The Clock that Struck Thirteen

by Sholom Aleichem

THE clock struck thirteen.

That's the truth. I wasn't joking. I am telling you a true story of what happened in Kasrilevka, in our own house. I was there.

We had a hanging clock. It was an ancient clock that my grandfather had inherited from his father and his father's father straight back to the days of Count Chmelnitzky.

What a pity that a clock is a lifeless thing, mute and without speech. Otherwise what stories it could have told and told. It had a name throughout the town—Reb Nochem's clock—so unfaltering and true in its course that men came from all directions to set their own clocks and watches by it. Only Reb Leibesh Akoron, a man of learning and philosophy, who could tell time by the sun and knew the almanac by heart, said that our clock was—next to his little watch—just so much tin and hardware, not worth a pinch of snuff. But even he had to admit that it was still a clock. And you must remember that Reb Leibesh was the man who, every Wednesday night, climbed to the roof of the synagogue or to the hilltop nearby, before the evening prayers, to catch the exact moment when the sun went down—in one hand his watch, and in the other—his almanac. And just as the sun sank below the housetops he muttered to himself: "On the dot!"

He was always comparing the two timepieces. Walking in without so much as a Good Evening, he would glance up at our

hanging clock, then down at his little watch, then over to his almanac, again at our clock, down to his watch, over to the almanac, several times, and away he went.

Only one day when he came in to compare the two timepieces with his almanac, he let out a yell, "Nochem! Quick! Where are you?"

My father, more dead than alive, came running. "What—what's happened, Reb Leibesh?"

"You are asking me?" shouted Reb Leibesh, raising his little watch right up to my father's face, and pointing with his other hand up to our clock: "Nochem, why don't you say something? Can't you see? It's a minute and a half fast! A minute and a half! Cast out the thing!" He hurled the words like an angered prophet with a base image before him.

My father did not like this at all. What did he mean, telling him to cast the clock out? "Where is it written, Reb Leibesh, that my clock is a minute and a half *fast*? Maybe we can read the same sentence backward—that your watch is a minute and a half *slow*. How do you like that?"

Reb Leibesh looked at my father as at a man who has just said that Sabbath comes twice a week or that the Day of Atonement falls on Passover. Reb Leibesh didn't say a word. He sighed deeply, turned around, slammed the door and away he went.

But we didn't care. The whole town knew that Reb Leibesh was a man whom nothing could please. The best cantor you ever heard sounded like a crow; the wisest man was—an ass; the best marriage—a failure; the cleverest epigram—a dull commonplace.

But let us return to our clock. What a clock that was! Its chimes could be heard three doors away. Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . Almost half of the town ordered its life according to it. And what is Jewish life without a clock? How many

things there are that must be timed to the minute—the lighting of the Sabbath candles, the end of the Sabbath, the daily prayers, the salting and the soaking of the meat, the intervals between meals . . .

In short, our clock was the town clock. It was always faithful to us and to itself. In all its existence it never knew a repair man. My father, himself, was its only master. He had "an intuitive understanding of how it worked." Every year before Passover he carefully removed it from the wall, cleaned the insides with a feather duster, took out from within a mass of spiderwebs, mutilated flies which the spiders had lured inside, along with dead cockroaches that had lost their way and had met their sad fate there. Then, cleaned and sparkling, he hung the clock on the wall again, and it glowed. That is, they both glowed, the clock because it had been polished and cleaned, and my father—because the clock did.

But there came a day when a strange thing happened. It was on a beautiful cloudless day when we were sitting at the noonday meal. Whenever the clock struck I liked to count the strokes, and I did it out loud.

"One, two, three . . . seven . . . eleven, twelve, thirteen . . ."

What . . . thirteen!

"Thirteen!" cried my father, and burst out laughing. "A fine mathematician you are—may the evil eye spare you. Whoever heard of a clock striking thirteen?"

"Thirteen," I said. "On my word of honor. Thirteen."

"I'll give you thirteen smacks," cried my father, aroused. "Don't ever repeat such nonsense. Fool! A clock can't strike thirteen."

