

The Unfaithful Clock

By W. C. Morrow

Mr. Austin Wheeler was startled out of his ten-o'clock nap by a peculiar cry of distress from Theophilus, his cat. Wise in the ways of cats, and experienced in all the vocal expressions of Theophilus, Mr. Wheeler had cause to feel alarm when, upon opening his eyes, he saw the cat staring straight past him, every nerve in the large brindled animal's body on a strain, the hair along his spine upright, his tail slowly swinging to and fro, his ears rigidly fixed in listening, his eyes glowing with an unwonted light, and that low note of alarm caution, or distress—perhaps all three in one—filling the chamber with its uncanny effect. It was such a sound as you may have heard cats give when worried by dogs.

Mr. Wheeler was wide awake in a moment. At first he supposed that the cat was looking at him; but when, in straightening himself from a reclining position, he had brought his face some two feet out of the cat's line of vision, and observed that Theophilus kept his gaze steadily as before, and, moreover, gave no heed to a call, Mr. Wheeler sent his glance in the direction of his cat's, and, as nearly as he could judge, found it to rest upon the clock. Instantly he made the startling discovery that instead of sleeping ten minutes, as had been his unbroken custom for years, he had really slept two hours, for the hands of the clock indicated midnight. More than that, he noticed that the little artificial figure of a man which hung by the neck just below the clock was still quivering, as though it had but that moment dropped to the end of its string, whereas it should have been perfectly still.

That the nature of the shock which these discoveries gave Mr. Wheeler may be understood, it is necessary to explain some things.

To begin, Mr. Wheeler was an elderly widower, rather small and thin, highly nervous, somewhat feeble, and possessed of means sufficient for him to live in modest comfort without work. He was conspicuously—indeed painfully—methodical, as Jenny, the girl who took care of his two rooms, had reason to know. Everything had to be in the place he had set apart for it; he went to bed, arose, had his meals, took his strolls and naps, and ordered everything else precisely to the minute, one day's routine being just like that of all other days. He had explained all this on the score of his health.

Jenny declared to her friends that he was the worst kind of "crank"; but she would add that so long as she did exactly as he directed, he was very kind to her, paid her well, and made her numerous presents. Unfortunately, she had never mentioned to her acquaintances the only serious misunderstanding that had ever arisen between her and her employer; but there will be no better place than this to insert it in the narrative. It was thus:

The small figure of a man, to which reference already has been made, was a perfect representation of a criminal being hanged. The clock, a large, old-fashioned affair, had been let into the wall above the mantel, bricks having been removed in number sufficient to make the face of the clock flush with the wall. The ragged edges of the mural incision had been smoothed with plaster, which made a neat juncture with the wooden frame of the clock. The excavation had been extended below the clock, forming a narrow niche for the reception of the figure. In this niche, attached to the bottom of the clock, was a miniature gallows with beam, trapdoor, cord, trigger, and the other essential mechanical devices employed in executions, everything being concealed by doors. At half-past eleven o'clock every night, the mechanism of the clock would

open the doors and spring the trigger, whereupon the trap-door would fly open and the little figure would fall through and hang suspended by the neck. The figure was neatly dressed in black, with a white shirt; its arms were strapped to its sides, its hands to its thighs, and its knees and also its feet together. To complete the picture, a hangman's black cap was drawn over the head, concealing the face.

Having accidentally opened the doors and seen the figure one day, Jenny cherished an uncontrollable curiosity to see the face. It so happened that she had never seen the figure hanging, for that was always at half-past eleven at night. For that matter, she did not know that the trap ever opened. All that she had ever seen was the figure standing rigidly on the gallows waiting to be hanged. But the gruesome picture of the little man standing there had always fascinated her, even after her original sentiment of horror and repulsion had passed. Accordingly, one day, when she knew that Mr. Wheeler had left for a stroll and to give her opportunity to put his rooms in order, and when experience with his ways made her sure that he would not return for two hours, she cautiously began an investigation.

