

The Black Cat

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The Clock That Went Crazy.

BY LOUISE BETTS EDWARDS.



It was an event that could have occurred only in Corinne.

The town clock of Corinne had a history which had never been written up, for the reason that the enterprising writers for Northern newspaper syndicates had one flaw in their armor of omniscience. They had never heard of Corinne, which, although a growing manufacturing village, was not yet important enough to have a place on the map of the United States. When aristocratic old Pierre de Viguers, ninety years ago, built a parish church with a towering clock (no pun intended) opposite his now half-ruined manorial estate, he would have had apoplexy at the idea that the ponderous timepiece would some day be the regulating center of a busy little town of toilers,—not in the rice field, not in the cotton plantation, but in the cotton mills. As a matter of fact he did have apoplexy, but it was from good living, not from disturbing visions of the future. Now the good Pierre was dust, the plantation built up into streets, the parish church burned down, and on the uninjured tower was grafted a tiny chicken coop called the “town house,” because the clock was called the town clock. And that clock—

“It’s not the clock that’s crazy,” succinctly said “Squer”

Viguers, the village lawyer, when Henderson, superintendent of the mills, told him the tale that was circulating among the negro operatives.

"Then who is?"

"You, if you believe such gammon and spinach. Have you seen this marvel yourself?"

"No," said Henderson. "But I shall stay up to-night and watch. So will all the rest of Corinne, I imagine."

"It changes before you can wink your eyes, mammy says. It isn't only the hands that move, it's the figures, so that it's all sorts of time at once." Thus, with some awe, spoke Lucile de Viguers, the last of that decaying line,—a lovely, ignorant child, with the manners of a duchess and the education of a housemaid. In a gown of calico from his own mills, she was more charming to Henderson than all the well-dressed beauties of the North,—ay, and of the South, East, and West added to it. Her father half frowned, half smiled.

"The negroes fill her head with nonsense," he said to Henderson. "I shouldn't have left her to them so much, but what's a wifeless man to do?"

"What, indeed?" said Henderson, to Lucile,—at least his glance was pointed at her, and her blush at him. As she settled her somewhat unsubstantial little person beside her father on the broad window-seat, he ruffled her hair fondly.

"What does Uncle Ashur say, honey, about the clock? He surely has some remarkable explanation of its goings on."

"Uncle Ashur hasn't seen it yet. He's been holding a revival at Merton Courthouse. but he comes home to-night."

"Too much revival is what is the matter with Corinne," said the squire impatiently. "The people have heard so much about judgments, and signs, and that sort of thing, that they're ready to believe —"

"There!" shrieked Lucile, clutching the arm nearest her, which opportunely was that of Henderson. "It did it!" And Henderson also uttered an exclamation, an echo of the inarticulate sound, half groan, half scream, that rose from the crowd assembled half a block away on a patch of grass which Corinne called "the town yahd." Women sobbed and swayed, trying hard to faint;

men turned their hats meditatively in their fingers, saying, "Sho!" and trying hard to appear composed. The hands of the clock, which a moment ago had marked fifteen minutes past ten, had suddenly turned a swift pirouette round the dial face — not once only, but twice and thrice, and so quickly that the dazzled eye counted dozens of hands instead of a single pair. Then, with equal suddenness, the movement stopped, leaving people rubbing their eyes. The clock looked placidly at them with its big, benevolent, white face, as a frisky old cat dares any one to say that it was recently executing kittenish capers. The time indicated was sixteen minutes past ten.

"Exactly traversed its own circle, by Jove!" breathed Henderson.

"I didn't see it," said Squire Viguers, putting a tardy head out the window. "Believe you, Henderson? Of course; if I didn't, I would believe my own child. The clock's old and out of order, that's all —" ignoring the dry smile suddenly evoked on the other man's face. "I'm going down into the crowd," he finished, and hastily suited the action to the word.