"Do you know what," my mother broke in, "I'm afraid that the child is right. It seems to me that I counted thirteen, too."

"Wonderful," said my father. "Another village heard from."

But at the same time he too began to suspect something.

After dinner he went to the clock, climbed on a stool, and prodded around inside until the clock began to strike. All three of us counted, nodding our heads at each stroke: "One, two, three . . . seven . . . nine . . . eleven, twelve, thirteen."

"Thirteen," repeated my father, with a look in his eye of a man who had just beheld the wall itself come to life and start talking. He prodded once more at the wheels. Once more the clock struck thirteen. My father climbed down from the stool pale as a sheet and remained standing in the middle of the room, looking down at the floor, chewing his beard and muttering to himself, "It struck thirteen . . . How is that? What does it mean? If it was out of order it would have stopped. What then?"

"What then?" said my mother. "Take down the clock and fix it. After all, you're the expert."

"Well," agreed my father, "maybe you're right." And taking down the clock he busied himself with it. He sweated over it, he worked all day over it, and at last hung it back in its place. Thank the Lord, the clock ran as it should, and when midnight came we all stood around it and counted each stroke till twelve. My father beamed at us.

"Well," he said, "no more thirteen."

"I've always said you were an expert," my mother said. "But there is one thing I don't understand. Why does it wheeze? It never used to wheeze like this before."

"You're imagining it," my father said. But listening carefully, we heard the clock wheeze when it got ready to ring, like an old man catching his breath before he coughs—"wh-wh-wh"—and then the boom . . . boom . . . boom. But even the boom itself was not the boom of olden days. The old boom had been a happy one, a joyous one, and now something sad had crept in, a sadness like that in the song of an old, worn-out cantor toward the end of the Day of Atonement . . .

As time went on the wheezing became louder and the ringing more subdued and mournful, and my father became melancholy. We could see him suffering as though he watched a live thing in agony and could do nothing to help it. It seemed as though at any moment the clock would stop altogether. The pendulum began to act strangely. Something shivered inside, something got caught and dragged, like an old man dragging a bad leg. We could see the clock getting ready to stop forever. But just in time, my father came to the decision that there was nothing wrong with the clock itself. What was wrong was the weight. Not enough weight. And so he fastened to the weight the pestle of my mother's mortar—a matter of several pounds. The clock began to run like a charm, and my father was happy again, a new man.

But it didn't last long. Again the clock began to fail. Again the pendulum began to act strangely, swinging sometimes fast and sometimes slow. It was heartrending, it tore you apart, to see the clock languish before your eyes. And my father, watching it, drooped also, lost interest in life, suffered anguish.

Like a good doctor devoted to his patient, considering every known treatment or possible remedy, my father tried every way imaginable to save the clock.

"Not enough weight, not enough life," said my father, and attached to the weight more and more objects. First an iron frying pan, and then a copper pitcher, then a flatiron, a bag of sand, a couple of bricks . . . Each time the clock drew fresh life and began to run. Painfully, with convulsions, but it worked. Till one night when a catastrophe took place.

It was a Friday night in winter. We had just eaten the Sabbath meal of delicious spicy fish with horseradish, fat chicken soup with noodles, pot roast with prunes and potatoes, and had said the grace that such a meal deserved. The candles were still flickering. The servant girl had just brought in the freshly

roasted sunflower seeds, when in came Muma Yenta, a toothless, dark-skinned little woman whose husband had abandoned her years ago and gone off to America.

"Good Sabbath," said Muma Yenta, breathless as usual. "I just knew you'd have sunflower seeds—the only trouble is—what can I crack them with? May my old man have as few years to live as I have teeth in my mouth . . .