Finding that the figure stood squarely upon its feet, without lateral support, she gently lifted it from the trapdoor and drew it out as far as the cord would permit. She carefully loosened the noose, which was outside the cap and which pressed it closely against the neck, and then slipped off the cap. That which she then saw gave her so terrible a fright that she dropped the figure, screamed with all her might, and fell in a senseless heap to the floor. There she lay unconscious for two hours, and there her master found her. Upon seeing at a glance what had happened, he became pale, and a look of singular ferocity and malignity distorted his features. With his foot he contemptuously turned the girl over, in order to get her out of his way, re-adjusted the cap and noose, and restored the figure to its original position, and then picked up Jenny, laid her on a lounge, loosened her clothing, sprinkled water in her face, and brought her back to consciousness.

After she had remembered what had happened, and had seen the hard, reproachful glance with which Mr. Wheeler was regarding her, she began to cry and to plead for forgiveness.

"Had you forgotten," he asked, "that I had particularly cautioned you never to touch that figure?"

"Oh, sir," she sobbed, "I am so sorry! It was very wrong of me, sir. You have been so good to me! Won't you forgive me, sir?"

The end of it was that he did forgive her, and that she promised faithfully never to tell any one what she had seen. But it was many a day before she could again enter that room without fear and shudderings. The slow, measured ticking of the clock was terrible, and the little figure standing behind its closed doors was a silent and formidable mystery. A thousand times did she wonder what it all meant—what dreadful history it illustrated. For months all her dreams were haunted by that terribly realistic little face, every detail of its strangely handsome features, distorted and discolored though they were by death from strangulation, being impressed ineffaceably on her memory. In a vague fashion, there had come to her certain stories of a strange tragedy far back in the life of her master—something about a beautiful young wife many years ago, and her death, and her husband's terrible revenge; but what all that had to do with the ghastly little figure in the clock, if anything at all, Jenny could not imagine.

When Mr. Wheeler, after having been awakened by Theophilus, saw that he had slept two hours instead of ten minutes, and that the body of the little figure was still quivering, as though it had but just fallen through the trap, he was thrown into alarm and consternation. He had never overslept a moment before. Exactly at ten o'clock every night he had taken a nap of ten minutes

in his chair, had read till eleven, and then had turned to face the clock and steadily watch the hands as they slowly went around to thirty minutes past eleven, when the little doors would swing open and the figure would drop to the end of its cord, and there sway awhile, turn slowly about as a man would in its place, and finally come to rest; then Mr. Wheeler would replace the figure, close the doors, and go to bed. If one had been present from eleven o'clock till the doors swung open, one might have made a study of Mr. Wheeler's face; for it gradually darkened and hardened, became firmer, more haggard, more deeply lined, more and more filled with hate and implacable vindictiveness; one might have observed him becoming rigid and breathless on the eve of the mock execution, the glowing look of triumph which illuminated his face when the trap was sprung, a writhing of the body and a rubbing of the hands as the figure slowly swung about, and complete relaxation and peace when it had finally come to rest.

On this night of his great surprise, Mr. Wheeler, at first unable to trust the evidence of his senses, felt his pulse, and, finding it bounding with alarming violence, concluded that he was ill, and that his illness had caused him to oversleep. But what explanation could be found for the singular conduct of the cat and the swaying of the figure? Mr. Wheeler examined the doors of his rooms and found them locked—no one could have entered. No draught which might have made the body sway after it should have been still nearly half an hour was discoverable. Nothing that might have caused the cat's uneasiness was visible. Could it be possible that some supernatural agency was at work? Mr. Wheeler was too hard-headed a man to entertain that idea for a moment. So he finally tried to satisfy himself with the explanation that he had been taken ill in the first minutes of his slumber; that Theophilus had become uneasy at his long sleep and this violent breach of his habits, and, associating the clock with his master's movements, had regarded it as the cause of the irregularity; and that as for the swaying of the figure, it might have been caused by a fly or some other insect, and that this untimely swaying alone might have accounted for the cat's uneasiness. Mr. Wheeler, forced to take that explanation to bed with him, had an uneasy night in its company.