But the clock had repented of its folly, it seems, and not the squire's own cheap but eminently reliable silver watch pushed the moments along with more decorum and accuracy than did the town clock of Corinne for the next two hours. The crowd, well mixed as to color and social standing, yawned, stood first on one foot, then on the other, glared disappointedly at the clock, and whiled away the creeping moments by rehearsing the tale of its eccentricities.

"Du'in' de day hit kindeh lays low," impressively stated one sable wiseacre. "Nobuddy ain' nebber been late to wu'k by it, has yo' yearn tell? No; if dat dar clock's got cunjur', hit's on'y night cunjur'."

"Has yo' seen it befoh to-night, Dave Brice?" asked a neighbor.

"'Deed I has, an' actin' queerer dan to-night. Why, de secon' time de figgers was dancin' Juba all ober de face, an' de pointers er whirlin' an' chasin' an' teetotummin' after dem. I tells yo', Unc' Ashur am right, an' sumpin's bounter happen in Corinne."

But the moment dragged on without excitement, and the crowd

thinned, and the remaining constituents discussed the absurdity of remaining, and Unc' Ashur, who had joined the group, said Corinne had had its warning now. Uncle Ashur was an aged negro preacher, deeply devout, deeply ignorant, and deeply impressed with the wickedness of the village to which he ministered. Then, just as the squire had made up his mind to return to the very humble village dwelling which was now all that was left of the De Viguers property, the clock made a face, — that was the way Unc' Ashur afterwards described it, — and the hands were jerked violently about, from twelve to three, from three to ten-thirty, thence to two-seventeen, thence to eight-forty, with an utterly bewildering inconsequence, then stopped with the same suddenness as before. The squire was indignant.

"Sprague is trying to be funny," he said sternly. "He's working the machinery about, that's what he's doing." Sprague, a white man of some standing in the town, had for years taken charge of the clock, sleeping in a little room at the foot of the tower stairs.

"I'd got to have a pretty long string, squire," said a voice at his elbow. Sprague was almost at his side.

"The thing needs repairing, then," said the squire, thankful that Henderson was not by to seize on the imbecility of the remark.

"Cleaned and oiled her yesterday," said Sprague. "She's in perfect working order — Hollo, Unc' Ashur, did it scare you?"

For Uncle Ashur's face was almost as gray as his own wool. He rocked his trembling body back and forth, with his hands to his face, to hide the goblin clock from his eyes. Some emotion stronger than fright — plainly although that was written on his dusky features — shook him from head to foot, and he was muttering to himself, "Hit's come, shore nuff. I didn' b'lieve hit wu'd."

"What's come?" asked Sprague, who knew the old man's superstitions well enough to anticipate the answer.

"De Lawd's judgment, come to C'rinne! Hyah, yo' all!" raising his still powerful voice to recall the stragglers who were leaving, "doan' tink yo'll 'scape the wrath to come thataway! Yo' jus' stan' still an' lissun —" which they meekly did, their

numbers augmented from moment to moment by fresh arrivals, many of them in dishabille, having been recalled from preparations for a night's repose by the attraction of Uncle Ashur's preaching.

"Yo' yeard what I done tole yo' las' week at de revival, yo' sinnehs of Corinne!" he shouted, his face working with excitement and genuine terror. "I tole yo' if yo' di'nt t'row away yo'se vanities an' inickerties, yo' wu'd get er wahnin' f'um above, an' beah hit is." Almost simultaneously with his words the hands of the clock gave a convulsive jerk, then returned to their original position. Uncle Ashur's hearers groaned, and seemed oppressed with their sins.

"Yes, yo' groans," continued their mentor severely, "but yo' doan give up what causes signs an' wonders in de skies." ("Hit's de clocks, not de skies," interpolated one wit, but was hustled and jostled into silence.) "Yo' knows what to do: stop yo' cahd playin', an' yo' quer'lin', an' yo' gittin' yo'sse'fs drunker'n ole fader Noah. Stop adohnin' ob yo' po' silly bodies wid a judgment hangin' ober dem." ("Dat's right," loudly agreed one of his dusky hearers, who was very nearly in that state when beauty is said to be most adorned.) "Gib up yo' gole watches an' yo' silk gowuds an' yo' bracelets an' breastpins wid big cullud stones in 'em, an' yo' srahch' sleebes lak gas balloons. I'se had de wahnin', an' I passes it on to yo'. Sumpin' will happen, if we all doesn't tek keer!"

