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The Tick of the Clock

There Was a Legend About It

By EMERSON MARBLE

There is coming about a singular mingling of American wealth and European ancestral abodes. It is now quite the fashion for an American multimillionaire to buy an old castle, repair it, decorate it and keep it for one of his homes. I am not exactly a multimillionaire. Indeed, I am scarcely a millionaire, but plenty rich enough to have bought a castle—a small one—and put it in habitable order.

It is a veritable feudal castle, situated in Pomerania between the towns of Dierenow and Kolberg, on the Baltic sea. It stands on an eminence overlooking the sea and altogether makes a delightful summer residence. As to winter—well, I can't say how pleasant it is in winter, for the moment the winds grow the least bleak in autumn I invariably leave, like the birds, for a warmer climate, but I should fancy it would be very desolate.

With the castle I bought what of the furniture remained in it. There were not many pieces, but what there was was very old. There was an elaborate bedstead with the arms of the family that built the castle carved upon the framework set on the posts supporting the canopy. There was the original dining table of massive oak. No wonder it remained. It was too heavy to be easily taken away. There was a spinning wheel that had spun all the material worn by the members of the inhabitant family for centuries.

At a turn in the great staircase leading to the rooms above stood one of the first clocks ever made. It was seven feet high and large in proportion. The machinery was crude, the weights heavy and the hands warped out of shape with age. But they were not moving. Indeed, they had not moved for many years. The pendulum was unhooked and standing in the case just below where it had ticked away a number of generations. A baby would be born, live to threescore years and ten, die, and meanwhile the pendulum would swing slowly back and forth, as the poet has beautifully expressed it, saying, "Never, forever; forever, never."

Of course there was a legend about the clock. There always is a legend about an old timepiece like that. A musty record book went with the premises, giving the history of the castle in entries that had been made from time to time. I went to live there in the early spring, intending to spend the summer, and one of my principal amusements from the first was poring over this old record. Certain entries I found scattered here and there interested me exceedingly. These are samples:

Dec. 12, 1654.
At midnight the clock stopped. All knew that it would likely begin to swing at the next midnight and that it would mark the hour of our good Sir Olaf's death, who is lying sorely distempred.

Dec. 13, 1654.
The clock began again to tick at midnight and gave twenty-five ticks, when it stopped again. Sir Olaf will die on Christmas day. The clock will not begin to tick again till after his death.

A later entry was as follows:
June 3, 1743.
Though the pendulum of the clock has been detached for forty years last midnight, a loud ticking was heard in the castle. All counted seven ticks. Poor little Hubert is very low. We look for his spirit to pass away in three days.

From a previous entry recording the birth of Hubert I judged that the lord of the castle and his wife had been married long without a child and Hubert had come to them a great blessing. After his death—he seems to have died in childhood—the entries for some twenty years are very meager, and the castle appears to have been seldom occupied.

I wondered at the superstitions of these people, who seemed to look upon the supposed or reported or dreamed ticking of a rusty clock whose pendulum had been detached for forty years as no more unusual than one would consider the appearance of a comet in the heavens. Nevertheless I never passed the old clock as I went up and down stairs without something akin to dread. I attributed this feeling to the superstition prevailing among my own ancestors centuries ago, the rudiments of which still exist in me.

I passed a delightful summer in my castle. I would sit all day looking at the ships now far out at sea, moving apparently so slowly that I could not detect their motion, just as we fall to perceive it in the passage of our lives. In the morning a sail would stand on the horizon, a mere spark of yellow

sunlight, and by noon it would be opposite me. Sometimes when the wind was light it would be within my range of vision all day. On a terrace, at my window or on the battlements of a tower I would dream dreams of the former denizens of my castle.

At one time I could see a riking ship pulled up to the shore below me, pennant knights debark and, coming up to the drawbridge, stand and call to me to come down and lower it for them. At another men would be noisy in the court yard putting on armor and mounting fiery steeds. There would be a sound of chains running through pulleys, a thud of the drawbridge as it came down, then a clatter of horses' hoofs upon it as the warriors under their feudal lord went forth to do battle for the king. Then they go scampering over the winding road, their metal suits and armor shining in the sun, their plumes dancing on their heads, their forms growing less and less, horses and men passing into a gradual confusion until they are swallowed up in a green wood.