He was so full of the affair the next morning that he made a close examination of the clock, and found it in perfect order. Although he had no watch, he observed that his clock was exactly in time with the tower-clock which he could see from his window; and that was as it should have been. After puzzling over the whole problem some time, he decided that he could only go on as formerly, depending upon the future to solve the puzzle.

That day he went about matters as usual. Loss of sleep and the shock to his nerves had been injurious, but he might retrieve all that. Everything proceeded in the old orderly way until the time came for him to take his ten-o'clock nap in the evening. At first he had thought of dispensing with it for a night or two, that he might watch for a repetition of the strange occurrences; but after reflecting that it would be unwise to break into the regularity of his habits he decided to take his nap. Accordingly, he composed himself in his chair, saw that Theophilus was sound asleep on the rug, and in a moment (being very tired) he was slumbering.

It seemed to him that he had not been asleep a minute when the same distressful cry from Theophilus roused him into alarmed wakefulness. Again was Theophilus gazing strangely at the clock. Quickly turning his glance in that quarter, Mr. Wheeler saw that the hands again pointed to midnight, and that the little figure was swaying as though it had but just fallen through the trap! This was more than the wretched man's nerves could bear quietly. He trembled, and a perspiration dampened his forehead. These things, happening once, made a situation strange enough; a repetition of exactly the same kind—three extraordinary elements entering into it—made a coincidence which was terrible. Mr. Wheeler found his pulse bounding as before; he

examined the clock and saw that it was in perfect order. He felt that he had not slept two hours, but on a matter of that kind he knew that no man's judgment is reliable. He replaced the figure and sat for a long time in deep thought and anxiety; at the end of everything he went to bed. His sleep again was uncertain; but if he had slept two hours how could he expect sound slumber? Still, it seemed to him that if he had slept two hours in a cramped position in a chair, he would have felt the strain on his muscles, and yet there was none whatever.

Mr. Wheeler's two rooms were in a large apartment-house of the better, though not the more expensive, kind. It was an uncommonly well-built house, the partitions separating the suites being of brick, those between the rooms of a suite, lath and plaster affixed to studding. The floors were deadened with plaster. Hence when the doors were closed, no sounds could penetrate the walls separating the suites or the floors below and above. Mr. Wheeler's suite being in a corner of the house, he had neighbors only on one side and at the rear of his rooms. He had never seen them, and knew nothing about them. Being something of a solitary, he had made the acquaintance of but one family in the house—a widow with two children. The woman was French, and as she was poor and he had once relieved her distress when informed by Jenny that she was ill, and besides was a dainty cook, he had arranged with her to take his meals at her table, paying her so generously that she regarded him as a benefactor.

Should he confide in her? She was bright and shrewd, and she might help him—he could not bear to think of bringing a detective into the case. While he refused to believe it possible that any of his neighbors could have a hand in the occurrences which disturbed him, he thought it might at least be well to know who they were. Should he employ the Frenchwoman to learn all that she could about them? It looked silly and undignified. Should he himself spy upon them, and thus keep his troubles to himself? That was inconceivable. He would wait awhile. As for Jenny, he could not bring himself to consult her, and by that means establish confidential relations with her. He determined to fight it out alone.

On the third night he threw aside his custom of taking a nap, and decided to watch the cat and the clock. At ten o'clock, anxious though he was, the habit of falling asleep came upon him so strongly that he had to resort to various artifices to keep awake. Ten minutes later he had lost his drowsiness. The cat slumbered quietly on the rug, and the clock and the figure gave no sign of irregular behavior. Eleven o'clock arrived. He took up his familiar position facing the clock. Slowly he came under the influence of the old spell; his face paled and hardened; he became rigid. In two seconds more the doors would fly open and the execution would occur. A second passed. Then the clock stopped. At the same moment the cat, which had been asleep on the rug, sprang to his feet; the hair rose along his spine, his tail swung to and fro; his eyes, glowing with a strange light, were fixed on the clock, and he gave a cry of distress and alarm.