Leaving him still haranguing, and apparently making some impression, De Viguers entered his house, and sent the round-eyed Lucile off to bed, while he discussed with Henderson the probable meaning of the clock's vagaries. Henderson was of the opinion that somebody was playing a trick, and must be stopped.

"It will demoralize the factories," he said. "All the hands, instead of working, will be out on the curbstone watching that blamed clock."

"Sprague's not doing it," said the squire. "He was down in the crowd with the others, as puzzled as I."

"He may have an accomplice in the tower, just the same, working the weights and wires."

"He's working them by magic, then," said De Viguers dryly,

“for no mortal man could jerk them around with that lightning rapidity. And what would be his object?”

“Give it up,” said Henderson. The two men agreed, none the less, on a plan of action for the following night. Then, however, it rained torrents, so that the crowd of watchers could not assemble in the square, and as the few unambitious street lights were far below the level of the face of the clock, it was impossible to pierce the darkness and the mist clearly enough to tell whether or not the hands were moving at the rate of sixty minutes to the hour, or “sixty hours to the minute,” as Sprague, the clock-keeper, declared they had done on the previous night.

Instead of being a relief, however, the suspense only increased the terrors of the ignorant majority among Corinne’s four hundred inhabitants. Uncle Ashur held a small meeting in his house, which Lucile’s mammy reported as highly productive of penitence. “Dey sw’arin’ off f’um eberyting wicket dey ebber done,” she said. “Dey goanter gib up all dey vanities, — dey banjos, an’ fiddles, an’ joolry, an’ sinful adohnments, — an’ Unc’ Ashur he goanter mek er big boufiah in de sq’ah, an’ buhv dem when he git enuff.”

“I’ll have something to say about that,” said the squire.

When the light of a clear dawn lit the face of the clock, and found it perfectly accurate in its indications, and decorous as to behavior, it also found a line of watchers already assembled on the curb. As Henderson had predicted, no one worked that day. He threatened fines, dismissal, everything; but curiosity was stronger than any other influence with the happy-go-lucky Africans, and the mill machinery stood idle.

So did the machinery of the clock, whose insanity seemed strictly nocturnal in its nature. Just at dusk the clock-keeper, Sprague, was surprised at being seized at each arm by two firm hands, as he was standing giving his view of affairs to an interested knot of loungers on the tavern stoop.

“I want you to come with us, Sprague,” said De Viguers. “We are going to spend the night with you in the tower, and have it well guarded on the outside, and see what goes on inside there.”

To their surprise, and somewhat to their disappointment,

Sprague made no objection. In fact, he frankly admitted he would liever than not have company inside that plaguey place, now that such queer things were happening. "I've heard of spooks ringing church bells, but never of their monkeying with clocks before."

Collecting a guard for the tower door seemed, however, impossible. Not a negro could be induced to go near the door of the haunted tower. "Debbils," "ghosteses," and "angels ob de Lawd" might have the place to themselves, so far as the inhabitants of Corinne were concerned; they would not venture near the threshold. The educated element declared themselves unafraid, but not deeply enough interested in the matter to pass an uncomfortable night in the open air. Goaded by the taunts of De Viguers, however, a sufficient number of volunteers was raised to surround the tower, and they were sworn to permit no man, woman, child, or ghost to go either in or out.

Henderson and the man he was anxious to have for a father-in-law went up with Sprague while he wound up the clock exactly as he had done, once in every eight nights, for years. Henderson scrutinized its machinery closely, and declared it all right, so far as he could see.

"All right!" said Sprague testily. "Would she go on all day reg'lar as clock-work, as the saying is, if she wasn't all right? It isn't her works that's out of kilter, it's something that ain't to be understood by you nor me."

