



Clockwork Angels

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Fable

Imagine, if you will, a small town. A tiny town. Let's say it's an American town. And let's say it was in somewhat early America. Say around the turn of the 20th century or so. Oh, and it was a frontier town.

So in this dusty little piece of Americana history, life was hard, but livable. Dull and repetitive, but enjoyable enough. These were a tough, hardy people, after all. Simple salt-of-the-earth folk. They loved God, country, hard work, and warm beer (this was a time before widespread refrigeration.)

That being said, all the townsfolk were in a tizzy when the Clock Man came rolling into town. He was a sight to see: tall, quite tall, stick-thin, mustachioed and top-hatted. Within a day or two the whole population of a few dozen or so people was gathering in the town square to watch his incredible, dazzling show. They were mesmerized. It was as if they hadn't realized just how parched they were for entertainment.

And the Clock Man was a font of entertainment.

He showed off spectacular clockwork machines with sprigs and sprockets and gears and a million little moving parts. They crawled and climbed and a few little clockwork angels even flew about on thin paper wings. His contraptions almost seemed to be alive, strange as that sounds.

The townsfolk loved it. The Clock Man was a miracle worker, they said. A true genius, like that Menlo Park man. No, not like him. He was a hack compared to their Clock Man.

After a week or so of daily afternoon shows, the Clock Man began offering more than just entertainment. His machines, he said, were good for more than just distracting them from their menial, difficult existence. They

could change that existence fundamentally. And with that, he flapped his cape dramatically (he wore a cape), revealing himself for just a breath—were those twisting, turning gears they saw?—but there was no time to consider his appearance, for something else was making a much more spectacular appearance before their very eyes.

A bunch of the Clock Man's clockwork machines were gathering themselves into a great pile. They broke apart, disassembled, reassembled, and were soon taking the shape of a huge, impossibly complicated, shiny brass... thing. It had at least a dozen legs and spurted great tufts of steam from a half dozen whistling pipes.

This device, the Clock Man said, could do the work of a hundred farmhands. And it proved him right by way of demonstration. The machine whirled and crawled about the fields outside the town and had them planted and plowed within hours.

It was theirs, the Clock Man said. All he asked in return was their gratitude. Their gratitude, and, perhaps, their—

But the townsfolk politely declined. They were simple, salt-of-the-earth types. They loved their hard work. They believed in it the way they believed in God and country. Now, they appreciated his taking the time to show them the great behemoth. And they really did find it quite impressive. And they most definitely appreciated his daily shows in the town square. Now those were a welcome break from the hard work of living on the American frontier. But they earned those breaks, and they paid the Clock Man handsomely for them, as was fair.

Did he maybe want to put on another show today? He had done their day's work, after all.

But the Clock Man did not want to put on another show. He felt downright insulted. He snapped his fingers, and all of his amazing inventions, including the big spider-like one that the townsfolk had rejected, fell to the ground with a great metallic clatter. They were now as lifeless and inert as any other hunk of brass and steel.

Then the Clock Man flapped his cape dramatically again and disappeared in a puff of smoke. No, not smoke. Steam. And with that, the townsfolk never saw him again.

Sort of.

He came upon them in the night. In a time before power lines crisscrossed the world, nights were dark in a way that we simply cannot imagine these days. The Clock Man moved methodically from home to home. He

slipped between the shadows, gears and springs just barely glinting in the starlight.

And in some dark, silent way, he changed the townsfolk.

This is what they got for their stupid, simple, downright ungrateful ways. They had insulted him! Him, the Clock Man! How dare they! Well, if they liked their hard work so much, then they could have it.

For the next thousand years.

And when the Clock Man left their tiny little ghost town, he did so with a few dozen new miracle machines: a whole fleet of clockwork angels, perfectly engineered to do his bidding for the next millennia.

Now, at this point you may be thinking that this is a terrible story. I take offense to that. But if what you really mean is that it has a terrible lesson. The moral seems to be that classic American values are a bad thing. The Clock Man won, after all.

But the townsfolk did nothing wrong. In fact, they did everything right. They were innocent victims of a mysterious, powerful evil. This sort of thing happens occasionally. The point wasn't to teach you a lesson using their behavior as a tool.

No, the real point is this: those good townsfolk are still out there, still trapped in a nightmarish existence as clockwork angels, and there is something we can do about it.

You see, due to the esoteric and frankly strange rules of evil mechanical engineering, every time a small child expresses a true desire and, yes, love, for hard work, a full ten years is shaved from the thousand-year imprisonment of the townsfolk.

But if they instead avoid hard work or take the easy way out, a year is added. Whining only adds a few days, but it's still undesirable.

There's no telling how much time those poor folks still have left as automotonic abominations in the service of the evil, sharply dressed Clock Man, but please tell your children that they really need to think hard about them the next time they don't want to do their homework or chores.

And if you're a child, please, for goodness sake, do your part.

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