

The Magic Watch

By Raphael

It was a glorious evening in the summer of 1793— sky and cloud blending in one uniform flood of splendour. The brightness of the heavens was reflected on the broad bosom of the Saale, a river which, passing Jena, falls lower down into the Elbe, whence the commingled waters roll onward till lost in the Noordt Zee.

On the banks of this stream, not more than a mile from Jena, sat two persons enjoying the delicious coolness of the hour. Their dress was remarkable, and sufficiently indicative of their pursuits.—Their sable garments and caps of black velvet, their long streaming hair, combed down the shoulders and back and the straight swords suspended from their right breasts denoted them to be two of the burschen, or students of the University of Jena.

‘Such an evening as this,’ said the elder youth, addressing his companion, ‘and thou here? Thyrsa is much indebted to thee for thy attention. Thou a lover!’

‘Thyrsa is gone with her mother to Carlsbad,’ rejoined his companion, ‘so thou mayst cease thy wonderment.’

‘So far from it, that I wonder the more. A true lover knows not the relations of space. To Carlsbad! Why ’tis no more than—but *seht!* who have we here?’

As he spoke, they were approached by a little old man, whose garments of brown serge appeared to have seen considerable service. He wore a conical hat, and carried in his hand an antique gold-headed cane. His features betokened great age; but his frame, though exceedingly spare, was apparently healthy and active. His eyes were singularly large and bright; and his hair, inconsistent in some respects with the rest of his appearance, crowded from under his high-crowned hat in black and grizzly masses.

‘A good evening to you, Meine Herren,’ said the little old man, with a most polite bow, as he approached the students.

They returned his salutation with the doubtful courtesy usual in intercourse with a stranger, whose appearance induces an anxiety to avoid a more intimate acquaintance with him. The old man did not seem to notice the coolness of his reception, but continued: ‘What think you of this?’ taking from his pocket a golden watch richly chased, and studded all over with diamonds.

The students were delighted with the splendid jewel, and admired by turns the beauty of the manufacture and the costliness of the materials. The elder youth, however, found it impossible to refrain from bestowing one or two suspicious glances on the individual whose outward man but little accorded with the possession of so valuable a treasure.

‘He must be a thief and have stolen this watch,’ thought the sceptical student. ‘I will observe him closely.’

But as he bent his eyes again upon the stranger, he met the old man’s look, and felt, he knew not why, somewhat daunted by it. He turned aside, and walked from his companion a few paces.

‘I would,’ thought he, ‘give my folio Plato, with all old Blunderdrunck’s marginal comments, to know who this old man is, whose look has startled me thus, with his two great hyaena-looking eyes, that shoot through one like a flash of lightning. He looks for all the world like a travelling quack-doctor, with his threadbare cloak and his sugarloaf hat, and yet he possesses a watch fit for an emperor, and talks to two burschen as if they were his boon companions.’

On returning to the spot where he had left his friend, he found him still absorbed in admiration of the watch. The old man stood by, his great eyes still riveted upon the student, and a something, not a smile, playing over his sallow and furrowed countenance.

‘You seem pleased with my watch,’ said the little old man to Theophan Guscht, the younger student, who continued his fixed and longing gaze on the beautiful bauble: ‘Perhaps you would like to become its owner?’

‘Its owner!’ said Theophan, ‘ah, you jest;’—and he thought, ‘what a pretty present it would be for Thyrsa on our wedding-day.’

‘Yes,’ replied the old man, ‘its owner—I am myself willing to part with it. What offer do you make for it?’

‘What offer, indeed; as if I could afford to purchase it. There is not a bursche in our university who would venture to bid a price for so precious a jewel.’

‘Well then, you will not purchase my watch?’

Theophan shook his head, half mournfully.

‘Nor you Mein Herr?’ turning to the other student.

‘Nein,’ was the brief negative.

‘But,’ said the old man, again addressing Theophan, ‘were I to offer you this watch—a free present—you would not refuse it perhaps?’

‘Perhaps I should not: *perhaps*, which is yet more likely—you will not put it in my power. But we love not jesting with strangers.’

‘It is rarely that *I* jest,’ returned the old man; ‘those with whom I do, seldom retort. But say the word, and the watch is yours.’

‘Do you really,’ exclaimed Theophan, his voice trembling with joyful surprise—‘do you really say so! Ach Gott!—Himmell! what shall I—how can I sufficiently thank you?’

‘It matters not,’ said the old man, ‘you are welcome to it. There is however, one condition annexed to the gift.’