The summer passed altogether too quickly. September came and my children, preferring the gay life of Berlin, departed and my wife was obliged to go with them. I preferred to remain a few weeks longer. So I let them go, intending to content myself with the companionship of those who, in my dreams, had centuries before peopled my castle. But the days had grown very short in that northern region by September and evening came all too early. I did my dreaming before the mammoth fireplace where I burned great logs, but, though they blazed and crackled and sputtered merrily, I did not like being alone. There were servants, to be sure, but I could have no companionship with them.

One night a dark cloud came over the sea and brought a shower. I was lying in bed and heard the rain come down for a few minutes, after which all was still again. I was about dropping off to sleep when my attention was arrested by what sounded exactly like the tick of a clock.

Could it be the old timepiece on the stairs?
I waited for a repetition. It was not a second, but what seemed ten seconds, when it came again. My heart stood still. Was the old machine about to predict the day of my death? I poohpoohed. There it is again, a third tick coming after the same interval. I tried to recall something in the old record book mentioning that the ticks marked more than a second of time. Nothing was said about this, but since they were phantom ticks by a pendulum that was not hung and since the weights were resting quietly in the bottom of the case an interval of one second was not to be expected. The seconds of eternity are sometimes centuries in duration.

Why had I begun to count the ticks? I would cease to do so. I tried, but failed. Four, five, six, seven, eight—I was obliged to count them. They would not permit me not to count them. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen—it was the 13th day of the month, and I hoped there might not be another tick. Then it would be no warning to me. Warning! What warning? That I was going to die some time during the month between the 13th and 31st?

Nonsense!
But my heart didn't say nonsense at all. It beat like a triphammer. There it is—fourteen. Now I hoped it would tick on. If I must die I would rather have time for preparation. I continued counting the ticks. I had to continue counting them—fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

What was that moan?
Oh, that's the wind. I have heard that sigh before. It comes from the current passing in a certain direction through openings. But how like a moan of one in suffering! It's the imagination that is working upon me. I wish morning would come. But it won't. The ticks always begin at midnight, and there has thus far been but twenty of them.

Twenty-one, twenty-two—it seems to me that there is a longer interval than at first—twenty-three, twenty-four. Surely they are coming to an end. There is now a long while between each. Like the breaths of one dying I counted twenty-seven, and there must have been half a minute before twenty-eight came. And it was the last.

Oh, heavens! I'm to die on the 28th of this month!
What a night I spent. Would that my castle had been blown up by the Norsemen centuries ago and I had never seen it. Two weeks to live! Two weeks and one day! I would telegraph my wife the first thing in the morning. Telegraph what? That I was to be ticked out of existence by a rusty clock with no pendulum? How could I do that? Doubtless when light came again I would feel better about it.

And so I did. I arose, ate a good breakfast and got on pretty well till evening was coming on, when I called my seneschal—a fat, baldheaded Swede—and told him that I would take the

evening train for Berlin.

"Why, Herr, I thought you would stay with us to the end of the month!"
"The 28th? No. What am I talking about? I am going on the first train. And, Adolph, I wish you to take the old clock off the stair landing and put it down in the cellar. Bury it. No, don't do that. Don't do anything. I'll write you."

I seized my suit case and walked to the station, though it was two miles. I wished to put distance between me and that old clock. What shall I say when I reach Berlin? That I'm sick? Who'll believe me?

Nobody did. I told my wife what and scared me away from the castle, but we kept it from the others.
"Why, I always thought you had such a contempt for superstition!" she said.

"So I have till I see a ghost myself," I replied.

I thanked heaven when the 28th of September had passed and I still lived. There is a sequel to this story, but it didn't transpire for a long while. One night when my wife and I were at our castle it rained. I awakened her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The clock is ticking."

She listened to the first tick, then turned over and was going to sleep.

"Well?" I observed.

"That's a dripping of water!"

This time the clock ticked all night.

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His marriage, too, was out of the ordinary. It happened while he was at Oxford. His father told him that he could not afford to keep him there any longer. Hawker at once set out to the home of his godmother, Miss Charlotte Ana, twenty-one years his senior and the possessor of an annuity of \$1,000. He is said to have "run from Stratton to Bude, arriving hot and blown," and proposed to her. She accepted him. He returned to Oxford a married man and won a fellowship. The marriage was a happy one.

When his wife died Hawker wore at her funeral a pink hat without a brim. But this was in no disrespect to her memory. It so happened that it was his usual headgear at that time.

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