Having explored the tower, and convinced themselves that no one else was on the premises, Sprague's two companions settled themselves for a night's vigil. The hours dragged on uneventfully, and each rated the other for his drowsiness. They heard the heavy, booming striko of the clock, they watched the steady swing of its pendulum for hours, and exchanged significant glances. The "manifestations" ceased, evidently, when there was surveillance from inside.

There was a little window half way down the tower stairs, and here they sat and, unseen, watched the crowd assembled outside. The window did not open, so they could only see, not hear.

"I declare, Viguers," said Henderson suddenly, "those fools are going on just as they always do. Look at Ashur screaming and

pointing and,—by George, a woman's fainted, and they are all wringing their hands and leaping up. What's that pounding at the door? Go down, Sprague, and see!"

But Sprague was too slow, and De Viguers was at the foot of the stairs before him, just as the guard burst in the flimsy fastenings of the door. "Has that infernal clock been carrying on again?" he gasped, and would have rushed out to see, but that the guard held him back, and sternly demanded, "What you been doing to it up there?"

The three men stared at their accusers for a moment, then the whole party, with one accord, clambered panting up the stairs—but too late, for the pendulum was swinging sedately, the whole machinery apparently in its usual state. Going outside, they perceived that the disturbance had stopped.

"*The thing's possessed!*" said the vexed and baffled Henderson.

Of course there was nothing supernatural about it, though every fool in Corinne might think so; but who was playing the trick? and how was he playing it, and why? "Pure malice," explained the latter riddle; but nothing explained the others, even when Henderson had a scaffolding rigged up against the tower, and ascended it himself, since no one else could be found brave enough to examine the face of the clock. Uncle Ashur, who seemed, if anything, more terrified than his followers, endeavored to withhold him from this.

"Doan' yo' tech dat ar clock, Mas' Hen'erson," he entreated. "Lak as not yo' fall daid befoh ouh eyes. Hit am cunjur', I tells yo' hit am."

"I thought you said it was a warning from heaven?" asked Henderson, glancing somewhat narrowly at the old man, who seemed filled with an unaccountable confusion and distress.

"I doan' know nuttin' 'bout hit," he said stumbingly. "We's all sinnahs, an' doan' know nuttin'. But I wouln' tech dat clock, sah, I suttinly wouldn'."

Henderson, who had undertaken the thing merely as a forlorn hope, was scarcely surprised to find nothing suspicious about the face of the clock. Indeed, as Sprague had said, was not the clock all right? Did it not keep perfect time, even at night? when,

however madly and incomprehensibly the hands might spin about, they resumed business at the correct interval of space when their maniacal dance was over.

De Viguers sulkily gave the thing up, declaring it an optical illusion which had descended upon the whole of Corinne. The town lapsed for a few days into a state of bewilderment, during which nothing was done to solve the mystery, which now had continued for nearly a week. The factory activities were at a standstill; a shadow hung over the town, an atmosphere of the uncanny, and little else was talked of but the weird changes of countenance of the Crazy Clock. Individuals with tropical imaginations claimed to have been waked up in the dead of night with a creepy feeling, and, glancing out of the window, to have beheld a pair of great owlsh eyes staring out of its white face. They even went so far as to have seen the face of "er grinnin' debbil" taking the place of its usual semblance. The small minority of educated men were in favor of sending to some big city for a detective to probe the matter, but Henderson emphatically opposed this. "They'd laugh at us," he said; "first, because they didn't believe us, then — when the whole thing comes to light — because we were so dense. We don't want any outside smarties solving our mysteries. *I'm bound to solve this!*"

Henderson had his reasons for taking such responsibilities upon himself. For the night before, Lucile de Viguers, with white, set little lips, and a deadly earnestness in her eyes, had broken her engagement with him.

"You and papa think as you believe best," she said, half tremblingly, "but I must think as *I* believe best, and I feel about that clock as mammy and Uncle Ashur do. I think it is a warning that we ought to give up our follies and our wickedness and turn ourselves to doing right."