‘A condition—what is it?’

The elder student pulled Theophan by the sleeve: ‘accept not his gifts,’ he whispered; ‘come away, I doubt him much.’ And he walked on.

‘Stay a moment, Jans,’ said Theophan; but his companion continued his steps. Theophan was undecided whether or not he should follow him; but he looked at the watch, thought of Thyrsa, and remained.

‘The condition on which you accept this bauble—the condition on which others have accepted it—is, that you wind it up every night, for a year, before sunset.’

The student laughed. ‘A mighty condition, truly—give me the watch.’

‘Or,’ continued the old man, without heeding the interruption ‘*if you fail in fulfilling the condition, you die within six hours after the stopping of the watch.* It will stop at sunset if not wound up before.’

‘I like not that condition,’ said Theophan. ‘Be patient—I must consider your offer.’

He did so; he thought of the easiness of avoiding the possible calamity; he thought of the beauty of the watch—above all, he thought of Thyrsa and his wedding-day.

‘Pshaw! why do I hesitate,’ said he to himself; then turning to the old man ‘Give me the watch—I agree to your condition.’

‘You are to wind it up before sunset for a year or die within six hours.’

‘So thou hast said, and I am content and thanks for thy gift.’

‘Thank me at the year’s end, if thou wilt,’ replied the old man, ‘meanwhile, farewell.’

‘Farewell I I doubt not to be able to render my thanks at the end of the term.’

Theophan was surprised, as he pronounced these words, to perceive that the old man was gone.

‘Be he who he may, I fear him not,’ said he, ‘I know the terms on which I have accepted his gift.—What a fool was Jans Herwest to refuse his offer so rudely.’

He quitted the spot on which he stood, and moved homewards. He entered Jena, sought his lodging, put by his watch, and, lighting his lamp, opened his friend’s folio Plato, (with Blunderdrunk’s marginal comments,) and endeavoured to apply to the Symposium. But in ten minutes he dosed the book with impatience, for his excited mind rejected the philosophic feast; and he strolled into the little garden which his chamber window commanded, to think of the events of the evening, and, with a lover’s passion, to repeat and bless the name of his Thyrza.

Time waned, and the watch was regularly wound up. Love smiled, for Thyrza was not cruel. Our bursche had resumed his studies, and was in due time considered as one of the most promising students of the whole University of Jena.

But, as we already observed, time flew apace; and the day but one before the happy day that was to give to Theophan his blooming bride, had arrived—which had been looked forward to with such joyful anticipations, and Theophan had bidden adieu to most of his fellow students, and taken leave of the learned professors whose lectures he had attended with so much benefit. It was a fine morning, and, being at leisure, he bethought him in what manner he should pass the day. Any novice can guess how the problem was solved. He would go and visit Thyrza.

He set out accordingly, and was presently before the gate of David Angerstell’s garden. A narrow, pebbled walk intersected it, at the top of which stood the house, an old quaint black and white building, with clumsy projecting upper stories, that spread to almost twice the extent of the foundation. A quantity of round, dropsical-looking flower-pots were ranged on either side of the door. The casement of a projecting window was open to receive the light breezes that blew across the flower beds, at which a young female was seated—a beautiful, taper-waisted girl, with a demure, intelligent countenance, light twining hair, and a blue furtively laughing eye. True as fate, that blue eye had caught a glimpse of her approaching lover. In a moment he was by her side, and kissed with eager lips the soft little white hand that seemed to melt in his pressure.

The lovers met in all the confiding tenderness of mutual affection; happy mortals! the moments flew fast—fast—so fast that—But let us take time.

They had strolled out into the garden; for the considerate parents of Thyrza had shown no disposition to interrupt their discourse further than by a mere welcome to their intended son-in-law. The evening was one of deep, full stillness—that rich, tranquil glow, that heightens and purifies happiness, and deprives sorrow of half its bitterness. Thought was all alive within their breasts, and the eloquence of words seemed faint to the tide of feeling that flashed from their eyes.

Theophan and Thyrza rambled, and looked, and whispered—and rambled, looked, and whispered again and again—and time ambled too gently for his motion to be perceived. The maiden looked on the sky: ‘How beautiful the sun has set,’ said she.

‘The sun set!’ echoed Theophan, with a violence that terrified his companion—‘*the sun set! then I am lost!* We have met for the last time, Thyrza.’

‘Dearest Theophan,’ replied the trembling girl, ‘why do you terrify me thus? Met for the last time! Oh! no, it cannot be. What! what calls thee hence?’