That any clock should stop is not an extraordinary thing; but that this clock should have stopped at that particular moment, and that simultaneously the cat should have manifested so great uneasiness, constituted, with the strange occurrences of the two last preceding nights, a coincidence which could not be ignored and which brought terror with it. Mr. Wheeler sat white and aghast. He spoke softly to the cat, hoping thus to find some clew; but Theophilus paid no attention for a full minute or two; and though even after that he noticed his master, he would suddenly turn every few seconds and fix his anxious gaze on the clock. Very soon, however, he was quiet again.

It was some time before Mr. Wheeler could get his courage in hand. When he had done so he went to the clock, opened it, found it properly wound up and otherwise apparently in order, and then started it again. The pendulum swung easily, the little doors opened, the execution went

forward with the accustomed precision, and the clock attended to its business without any further ado. Mr. Wheeler pushed forward the hands seven minutes, after consulting the illuminated dial of the tower-clock, and then sat down, weak and ill, and watched the clock from his chair all during the night. Nothing further went amiss.

In the morning his hands trembled, his knees were unsteady, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face was haggard and white. Theophilus behaved strangely. This wisest, most complacent, most decorous of cats exhibited an unusual conduct in divers ways, all ascribable undoubtedly to apprehension. Although he no longer paid attention to the clock, he strode about the room stealthily, his tail swinging, his ears erect, and his whole bearing indicating the presence of strange sounds. Mr. Wheeler himself, attentively as he listened, could hear nothing peculiar. Yet the conduct of the cat alarmed him. He strained every sense to catch the least uncommon happening. He examined the walls inch by inch, puffing an ear to them now and then, watching Theophilus and the clock meanwhile.

Presently the time arrived for him to take his breakfast; but, as he was ill and had no hunger, he fell into a chair and groaned. In a little while the Frenchwoman came in, and started in fright when she saw his face.

“Oh, monsieur!” she exclaimed; “you eel! Ah, what a peety! I bring you some coffee quick, monsieur.”

“If you please, madame,” weakly responded the wretched man.

Afterward he felt a little better; but a violent headache came on, and it seemed as though his temples would burst. He forgot all about his morning walk, and, lying back in his chair, could only watch Theophilus. He had not let any light into the room, and that which was strained through the oil shades, though to him seemingly so brilliant that it burned him, was insufficient for Jenny, who, a few minutes before her accustomed time, burst into the room, in extraordinary excitement.

“I’m sure it was the same,” she gasped breathlessly, speaking to herself, and supposing that her master was away; “but I’ll see.”

Not observing him crouching in his chair, she hastily threw up the shades, went straight to the clock, and pulled open the little doors. Then she drew the figure from the trap, with fierce eagerness loosened the noose and removed the black cap, and then, letting the figure fall to the end of its cord, she staggered back to the mantel, clutched her throat, and panted, her wide-staring eyes fixed on the distorted features of the figure.

“Jenny!” called her master.

She screamed and sprang away. Her excitement must have been great, for she exhibited neither shame nor contrition for being caught in the act of violating her master’s orders. On the contrary, as soon as she could realize that it was he who was present, and not some dreadful thing that evidently she feared, she ran to him and threw herself on her knees at his feet, seizing his hands and clinging to him for protection. Every one of her features and movements expressed terror. Her throat was filled with sobs and gasps. She swayed and writhed in an effort to speak.

“Oh, Mr. Wheeler,” she finally found voice to say, “I’ve seen him—the same as *that!*” pointing to the figure.

