of the clock; and all the time, she peered into the dark and felt around and listened with all her might.

Finally she clambered up through a trapdoor into the very topmost chamber, and found silver moonlight shining in on such a complexity of



✻

mechanical parts that she could make no sense of them at all. At the same moment, she heard a little song. It was the prince calling to her.

Dazzled by the moonlight, Gretl blinked and rubbed her eyes. And there was Prince Florian, with the very last of his clockwork life, singing like a nightingale.

'Oh! You poor cold thing! He's fastened you so tightly I can't undo the bolts – oh, that was wicked! He was going to leave you here and run away, I'm sure. What's the matter with you, Prince Florian? I'm sure you'd tell me if you could. I think you're ill, that's what the trouble is. I think you need warming up. You're too cold, but that's hardly surprising, seeing what they've done with you. Never mind! If I can't get you down, I'll stay up here with you. I can wrap my cloak around us both, you'll see. We're better off up here in any case, if you ask me. The things that have been going on! You'd never believe it! I won't tell you now, because you wouldn't go to sleep. I'll tell you in the morning, I promise. Are you comfortable, Prince Florian? You don't have to speak if you



don't want to; you can just nod.'

Prince Florian nodded, and Gretl tucked her cloak around them, and held the little boy in her arms as she went to sleep. The last thing she thought was: He *is* getting warmer, I'm sure; I can feel it!

The morning came. All through the town, visitors and townsfolk alike were getting dressed and eating their breakfasts hungrily, eager to see the new figure in the famous clock.

The snow-laden rooftops glittered and gleamed in the bright blue air, and the fragrance of roasting coffee and fresh-baked rolls drifted through the streets. And as time drew on towards ten o'clock, a strange rumour went round the town: the clockmaker's apprentice had been found dead! Murdered, what was more!

The police called Herr Ringelmann in to look at the body. The old clockmaker was shocked and dismayed to see his apprentice lying dead.

'The poor boy! It was his day of fame! Whatever can have happened? What a disaster! Who can have done this terrible thing?'



'Do you recognize this figure, Herr Ringelmann?' said the sergeant. 'This clock-work knight?'

'No, I've never seen it before in my life. Is that Karl's blood on its sword?'

'I'm afraid so. Do you think he could have made this figure?'

'No, certainly not! The figure he made is up in the clock. That's the tradition, you know, sergeant: he was going to fit his new figure in the clock on the last evening of his apprenticeship, just as I did in my time. Karl was a good boy; a little quiet and morose, perhaps, but a good apprentice; I'm sure he did what he was supposed to do, and we'll see his new figure when it comes out in a minute or so. What a sad occasion, instead of a happy one! The new figure will have to be his memorial, poor boy.'

Nothing was right that morning. The innkeeper was desperately anxious, because Gretl was missing. What could have happened to her? The whole town was in a ferment. A crowd had gathered outside the inn, and they watched the policemen carrying out Karl's body



on a stretcher, covered by a piece of canvas. But they didn't look that way for long, because it was nearly ten o'clock, and the time had come for the mechanism to reveal the new figure.

All eyes turned upwards. There was even more interest than usual, because of the strange circumstances of Karl's death, and the square was so crowded that you couldn't see the cobbles; people were crammed shoulder to shoulder, and every face was turned up like a flower to the sun.

The hour began to strike. The ancient clock wheezed and whirred as the mechanism came into play. The familiar figures came out first, and bowed or gestured or simply twirled on their toes; there was St Wolfgang, throwing the devil over his shoulder; there was the Archangel Michael with his glittering armour; there was the figure Herr Ringelmann had made for the end of *his* apprenticeship, many years ago: a little boy who popped out, thumbed his nose at Death, and twiddled his fingers before ducking out of sight again.

And then came the new figure.



But it wasn't one figure, it was two: two sleeping children, a girl and a boy, so lifelike and beautiful that they didn't seem to be made of clockwork at all.

A gasp of surprise went up from the crowd as the two little figures yawned and stretched and looked down, clutching each other for fear of the height, and yet laughing and chatting together in the bright morning light, and pointing out the sights around the square.

'A masterpiece!' cried someone, and another voice said, 'The best figures ever made!'

And more voices joined in:

'A work of genius!'

'Incomparable!'