‘*He calls who must be obeyed*—but six short hours—and then, Thyrza, wilt thou bestow one thought on my memory?’

She spoke not—moved not:—senseless and inanimate she lay in his arms, pale and cold as a marble statue, and beautiful as a sculptor's dream. Theophan bore her swiftly to the house, placed her on a couch, and called for assistance. He listened, and heard approaching footsteps obeying the summons—pressed his lips to her cold forehead, and, springing from the casement, crossed the garden, and in ten minutes was buried in the obscurity of a gloomy wood, or rather thicket, some miles or thereabouts from Jena.

Overcome by the passionate affliction that fevered his blood and throbbed in every pulse, Theophan threw himself down on a grassy eminence, and lay for some time in that torpid state of feeling in which the mind, blunted by sudden and overwhelming calamity, ceases to be aware of the horrors of its situation, and, stunned into a mockery of repose, awaits almost unconsciously the consummation of evil that impends it.

Theophan was attracted from this lethargy by the splashing rain, which fell upon him in large thunder-drops. He looked around, and found himself in almost total darkness. The clouded sky, the low, deep voice of the wind, booming through the trees and swaying their high tops, bespoke the approaching storm. It burst upon him at length in all its fury! Theophan hailed the distraction, for the heart loves what assimilates to itself, and his was wrung almost to breaking with agony. He stood up and shouted to the raging elements! He paused, and listened, for he thought some one replied. He shouted again, but it was not this time in mere recklessness. Amid the howling of the tempest he once more heard an answering shout: there was something strange in the voice that could thus render itself audible above the din of the storm. Again and again it was the same; once it seemed to die away into a fiend-like laugh. Theophan's blood curdled as it ran—and his mood of desperation was exchanged for one of deep, fearful, and overstrained attention.

The tempest suddenly ceased; the thunder died away in faint and distant moanings, and the lightning flashes became less frequent and vivid. The last of these showed Theophan that he was not *alone*. Within his arm's reach stood a little old man: he wore a conical hat—leaned on a gold-headed cane—above all, he had a pair of large glaring eyes, that Theophan had no difficulty in instantly recognizing.

When the momentary flash had subsided, the student and his companion were left in darkness, and Theophan could with difficulty discern the form of his companion.

There was a long silence.

'*Do you remember me?*' at length interrogated the mysterious stranger.

'*Perfectly,*' replied the student.

'That is well—I thought you might have forgotten me; wits have short memories. But perhaps you do not aspire to the character.'

'You, at least, must be aware I have no claim to it, otherwise I had not been the dupe lam.'

'That is to say, you have made a compact, broken your part of it, and are now angry that you are likely to be called upon for the penalty. What is the hour?'

'I know not—I shall shortly.'

'Does *she* know of this? you know whom I mean.'

'Old man I exclaimed Theophan, fiercely, 'begone. I have broken the agreement—that I know. I must pay the penalty—of that too I am aware, and am ready so to do; but my hour is not yet come: torment me not, but leave me. I would await my doom alone.'

'Ah, well—I can make allowances. You are somewhat testy with your friends; but that we will overlook. Suppose now, the penalty you have incurred could be pretermitted.'

The student replied with a look of incredulous scorn.

‘Well, I see you are sceptical,’ continued the old man; ‘but consider. You are young, active, well gifted in body and in mind.’

‘What is that to thee? still more, what is it to me *now*?’

‘Much: but do not interrupt me. You love, and are beloved.’

‘I tell thee again, cease and begone to—*hell!*’

‘*Presently!* You are all of these now—what will you be, what will Thyrza Angerstell be, tomorrow?’

The student’s patience was exhausted; he sprang on the old man, intending to dash him to the earth.

He might as well have tried his strength on one of the stunted oaks that grew beside him. The old man moved not—not the fraction of an inch.

‘Thou hast wearied thyself to little purpose; friend,’ said he; ‘we will now, if it pleases you, proceed to business. You would doubtless be willing to be released from the penalty of your neglect?’

‘Probably I might.’

‘You would even be willing that the lot should fall upon another in preference to yourself?’

The student paused.

‘No: I am content to bear the punishment of my own folly. And still—oh, Thyrza!’ He groaned in the agony of his spirit.

‘What! with the advantages you possess! the prospect before you—the life of happiness you might propose to yourself—and more, the happiness you might confer on Thyrza—with all these in your reach, you prefer death to life? How many an old and useless being, upon whom the lot might fall, would hail joyfully the doom which you shudder even to contemplate.’

