

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1948

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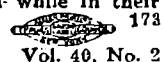
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Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 20 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.00. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1947, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.



PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 40, No. 2

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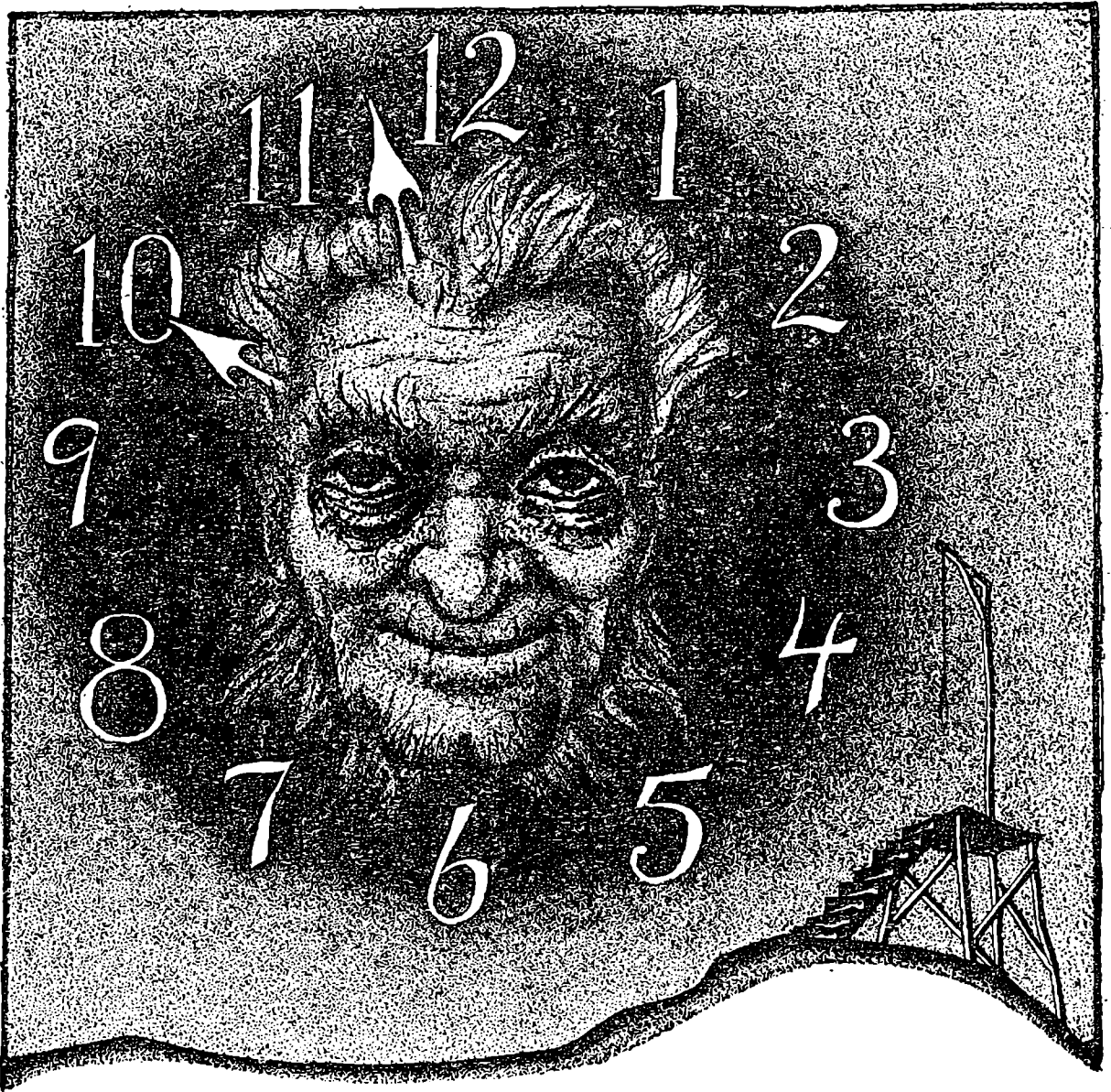
Grandfather McGraw

THE sun rose bright and cheerful on the morning of May 10, 1858, over the Village of Norcutt, County Seat of Bouster, and Richard McGraw II, looking from his window, couldn't help re-

senting that this day of all days should be so beautiful.

The Jail and Courthouse faced each other across the Green. The hands of the big clock over the Courthouse door showed six

BY ROGER S. VREELAND



When a man gets ready to die he thinks and sees strange things

minutes of seven. Richard looked at the clock from his window. He loved that clock. He felt a personal pride in it, for it had been made, installed, and presented to Norcutt by his Grandfather McGraw. Richard's memories of his Grandfather were profoundly endearing. No greater ideal could he imagine than to be as fine a man as Grandfather McGraw had been.