Mr. Wheeler’s face became livid, and his eyes seemed to sink back into his skull.

“Where?” he whispered.

“Out there. He was slipping away from your door. His face frightened me so that I ran, and he caught me, and twisted my wrist, and asked me what I was afraid of. He is a young man. I don’t

know what I said—it was something about a rope around his neck. He cursed me, and said that if I said a word about having seen him he would kill me. And there was murder in his face!”

Mr. Wheeler shrank deeper into his chair; and there he sat in complete collapse, his jaw hanging, his eyes rolled up and half-closed, and his breathing hardly perceptible. His appearance alarmed the girl, who feared that he had died. She shook him and called him by name, but his response was only a faint and petulant groan. She ran and brought the Frenchwoman, and together they chafed his hands, placed him on a lounge, and covered him heavily, for he was very cold. Sooner than might have been expected, and before the arrival of a physician who had been summoned, Mr. Wheeler’s cheeks began to flush, his eyes to brighten, and his pulse and breathing to become strong. He sat up and curtly dismissed the physician when he arrived. He refused to eat anything, and directed the women to leave him alone, taking occasion to whisper to Jenny a request that she say nothing to any one about what she had seen.

He got to his feet and looked around anxiously for the cat; Theophilus was sleeping peacefully on his rug. Then he staggered to the clock and carefully readjusted the figure on the trap, taking a great deal of time, for his hands were extremely weak and uncertain. Then he sat down, trembling. The Frenchwoman presently brought him a tempting little meal.

“Thank you,” he said; “that is just what I need—I am very hungry.”

But as soon as she was gone he gave Theophilus the food, to pretend that he himself had eaten. Meanwhile, the color in his cheeks deepened and the light in his eyes became brighter; worse than that, he began to talk; and as Theophilus, to whom he had often talked before, was his sole audience, Theophilus had to hear what he said.

“Theophilus,” he said, “it is a lie—the girl is mad! Do you understand that? How could he come back, when I myself hounded him to the gallows; when I myself had the last glimpse of his living face when the black cap was drawn over it; when I myself, after it all was over, saw that same devilishly handsome face all swollen and purple—just as I afterward reproduced it *there*, Theophilus?” pointing toward the clock with a meagre, trembling hand. “And yet, Theophilus, she saw something, and that something has come back to life and has taken up its abode in my clock.”

Theophilus, each time that his name was called, blinkingly opened his eyes and then drowsily closed them again.

“Thirty years ago, Theophilus. Let me say twenty-nine years, four months, and eleven days. Three hundred and sixty-five times twenty-nine—but where do the leap-years come in? Nine times five, forty-five, eight, thirty-two, seven thirty—ten thousand five hundred and something; hundred and twenty, eleven; ten thousand and—ten thousand and—ten thousand and—more than ten thousand times, Theophilus! He’s been hanged by the neck till he was dead ten thousand and something times, Theophilus! Think of that! Isn’t that sufficient to kill a man? . . . What a fool that Jenny is!”

The feeble man rose in his excitement and reeled around the room, his face crimson and his eyes aflame.

“When, thirty years ago, she listened to his smooth voice and lying tongue, and he stole her away from me—oh, Theophilus, had I been born a cat! And in less than a year, when she was in that condition in which a woman appeals to every sense of tenderness and consideration in a man, he was beating her like a dog, Theophilus—beating her like a dog.”

By this time the poor man was reeling wildly about the chamber, stumbling over chairs and tripping on rugs.

“Beat her like a dog, and I knew nothing of it! Like a dog, Theophilus. Do you understand that? And that wasn’t all.”

His husky voice fell to a whisper. Half-stooping, half-crouching, he halted in front of the cat, and, with outstretched arm and a finger pointed at the cat, he hissed:

“He murdered her one day. . . murdered her! . . . And for *that*, Theophilus”—he straightened, threw back his head and shoulders, raised both arms triumphantly above his head, and passionately exclaimed in a loud voice—“for that I drove him to the gallows; and I saw him fall through the trap, and I saw his purple face when the cap had been lifted.”