‘Stay—were I to embrace your offer, how must the lot be decided—to whom must I transfer my punishment?’

‘Do this—your term will be prolonged twenty-four hours. Send the watch to Adrian Wenzel, the goldsmith, to sell; if, within that time, he dispose of it, the purchaser takes your place and you will be free. But decide quickly—my time is brief, yours also must be so, unless you accede to my terms.’

‘But who are you to whom is given the power of life and death—of sentencing and reprieving?’

‘Seek not to know of what concerns you not. Once more, do you agree?’

‘First, tell me what is your motive in offering me this chance?’

‘Motive?—none. I am naturally compassionate. But decide—there is a leaf trembling on yonder bough, it will fall in a moment. If it reach the ground before you determine—Farewell!’

The leaf dropped from the tree. ‘*I consent!*’ exclaimed the student. He looked for the old man, but found that he was alone. At the same time the toll of the midnight clock sounded on his ear: it ceased—the hour was passed, *and he lived!*

It was about the noon of the following day that the goldsmith, Adrian Wenzel, sold to a customer the most beautiful watch in Jena. Having completed the bargain, he repaired immediately to Theophan Guscht’s lodgings.

‘Well, have you sold my watch?’

‘I have—here is the money, Mein Herr.’

‘Very well: there is your share of the proceeds.’

The goldsmith departed, and Theophan shortly afterwards directed his steps towards Angerstell's house, meditating as he went on his probable reception, and what he could offer in extenuation of his behaviour the day before.

Ere he had settled this knotty point to his satisfaction, he arrived at the garden gate. He hesitated—grew cold and hot by turns—his heart throbbed violently. At last, making a strong effort at self command, he entered.

At the same window, in the same posture in which he had seen her the day before, sat Thyrza Angerstell. But the Thyrza of yesterday was blooming, smiling, and cheerful—today she was pale and wan, the image of hopeless sorrow; even as a rose which some rude hand has severed from its stem. Theophan's blood grew chill; he proceeded, and had almost reached the porch of the house when Thyrza perceived him. With a loud cry she fell from her seat. He rushed into the room, and raised her in his arms.

She recovered—she spoke to him. She reproached him for the evening before. He obtained a hearing, and explained just as much of the history of the watch as related to its purchase, and the condition annexed to it. This he asserted was a mere trick of the donor, he having broken the condition and being yet alive. They wondered, he with affected, and she with real surprise, that any one should have been tempted to part with so valuable a watch for the idle satisfaction of terrifying the recipient. However, love is proverbially credulous; Theophan's explanation was believed, and the reconciliation was complete.

The lovers had conversed about a quarter of an hour, when Thyrza suddenly reverted again to the subject of the watch.

'It is strange,' said she, 'that I too am connected with a watch similar to yours.'

'How—by what means?'

'Last night I lay sleepless—'twas your unkindness, Theophan—'

Theophan hastened to renew his vows and supplications.

'Ah, well! you know I have forgiven you. But as I lay, the thought of a watch, such as you describe, presented itself to my mind; how, or why I cannot guess. It haunted me the whole night, and when I rose this morning it was before me still.'

'What followed, dear Thyrza?' enquired the anxious student. 'Listen, and you shall hear. Thinking to drive away this troublesome guest, I walked out. I had scarcely left my home two minutes when I saw a watch, the exact counterpart of my ideal one.'

'Where—where did you see it?'

'At our neighbour's, Adrian Wenzel's.'

'And—you—you I'—His words almost choked him.

'I was impelled by some inexplicable motive—not that I wanted or wished for so expensive a jewel—to purchase this watch.'

'No—no!' exclaimed the agonized student, 'you could not do so!' He restrained himself by an exertion more violent than he had believed himself capable of. He rose from his seat and turned away his face.

Not now, as before, did his anguish vent itself in passion and violence. It seemed that the infliction was too heavy, too superhuman a calamity to be accompanied by the expression of ordinary emotions. He was deadly pale—but his eye was firm, and he trembled not.

'Theophan,' said his mistress, 'what ails you? and why should what I have said produce so fearful an effect upon you? I shall—'

‘It is nothing—nothing, dearest Thyrza. I will return instantly, and tell you why I have appeared so discomposed. I am not quite myself—I shall return almost immediately. I will walk but into the lane, and catch a breath of the fresh breeze as it comes wafted from the water.’

He left her, passed out of the garden. ‘I could not,’ said he inwardly, ‘tell her that she was murdered—and by me too!’