When the sun struck the gilt hands and numerals of the clock, they glistened; and its face, it seemed to Richard, smiled with that calm, benign, and understanding light that had been Grandfather McGraw's.

Richard could see the clock well across the Green, for his room was in the Jail. Often he had imagined he saw his Grandfather's face in the clock, but this morning there had been an instant when it was startlingly real—that characteristic aspect of kindly assurance. The brightness of the morning, however, clashed with the gloom clouding his soul. This was the day he was to be hanged. The gallows was up. The hour set. The gaunt structure wasn't quite within the view of his narrow window, but its long shadow lay across the Green between him and the Courthouse, and he could even see the ringlike shadow of the noose.

Yes, for Richard there was ironic mockery in the pure bright morning, in the pungency of the spring air. Illogical, unreasonable Fate was slamming the door in his face just as he was reaching the threshold of full life. And now, unsparing of his sensitivities, all the fair elements of nature were conspiring, combining to add bitterness to his last hours.

What had been the matter with the people? The court? The judge? The witnesses? All of them? Hadn't the good clean life he had lived counted for anything? Didn't it mean something that he was the grandson of Richard McGraw, the great clockmaker whose life had spread fame for the town? No, no one thought of that now. All they said was that he had murdered Old Man Kipp, murdered him for his money. They seemed sure of it. There had been so much pompous rignarole. So much talk of justice. Circumstantial evidence. And so many false conclusions. He had protested his innocence vehemently at first. Then, abashed at their unwillingness

to believe him, and thoroughly disillusioned, he had sunk into lethargic apathy.

They had found Kipp's money hidden in his foster father's barn. Anybody could have hidden it there. He had been out the night of the murder, in the vicinity of Kipp's house. He had been seen. He often took walks at night when the stars were clear. He liked the stars. They were friendly and they filled him with wonder. He had bought a little book about the constellations. But when he had tried to explain this, they looked at him with—almost with disgust—as though he should have thought of something better to tell.

Richard turned again to his little window and looked into the sunshine. People already were gathering on the Green. Yes, it was to be a big party—to watch him hang! Carriages were arriving and people getting out as though it were a Sunday School picnic. He could see Jake Hoag in the center trying to impress a group of girls. Richard disliked Jake. The girls were laughing, but Jake was too dumb to know they were probably laughing at rather than with him.

Well, at least he was contributing entertainment to the countryside. Probably if he'd had blood kin to champion him things would have worked out differently. But what could he expect from foster parents who raised him merely through a sense of duty? His Grandfather McGraw was the only real kin he had ever known. Ah, but he sort of made up for all the others he didn't have! How his Grandfather McGraw would have championed him if he had been alive! He would have shouted, waved his cane, and known the right things to say to make people think clearly.

For a while Richard spurned sight of the bright outdoors and sat on his cot. Then he looked out once more. The morning was passing rapidly, strangely. He had expected it to drag. How the crowd was gathering! He was to hang at ten o'clock. He wondered why they had chosen that time. In stories he'd read people were always hanged at either sunrise or sunset. Well, at least he wasn't panicky anymore. He was determined to impress the crowd with his calmness.

But try as he would, he couldn't entirely suppress thoughts upon who really had mur-

dered Old Man Kipp. Somehow he couldn't help suspecting either Jake Hoag or Tom Putner, though he had no good reasons. Tom, he considered, had very little conscience. And Jake was something of a nitwit, though he had a mean streak in him.

THE clanking of keys and the sound of heavy footsteps came from the corridor. They were coming for him! His throat grew tight and a tingling went through his arms, legs, and back; and his stomach tightened.

People were not moving about and talking as they had been. They were still and were looking toward him. Richard backed away. Could they see him? But he cast a final glance toward the clock. It was twelve after nine. His eyes lingered a moment on the face. There seemed to be a different expression on it. The hands were like arched eyebrows—menacing, angry. The figures grew blurred—from tears. *I guess Grandfather doesn't want me to cry!* he thought. *After all, I am nearly a man,* and he wiped his eyes. The dial was still blurred, but Grandfather's face shone from it. It was his imagination, of course, but it was comforting. Especially because Grandfather's face was sympathetic. It was the look Grandfather used to have when he told him not to be afraid of something.

Richard turned with a jerk. His door was being opened. He was surprised. What was Reverend Potter . . . ? Oh, yes, of course. They always sent a preacher to a man about to be hanged. Mr. Potter took his hand and told him to sit down. Mr. Potter sat beside him and began to talk. But his words didn't register. Just words. Soon he realized that Mr. Potter was more nervous than he was. That relieved him a little: Richard began to say something about his Grandfather, but he didn't like the sound of his own voice so he stopped. Mr. Potter was praying now. Richard shook himself. He couldn't get into the right mood. All he could think of was whether Mr. Potter thought God was really listening to him. Finally the minister went away and the jailer came in, put a black cloth over his face.