"And I am a folly, Lucile, or a wickedness?"

"Don't talk so!" with a quivering lip. "It is only that you are the dearest thing on earth to me, and — and I have no fine clothes or jewelry or other treasures to renounce," — as, poor little soul, she had not, — "so it — must be — you." If the way she drooped her head and faltered out those last words between tears had led Henderson to doubt the firmness of her intention,

he was wofully undeceived. In vain he stormed against the superstition — ignorance — imbecility — of those who had turned her pretty young head with such ideas; she was tearfully unbending, and he went away grinding his teeth and swearing he would bring the crazy clock to its right mind, and the crazy people of Corinne to theirs.

There was no use appealing to De Viguers from Lucile; only reluctantly reconciled to her choice of a Northern husband, he would refuse to coerce her in any way. So, without telling the trouble which weighed on him, the forlorn lover urged the lawyer to begin the work of investigating anew.

"It makes me too mad," said De Viguers morosely. "To be foiled by an idiotic clock face a hundred years old! Henderson, do you think there *was* any one in the tower that night?"

The other shook his head. "The tower's all right, and so is the man that keeps it. I'll tell you, though, whom I suspect, for lack of a better, and am going to watch — Uncle Ashur."

The squire stared. "Uncle Ashur! and I thought you were the one man in Corinne who was not crazy. How could that good, illiterate, slightly doddering old fellow carry on a trick that successfully fools men like you and me? And why should he?"

"For purposes of revenue. How many silver watches and silk gowns do you suppose the old chap has in his hands now?"

De Viguers started. "Henderson, you haven't lived here all your life as I have, and known Uncle Ashur's character. He is absolutely honest and upright. Then, too, do you think he could act such terror as he has displayed over this affair?"

"I don't think anything," said Henderson dejectedly. "I'm as much in the dark as you. Let's go to Uncle Ashur's house and try what talking will do."

Uncle Ashur lived on the verge of the village, in a house little more than a cabin. There was no answer to his visitors' knock, but sounds from within told them he was there.

"The old man's *erying*, I verily believe!" said De Viguers. In fact, a series of loud sobs or muffled howls of anguish could be plainly heard. To their repeated knock, he called out huskily: —

"Yo' ain' comin' in, yo' ain', while Ashur's guter bolt on his do'!"

"That won't be long," said Henderson with set teeth, battering his shoulder against it. "Open!" he called.

"Whar dem tings, yo' white debbil?" called Ashur in reply, starting up in terror as the door gave way and the two men entered.

"O Mas' Hen'erson, I din' know hit war yo'! O Mas' Viguers, dey is all gone, an' I has been traffickin' wid de debbil!" and he frantically pulled at his scant white wool, a picture of despair and misery.

"Now just look here, Uncle Ashur," said Henderson, with a great effort at calmness; "tell us about it, and we'll get your things back, wherever they are. But tell us first what you have had to do with that clock."

The old man fairly groveled before him. "I'se been traffickin' wid de debbil," he piteously repeated. "Now he done tek de tings away, an' he tek ole Ashur nex'."

"Things — you mean the articles you were going to burn in the bonfire?"

"Yes; all de vanities an' fribberlossities of de wu'l' dat I war goin' to buhn! Mas' Hen'erson, I tought it war er angel, I did, reely. Yes, suh, I'll tell yo' all about hit, on'y please, suh, get dem back. Yo' know I hel' er gran' revival heal' las' month? Dey was clost on t'ree hun' red dere, 'cludin' white folks an' cullud come ober fum Merton Co'thous."

"Yes."

"Well, among odder tings I 'zorts dem to gib up all dere vanities an' fribberlossities of dis wu'l' — dere banjos an' gole rings an' fine dresses dey spend all dey earnin's in de mills foh. I tole 'em dey'd get er wahnin' ef dey din't. De nex' day I war walkin' in de woods jus' at dusk when er white man come sudden fum behine er bush en say, 'Ashur, does yo' want er sign to skeer all de people an' mek 'em do as you done tole 'em?'

