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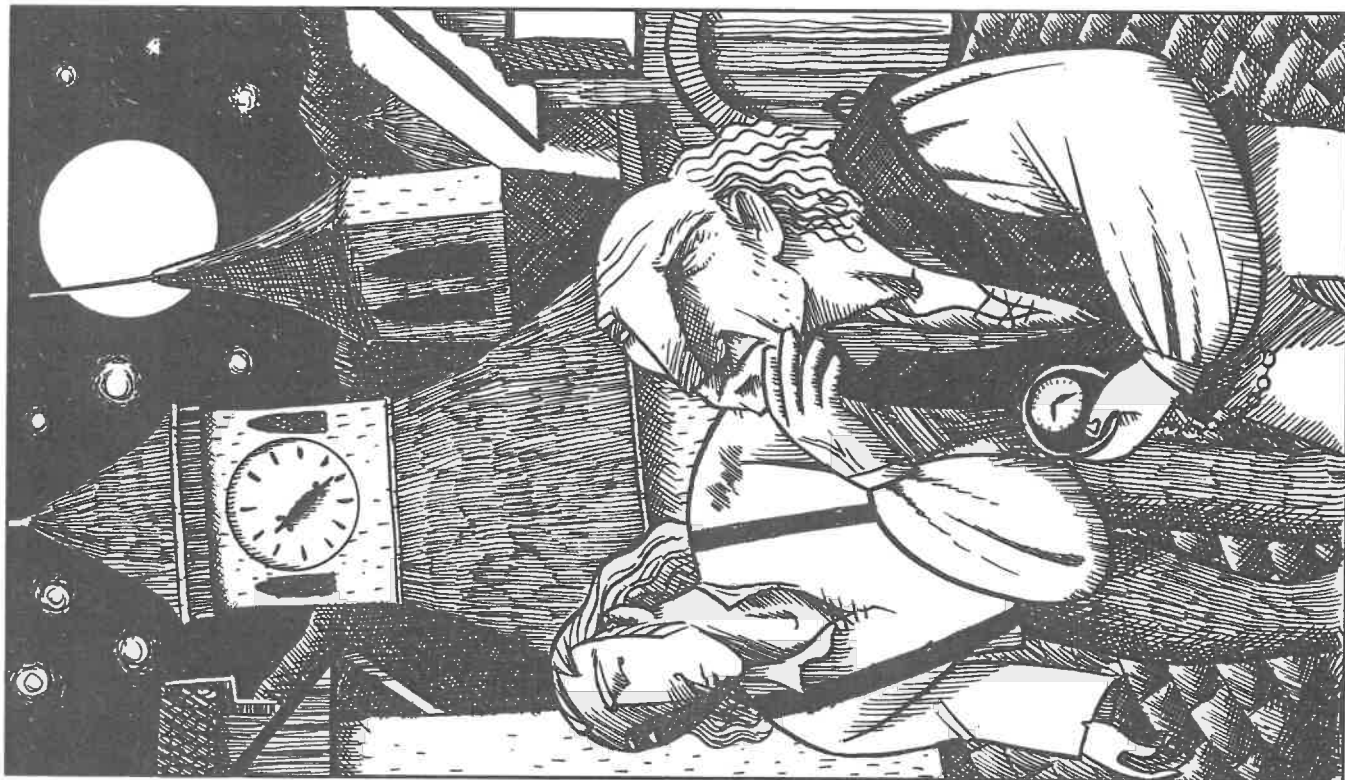
A CLOCKWORK MURDER

Switzerland, 1760

THE BELLS OF THE VALANGIN town hall rang nine times, echoing through the sleepy streets. Hans, the watchman, had just finished closing the gates for the night. As the old man hobbled toward the square, he pulled out his pocket watch. It was his pride and joy, constructed within an iron musket ball and worth its weight in gold. Hans pried open the cover and shook his head. 9:05. There was no question in his mind that his watch was right and the town clock wrong.

Here in the Jura Valley, timekeeping was almost an art. The Swiss cantons prided themselves on the extravagance and accuracy of their clocks, even in small villages. Valangin had been as proud as any town, until a stroke of lightning from a spring storm fused several iron cogs together in their clock's delicate mechanism. The village commune had gathered in an emergency session and sent the mayor riding off to Bern in search of a master clockmaker. But the poor excuse of a clockmaker he returned with, this Carl Jurgen, curse his name....

Hans sighed and glanced up as darkness began to gather around the tower. A small stained-glass window just to the right of the clock face opened. An arm reached out the window, grabbed the minute hand and pulled it down. 9:06. Once a day at this time, that idiot Jurgen stopped his infernal fiddling and manually adjusted the hands, as if this would fool anyone.



Inside the tower, Carl Jurgen pulled his arm back through the window, latched it shut, then tried to wipe the fresh grease mark from his sleeve. "You cannot say I haven't oiled the workings, eh?" His attempt at humor did not impress his guest.

Mayor Birchenstock stood in the middle of the tower room, frowning. The young clockmaker had been here nearly a month, hammering and adjusting and rebuilding the intestines of his ailing patient, although he seemed to spend more time than necessary quenching his thirst at the Brown Bear Inn and romancing the innkeeper's daughter.

After three weeks, the clock had finally begun to work. Jurgen collected his gold and was halfway out of town before old Hans checked his pocket watch and realized that the huge clock was already losing time. A pair of farm boys dragged the reluctant clockmaker back and the mayor confiscated his fee. Now, a week later, the clock was still losing time. Perhaps it would never be fixed.