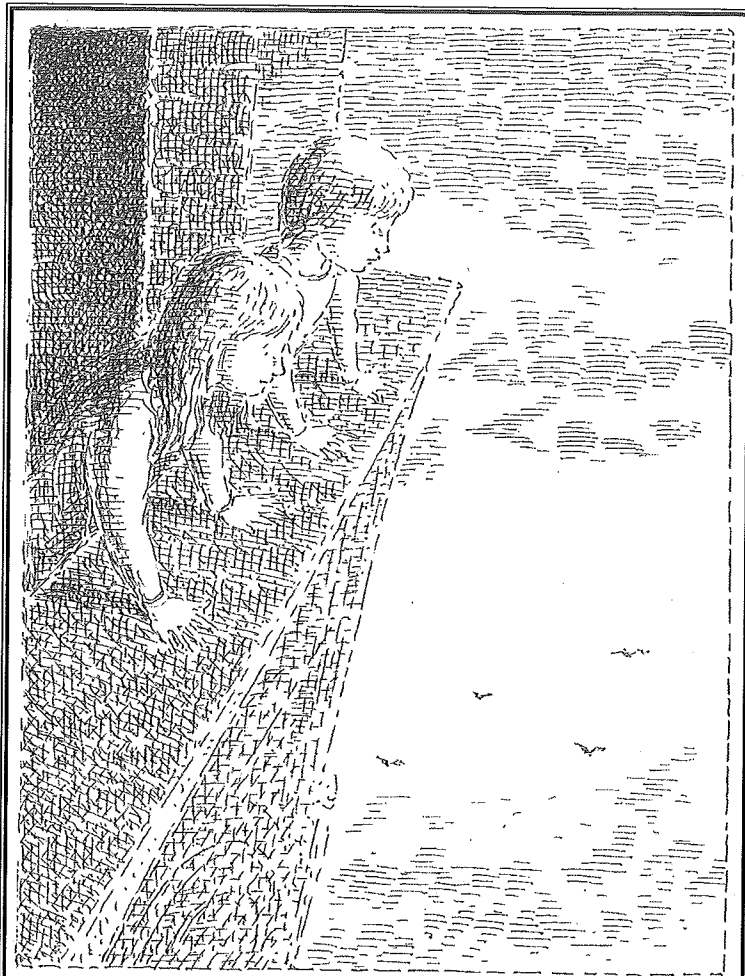
'So lifelike – look at the way they're waving at us!'

'I've never seen anything like it!'

But Herr Ringelmann had his suspicions, and peered upwards, shading his eyes. And then the innkeeper, looking up with everyone else, saw who it was, and gave a cry of joy.

'It's my Gretl! She's safe! Gretl, keep still! We'll come up and bring you down safely!'





OUT OF THE NIGHT, AND OUT OF THE PAST. GRETL HAS MADE FLORIAN A PRESENT OF HER HEART, AND WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING AT IS THE FUTURE.



Don't move! We'll be there in a moment!

And very soon, the two children were safely on the ground. Two children, because the prince wasn't clockwork any more; he was a child as real as any other, and so he remained. 'The heart that is given must also be kept,' as Dr Kalmenius had been about to say to Prince Otto; but the prince didn't listen, did he? No-one could guess where the little boy had come from, and Florian couldn't remember. Presently everyone accepted that he had been lost, and that they had better look after him; so they did.

As for the metal knight with the bloodstained sword, Herr Ringelmann took it away to his workshop to examine closely. When they asked him about it later, he could only shake his head.

'I don't know how anyone expected that to work,' he said. 'It's full of miscellaneous bits and pieces, and they're not even connected up properly: broken springs, wheels with cogs missing, rusty gears – worthless rubbish, all of it! I do hope Karl didn't make it; I thought better of him than that. Well, my friends, it's just a





mystery, and I don't suppose we'll ever get to the bottom of it.'

Nor did they, because the one person who might have been able to tell them the truth was Fritz, and he had been so badly scared that he'd left town before the sun rose, and he never came back. He fled to another part of Germany, and he was going to stop writing fiction altogether, until he found he could earn lots of money by making up speeches for politicians. As for what happened to Dr Kalmenius, who can say? He was only a character in a story, after all.

And if Gretl knew more than anyone, she said nothing about it. She had lost her heart to the prince, and kept it too, which was how he came to be turned from clockwork into boy. So they both lived happily ever after; and that was how they all wound up.

The End