He hastened on without an object, and scarcely knowing whither he was directing his steps, passed down the path which led by Angerstell’s house, in that depth of despair which is sometimes wont to deceive us with the appearance of calmness. He had no distinct idea of the calamity he had brought upon Thyrza—even she was almost forgotten; and nothing but a vague apprehension of death, connected in some unintelligible manner with himself, was present to his mind. So deep was the stupefaction in which he was involved, that it was not until some one on the road had twice spoken to him, that he heard the question.

‘What is the time of day?’

Theophan looked round, and encountered the large, horribly-laughing eyes of the giver of the fatal watch. He was about to speak, but the old man interrupted him.

‘I have no time to listen to reproaches: you know what you have incurred. If you would avoid the evil, and save Thyrza, I will tell you how.’

He whispered in the student’s ear. The latter grew pale for a moment, but recovered himself.

‘She shall be safe,’ said he, ‘if I accept your terms? No equivocation now—I have learnt with whom I deal.’

‘Agree to what I have said, and fetch hither the watch within half an hour, and she is delivered from her doom. She shall be yours, and—’

‘Promise no more, or give thy promises to those who value them. Swear that she shall be safe I request no more—wish for no more on earth.’

‘Swear!’ repeated the old man; ‘by what shall I *swear*, I pray thee? But I promise—begone and fetch the watch—remember, half an hour; and, hark! thou accedest to my terms?’

‘I do!’

So saying, Theophan sped back to the house, unchecked even by the loud laugh that seemed to echo after him. He had walked farther than he had any idea of, and swiftly as he sprang over every impediment to his course, one-third of the allotted time had elapsed before he reached the room in which he had left his beloved.

It was empty!

‘Thyrza! Thyrza!’ shouted the student—‘the watch! the watch! for Heaven’s sake, the watch!’

The reverberation of his voice from the walls alone replied.

He then rushed from chamber to chamber, in a state of mind little short of desperation. He descended into the garden; the dull ticking of the family clock struck on his ear as he passed it, and he shuddered. At the extremity of the principal walk he beheld Thyrza.

‘The watch! the watch I as you value your life and my—but haste, haste—not a word—*a moment’s delay is death!*’

Without speaking, Thyrza flew to the house, accompanied by Theophan.

‘It is gone,’ said she; ‘I left it here, and—’

‘Then we are lost! forgive thy—’

‘Oh! no, no, it is here,’ exclaimed she, ‘dearest Theophan! but why—’

He listened not even to the voice of Thyrza; one kiss on her forehead, one look of anguish, and he was gone!

He sped! he flew!—he arrived at the spot where he had left the old man. The place was solitary; but on the sand were traced the words—*The time is past!*

The student fell senseless on the earth.

When he recovered he found himself on a couch—affectionate but mournful glances were vent upon him.

‘Thyrza! Thyrza!’ exclaimed the wretched youth, ‘away to thy prayers I but a soul like thine has nought to repent. Oh! leave me—that look I go, go!’

She turned away, and wept bitterly. Her mother entered the room.

‘Thyrza, my love, come with me. The physician is here.’

‘What physician, mother? is it—’

‘No, he was from home, this is a stranger; but there is no time to lose.’ She led her daughter from the apartment. ‘Your patient is in that room’ she added, to the physician. He entered, and closed the door.

The mother and daughter had scarcely reached the stair-head, when a cry, which was almost a yell of agony, proceeding from the chamber they had left, interrupted their progress. It was followed by a loud and strange laugh, that seemed to shake the building to its foundation.

The mother called, or rather screamed, for her husband; the daughter sprang to the door of the patient’s chamber! It was fastened, and defied her feeble efforts to open it. From within rose the noise of a fearful struggle—the brief exclamations of triumph, or of rage—the groan of pain—the strong stamp of heavy feet—all betokening a death-grapple between the in-mates. Suddenly, something was dashed upon the ground with violence, which, from the sound, appeared to have been broken into a thousand pieces.

There was a dead silence, more appalling than the brunt of the contest. The door resisted no longer.

Thyrza, with her father and mother, entered the room: it was perfectly desolate. *On the floor were scattered innumerable fragments of the fatal watch. Theophan was heard of no more.*

On the fifth day from this terrible catastrophe, a plain flag of white marble in the church at —, recorded the name, age, and death of Thyrza Angerstell. The inscription is now partly obliterated; so much so as, in all probability, to baffle the curiosity of any gentle stranger who may wish to seek it out, and drop a tear on the grave of her who sleeps beneath.