"M-m-m," she went on, faster and faster, "I can still smell your fish, Malka . . . What a time *I* had getting fish this morning, with that Sarah-Pearl—the millionairess—standing next to me at the market. I was just saying to Menasha the fishman, 'Why is everything so high today?' when Sarah-Pearl jumps up with, 'Quick, I'm in a hurry. How much does this pickerel weigh?' 'What's your rush?' I say to her. 'The town isn't on fire. Menasha won't throw the fish back into the river. Among the rich,' I let them know, 'there is plenty of money but not much sense.' Then she goes and opens her mouth at me. 'Paupers,' says she, 'shouldn't come around here. If you have no money you shouldn't hanker after things.' What do you think of her nerve? What was she before she married—a peddler herself—standing in her mother's stall at the market?"

She caught her breath and went on: "These people and their marriages! Just like Abraham's Pessel-Peiseh who is so delighted with her daughter just because she married a rich man from Stristch, who took her just as she stood, without dowry. Wonderful luck she has. They say she is getting to look a sight. The life those children lead her . . . What do you think—it's so easy to be a stepmother? God forbid! Look at that Hava for instance. A good, well-meaning soul like that. But you should see the trouble she has with her stepchildren. The screaming you hear day and night, the way they talk back to her. And what's worse—pitch-patch—three smacks for a penny . . ."

The candles begin to gutter. The shadows tremble on the walls, they mount higher and higher. The sunflower seeds crackle. All of us are talking, telling stories to the company at large, with no one really listening. But Muma Yenta talks more than anybody.

"Listen to this," she lets out, "there is something even worse than all the rest. Not far from Yampola, a couple of miles, some robbers attacked a Jewish tavern the other night, killed everyone in the family, even an infant in a cradle. The only one left was a servant girl asleep on top of the oven in the kitchen. She heard the shrieks, jumped down from the oven, and looking through a crack in the door, saw the master and mistress lying murdered on the floor in a pool of blood. She took a chance—this servant girl—and jumped out of the window, running all the way to town yelling, 'Children of Israel, save us! Help! Help! Help!' "

Suddenly, in the midst of Muma Yenta's yelling, "Help! Help!"—we hear a crash—bang—smash—boom—bam! Immersed in the story, all we could think was that robbers were attacking our own home, and were shooting at us from all sides—or that the room had fallen in—or a hurricane had hit us. We couldn't move from our seats. We stared at each other speechless—waiting. Then all of us began to yell, "Help! Help! Help!"

In a frenzy my mother caught me in her arms, pressed me to her heart, and cried, "My child, if it's going to happen, let it happen to me! Oh . . ."

"What is it?" cries my father. "What's happened to him?"

"It's nothing. Nothing," yells Muma Yenta, waving her arms. "Be quiet." And the girl runs in from the kitchen, wild-eyed.

"What's the matter? What's happened? Is there a fire? Where is it?"

"Fire? What fire?" shouts Muma Yenta at the girl. "Go

burn, if you want to. Get scorched, if you like." She keeps scolding the girl as if it's all her fault, then turns to us.

"What are you all making this racket for? What are you frightened of? What do you think it is? Can't you see? It's just the clock. The clock fell down. Now do you know? Everything you could imagine was hung on it—a half a ton at least. So it fell down. What's strange about that? You wouldn't have been any better yourself . . ."

At last we come to our senses. We get up from the table one by one, go up to the clock and inspect it from all sides. There it lies, face down, broken, shattered, smashed, ruined forever.

"It is all over," says my father in a dull voice, his head bent as if standing before the dead. He wrings his hands and tears appear in his eyes. I look at him and I want to cry too.

"Hush, be quiet," says my mother, "why do you grieve? Perhaps it was destined. Maybe it was written in heaven that today, at this minute, the end should come. Let it be an atonement for our sins—though I should not mention it on the Sabbath—for you, for me, for our children, for our loved ones, for all of Israel. Amen. *Selah.*"

All that night I dreamed of clocks. I imagined that I saw our old clock lying on the ground, clothed in a white shroud. I imagined that I saw the clock still alive, but instead of a pendulum there swung back and forth a long tongue, a human tongue, and the clock did not ring, but groaned. And each groan tore something out of me. And on its face, where I used to see the twelve, I saw suddenly number thirteen. Yes, thirteen. You may believe me—on my word of honor.