"I don't need that!" blurted Richard.

But the jailer insisted. *I don't mind*

looking at them, he thought, *but I guess they don't want to look at me!*

Now came the moment he feared—walking to the gallows! He remembered, though, how he was going to impress everyone. The jailer took his arm to lead him. He began to walk, but strength was leaving his legs. The thought, however, of having to be dragged was too repulsive. *I will walk as a brave man!* he said to himself. *They shall see that I am innocent! And when they find out later that I am innocent, they will say that Richard McGraw, the grandson of Richard McGraw the clockmaker, walked to the gallows as his Grandfather would have, for he was the same kind of man!*

He walked. Someone else took his other arm and they led him through the door, down the steps. There were hundreds of people watching him, he felt them, but their silence was not pleasant. Gravel crunched under his feet now. It was the path to . . . He swallowed hard and raised his chin. He wanted to shout—tell the people that they didn't need to be so quiet and solemn. Then he stumbled—on wood. It was the first step up. The guiding arms clutched him. He caught his balance—made the rest of the way all right. It would soon be over.

They turned him around. A faint murmuring from the Green encroached upon the silence. Then a deep dramatic voice from below him reviewed the crime, *their* version, and the trial. Richard didn't listen carefully. To him it was all travesty. Finally, in a rasping whisper, came the concluding words: *To be hanged by the neck until he is dead.* A pause, and a voice closer to him, a voice tinged with sympathy, asked: Richard McGraw, do you have a final request?"

Richard's first impulse was to reply impatiently: *Yes, for God's sake get it over with!* Then he thought of something else. Clearing his throat, he tested his voice on "Yes." It was a little shrill, but at least steady. "I would like the cloth removed for a minute so that I may look at my Grandfather's clock."

A muffled babble arose from the mob. Some had not heard and others passed the quotation along. And he heard the voices of the officials close below him. "Yes, grant it," said one. He wasn't sure whether

it was the sheriff or the judge. Fingers touched the back of his neck and the cloth fell away. He swayed. He was much higher than he thought. He stared down into the hundreds of gaping faces. He smiled at them, faintly. But the people seemed too shocked to return it. Then he raised his eyes over their heads across the Green to the Courthouse—to the clock. The big hand was almost straight—three minutes of ten! But Richard was disappointed. He didn't know exactly why—except that the clock seemed to have lost all expression. It looked like just any clock. He had thought that perhaps his Grandfather's face . . .

The cloth was put back over his eyes. Someone said: "Not until exactly ten o'clock."—Someone else was moving things. To Richard those three minutes dragged interminably. The crowd grew so still it seemed to have stopped breathing. Time had become a void. Surely, he thought, it was ten o'clock by now! He waited . . . waited. Everyone's eyes, he imagined, must

be on his Grandfather's clock. That didn't seem right, that it should fall upon his Grandfather's clock to give the final signal for his doom. He tried to picture the minute hand. It didn't move gradually, as in small clocks, but jumped a full minute at every sixty-second interval. Probably it had one more jump to make.

Richard was beginning now to tremble. This last minute seemed everlasting. He has succeeded in keeping his mind blank about the final details, but now he was contemplating them. He couldn't help it. His muscles tightened and relaxed involuntarily, he grew cold. It seemed like such a long, long

A voice from someone on the Green suddenly pierced the silence.

"The clock has stopped!"

The babble rose in a fast crescendo. The people, he imagined, were turning; those with watches checking them with the clock. Rough hands suddenly grabbed him. Something hard fell on his shoulders, tightened about his neck. But the rope had caught the bottom of his mask, tugged it downward uncovering his eyes. He found himself looking straight at the clock: It still said three minutes of ten, but . . . Ah! There he was! Just as clear and bright as the face of an October moon—his Grandfather McGraw! And he was grinning!

Then—suddenly in the center of the Green—a commotion arose. Someone was making a howling fuss. Richard couldn't make out at first who it was, but the excitement around this person spread rapidly. Everyone, including the officials, tried to converge toward the center of the disturbance. Then a woman's high-pitched voice called out: "He says *he* done it! He says *he's* the one who killed Old Man Kipp!"

"Who?" came a mixture of shouts.

"Jake Hoag!"

Richard felt his legs growing weak. He was alone. They seemed to have forgotten him. He lifted the noose off his head. He was on the verge of collapse! He knew it! But somehow, as he felt himself sinking, his eyes went toward Grandfather McGraw's clock again. Grandfather McGraw's face was gone, but—*the minute hand was exactly at twelve!*