"It's not my fault," Jurgen said morosely. "You need a new weight mechanism."

"What?" Mayor Birchenstock could barely control his temper. This was a bold-faced lie, an excuse for the man's incompetence. If only he had listened to the commune and hired a well-known master instead of this charming young charlatan. Already tradesmen and travelers were spreading the word, laughing behind their hands at poor Valangin and its lazy clock. Right now the villagers blamed only Jurgen. How long before they started blaming him?

Without another word, the mayor turned his back, exited the clock room and stomped down the flights of wooden stairs. He had just rounded a corner near the bottom when he nearly collided with Marta Braun.

The innkeeper's daughter was carrying a tray of food in one hand and a tankard in the other. She spun around to avoid him, not spilling a crumb or a drop, then laughed with surprise. "Father doesn't like me to take him food," she said

with a blush. "But Herr Jurgen works so hard. And his stories are so thrilling."

The mayor stood aside and let Marta continue up the stairs. When he reached the square, Mayor Birchenstock had a decision to make—turn left to home and hearth and the formidable Dame Birchenstock, or turn right to the Brown Bear Inn. He turned right.

Herman Braun took the mayor's personal stein down from its peg and filled it. The innkeeper seemed unusually quiet tonight, although when now and then he looked out the window toward the town hall, the mayor could guess what he was thinking.

The hall clock struck ten just as Marta walked through the heavy, beamed door with the empty tray. A flash in her eyes and a flutter of her hands seemed to confirm her father's worst fears. "You went to see that fool in the clock tower," he growled. Like the bear on his swinging sign, Herman Braun looked large and dangerous.

"So what if I did?" Marta answered with a defiance that sent chills down her father's spine. "Carl—Herr Jurgen—is the most exciting man I've ever met. The tales he tells of the world beyond this valley..."

"Enough," her father barked. "To speak of a stranger that way, and with your own marriage bans to be read in church this very Sunday. What would your fiancé think?"

"Johann knows how I feel about Carl. Maybe we should call off the wedding; maybe that's best." Marta left the words hanging as she crossed to stoke the fire, then refill the steins of Mayor Birchenstock and Hans the watchman, who had come in for a nightcap after his rounds.

The angry silence grew as the men drank and Marta washed down tables and her father polished the same keg spigot over and over. It was 10:10 by Hans's pocket watch when Johann Senseinig came through the door. The large, naturally cheerful man wished everyone a good evening, then went straight to Marta's side.

Her coolness toward the young herdsman was obvious. But Johann chose to ignore it, continuing to smile when no smiles were returned, reaching out to touch her hand on the table even as she drew it away.

Herman Braun saw all this and, growing too angry to stand still, disappeared into the kitchen. The mayor, just as uncomfortable, threw a few centimes on the oaken table, walked out to the lane, and turned toward home. Only Hans refused to play the diplomat and leave the couple alone. Slowly he drained his stein, then wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

"Come, escort me home," the old watchman said. Johann, always respectful of his elders, agreed with some reluctance. Before leaving, Johann wished his fiancée a good night's sleep.

The two men walked the narrow alleys of Valangin, discussing women and what they wanted and if they had changed at all in the forty years since Hans had been faced with similar problems. It was some time later when they circled around to the open, deserted square. By the light of the moon, Hans checked the time on the tower clock.

"Ten twenty-five? No!" Hans pulled out his own timepiece. "It's 10:31. The clock could not have lost so much." He peered into the dimness and saw the huge minute hand jerking back and forth between the same two painted lines. "Something is wrong."

Hans led the way to the town-hall tower, leaning on the younger man's arm as they climbed the four flights of stairs. A grinding, thumping sound, barely audible at ground level, grew louder and more ominous as they climbed.

At first glance, the clock room seemed empty of everything but the grinding and thumping. It was Johann who walked to the edge of the works and looked down. There was the young clockmaker, half a flight below them, wedged between the maws of the two largest gears.

Hans stepped forward and caught sight of the mangled body that had stopped the town clock at the fatal hour of 10:25. "God in heaven, he must have fallen."

Johann, with clearer, stronger eyes, saw the bloody gash on the rear of the dead man's head, far from any point of impact with the gears. Carl Jurgen had fallen, yes, but not by accident.

(1) Who killed Carl Jurgen? (2) What did the killer do to avoid detection? (3) What clue points to the killer?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 134. To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 110.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON SWISS CLOCKS & WATCHES

IN THE EARLY 1300s, the first public clocks began appearing on church towers in Central Europe, due mainly to the ingenious tinkering of Catholic monks. The trend spread across Europe, but the mechanics remained crude. The clocks would gain or lose several hours each day and were equipped with only one hand, the hour hand.

Over the next few centuries, the clocks' unreliable drive weights were replaced by pendulums, a concept first explored by Galileo. By 1721, the accuracy of pendulum clocks was improved to a gain or loss of just one second a day.

The Swiss became famous for timekeeping largely due to a single man, Abraham-Louis Breguet, recognized as the greatest watchmaker of all time.

Watches were first invented around 1500. Expensive and unreliable, they were initially the ornaments of royalty. Early models were worn around the neck or as broaches. Queen Elizabeth I owned a ring watch with an alarm that scratched her finger at the preset hour.

With the invention of the balance spring, watches became more reliable and less expensive, although at the time of our story, they were still not common possessions.