

## The Clock that Struck Thirteen

*Sholom Aleichem*

In our house in Kasrilevke we had a hanging clock. It was an ancient clock that my grandfather had inherited from his father and his father's father. What a pity that a clock is a lifeless thing, mute and without speech. Otherwise what stories it could have 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.

Reb Leibesh was always comparing the two timepieces. He would glance up at our hanging clock, then down at his little watch, then over to his almanac, several times, and away he went.

Only one day, 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 up to our clock. "Can't you see? It's a minute and a half fast! A minute and a half!"

My father did not like this at all, "Where is it written, Reb Leibesh, that my clock is a minute and a half *fast*? Maybe your watch is a minute and a half *slow*."

Reb Leibesh looked at my father as at a man who has just said that the Day of Atonement falls on Passover. Reb Leibesh didn't say a word, he slammed the door, and went away.

But we didn't care.

What a clock that was! Its chimes could be heard three doors away.

And what is Jewish life without a clock? How many things 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, always faithful to us and to itself. In all its existence my father 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 a mass of spiderwebs, mutilated flies, cockroaches that had a sad fate there. Then, 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.

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...."

My father burst out laughing. "A fine mathematician you are! 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, "A clock can't strike thirteen."

"Do you know," my mother broke in, "the child is right. I counted thirteen, too."

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

But 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 of a man who had just beheld the wall itself come to life and start talking. He prodded at the wheels. Once more the clock struck thirteen. My father climbed down from the stool pale as a sheet, chewing his beard and muttering, "It struck thirteen.....How is that? If it was out of order it would have stopped. What then?"

"What then?" said my mother. "Take down the clock and fix it. You're the expert."

"Well," agreed my father, "maybe you're right." And 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 stood around it

and counted each stroke till twelve. My father beamed at us.

“I’ve always said you were an expert,” my mother said. “But, why does it wheeze? It never used to wheeze before.”

“You’re imagining it,” my father said. But listening carefully, we heard the clock wheeze, like an old man catching his breath before he coughs - “wh-wh-wh” - and then boom....boom....boom. But the old boom had been a happy one, and now something sad had crept in like an old worn-out cantor toward the end of the Day of Atonement.

As time went on the wheezing became louder, 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. 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 what was wrong was the weight. And so he fastened to the weight the pestle of my mother’s mortar. The clock began to run like a charm, and my father was happy again.

But it didn’t last long. Again the clock began to fail. The pendulum acted strangely, swinging sometimes fast, sometimes slow. 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, he 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 flat iron, of sand, of bricks... Each time the clock drew fresh life and began to run. Painfully, with convulsions, but it worked. Till one night a catastrophe took place.

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 servant girl had just brought in the freshly roasted sunflower seeds. The candles began to gutter. All of us are talking, telling stories to the company at large.

“Listen to this,” a neighbour says, “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 in a pool of blood. She jumped out the window, running all the way to town yelling, ‘Children of Israel, save us! Help! Help! Help!’”

Suddenly, in the midst of “Help! Help!” we heard a crash—bang—smash—boom—bam! Immersed in the story, all we could think was that robbers were attacking our own home, shooting at us from all sides. 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 pressed me to her heart, and cried, “My child, if it’s going to happen, let it happen to me!”

“What is it?” cries my father.

“It’s nothing. Nothing.” Yells the neighbour, “Be quiet.”

And our servant girl runs in from the kitchen, wild-eyed. “What’s happened? Is there a fire?”

“Fire? What fire?” shouts the neighbour, then turns to us.

“What are you making this racket for? Why are you frightened? It’s just the clock. Everything you could imagine was hung on it – a half a ton at least. So it fell down. What’s strange about that?”

At last we come to our senses. We go up to inspect the clock. There it lies, face down, shattered, ruined forever.

“It’s all over,” says my father in a dull voice, his head bent as if standing before the dead. Tears appear in his eyes. I look at him and I want to cry, too.

“Hush.” says my mother, “why do you grieve? 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, that I saw the clock still alive, but instead of a pendulum there swung back and forth a long

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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.