He slowly drooped after that outburst, gradually settled into himself, and then sank groaning into his easy chair, where he sat staring vaguely at the clock.

The two women looked in once or twice during the day, but he told them firmly at last that he desired to be left alone. Jenny went to her own home, which was in another street, and thenceforward the suffering man had only Theophilus for company. He talked now and then to the cat, whose peaceful attitude remained undisturbed.

At eleven o’clock that night, Mr. Wheeler, so weak that he could barely move, composed himself as usual to watch the execution. Had not his senses become so dull, and had it not happened that Theophilus was without the range of his vision, he certainly would have noticed that strange occurrences were on the march. It is true that about twenty minutes past eleven he heard Theophilus give voice to alarm and distress; but he only laughed foolishly at that, and in a thick, maudlin fashion tried to reassure the animal, knowing nothing of the stealthy entrance of a man through the door.

“That’s right, Theoph—Theoph—Theoph—what’s your name, Theophilus? What’s your name, hey? He’s all around here, old fellow—all around here. Can feel him—smell him. You afraid, Theophilus? Don’t be afraid. *I’m* not afraid. Ha! Don’t do that, Theoph—Theoph—Theoph—what’s your name, Theophilus? What’s your name? Six minutes more. Keep an eye on the doors up there. Theoph—Th—Th—ophilus. Gracious me! what a name for a cat! Ha, ha! What a name for a cat! Theos—Theos—ophy! Oh, what a name for a cat! Four minutes more. Keep an eye on the doors up there—doors up there.”

And thus he rambled on until the little doors flew open. One more swing of the pendulum, and then the execution; Mr. Wheeler had nerved himself to witness it—to drink in the sweetness of it. His dull eyes and deathly pallid cheeks had taken on new life, and with suppressed respiration he had leaned lurchingly forward, his mouth drooling and his head nodding as with a heavy palsy. But before the pendulum could swing once more and release the trigger, the dark form of a young man uprose between him and the clock and shut off his view.

For a while Mr. Wheeler could not understand what had happened. The stranger had brought his face directly before Mr. Wheeler’s, and the wretched man stared helpless and speechless at the apparition.

“Well,” said the stranger, his hard voice comporting well with the sinister cruelty of his face—“well, I have brought you to this much sooner than I expected. You are more nervous than I thought. And now, after torturing you thus far, I dare carry it no further, for fear that I shall not leave sufficient life in your miserable body to treat you as my father treated your wife and as you treated him. It is all a delicious revenge. You had forgotten all about me, eh? Perhaps you did not know that she gave birth to me before my father put an end to her. Well, I am his son and your wife’s son, and I inherit my father’s spirit. Do you understand all that?”

It was not clear that Mr. Wheeler did. He still stared in that hopeless way, not knowing that the execution had regularly occurred, or, perhaps, believing that the figure had stepped forth from

the clock to punish him. For in his eyes was a new and deeper horror, coming seemingly from an immeasurable distance; but there it was, and his head continued to nod as with a palsy. He tried to mumble something. The stranger roughly seized him by the shoulder, and that roused the sinking man. With a tremendous effort, Mr. Wheeler staggered to his feet, pitifully weak. Then in a burst of life, he threw his arms aloft and cried:

“He was a coward and a murderer, and I hanged him nine times five, forty-five, eight, ten thousand—

* * *

The stranger, once again in his own room (which adjoined that of Mr. Wheeler), looked up at the wall.

“I don’t think that they will ever find that opening behind his clock,” he ruminated, as he made final preparations at midnight to leave, “for I have closed it as carefully as possible.” He regarded his hands, which appeared to have been badly scratched. “Damn the brute!” he exclaimed. “Who ever heard of a cat fighting for its master’s life?” He drew on a pair of gloves and quietly slipped away.