"I was took so aback I jus' say, 'Yas, suh.' Hit got darker ebery minute.

"Well, he say, 'yo' mine me an' yo' shell have er sign. Gedder all de tings dey gibs yo', an' put 'em in de place I tells yo', an' after while you shall buhn dem in er consumin' fire,' he says, an' af'erwards I 'member he laugh behine he han'.

“ ‘G’long,’ I says. ‘Who yo’ be, ter mek er sign?’

“ ‘One ob de Lawd’s angels,’ he says, berry sof’. ‘If yo’ doubts de sign, jus’ look at de town clock ob Corinne, one week f’um to-night.’ Den he walks off, an’ I runs home, skeered.”

“Where did he tell you to put them?” asked De Viguers abruptly.

“Yo’ gran’fader’s ole house, Mas’ Viguers, — de ole tumble-to-pieces Viguers house op’site de clock. I steal dere at night, an’ puts em in de kitchen lak he tole me — dough I awful skeered sometimes foh feah it haunted; I tink I heah noises, an’ I tink I see lights in de sullah — ”

De Viguers had jumped up, and made for the door. “Where are you going?” cried Henderson.

“To that house, of course,” was the reply, and Henderson had to hold him back.

“Man, what are you thinking of? You won’t find your bird there when his booty’s flown. The railroad station at Merton Courthouse is the place to go; they only run three trains a day, and perhaps he started late enough to miss the four-fifty.”

Little was said in the frantic drive from Corinne to Merton Courthouse, the nearest railroad station, but the hired hack-horse’s back was lashed in a way to grieve the S. P. C. A. I am afraid the mind of Henderson, the driver, dwelt less on the prospect of possibly restoring the stolen chattels to Unc’ Ashur than that of discovering the already half-surmised secret of the Crazy Clock. The shriek of a whistle, as they neared the station, — on whose platform they could by the dim lights discern a man’s figure, — nearly maddened the three pursuers, who, in turn, nearly maddened the horse.

“For Richmond, Washington, and all points North!” called the conductor, as the train slowed. One quick, guilty, backward glance showed the unknown man that three other men were precipitating themselves from a carriage and dashing toward him. The next moment he sprang into the last car, and up the steps after that vision of vanishing coat tails rushed Henderson and De Viguers. Through that car, and the next, and still the next they sped, glaring excitedly on this side and that, only to bring up finally against the blank end of a baggage car. At the same

moment the engine gave a premonitory puff, and the two baffled pursuers, leaping to the ground, looked dazedly around for some clue to the pursued. But though he had in some way doubled on his tracks, the day was not wholly lost. For a few yards beyond the platform, and so out of range of the station master's sway, behold the valiant Uncle Ephraim, dragging from the open side door of the baggage car a wooden box and a haircloth trunk!

"Hit's mine," he gasped, as he sprawled to the ground with his treasures, precipitated by the impetus of the now rapidly moving train. "De trunk's what I kep' de offerin's in!" By the time that the indignant baggage master had reached the prostrate defender of his trust the train had vanished around a neighboring curve.

While De Viguers explained to the station men, and Uncle Ashur joyfully wept over his recovered treasures, Henderson went at the wooden box with ravenous curiosity, tearing it open by main strength and a jackknife. When the lid came off he gave one quick look and said, "I thought so."

"A magic lantern!" said De Viguers, peering in.

"A biograph," said Henderson. "Wonder where he stole that? Well, weren't we a choice collection of jackasses and dunderheads?"

"The station agent says," said De Viguers, "that he must have been the fake scientist who gave a lecture on astronomy in Merton Courthouse last month, and disappeared without paying for his board or for the use of the schoolhouse, — but how did he use that thing on the clock?"

"Had a series of pictures of a clock face, and kept 'em whirling," said Henderson briefly. "Simplest thing in the world. Here's the whole apparatus. The white clock face made a splendid background. I wonder why we never saw the light from the confounded thing?"

"That avenue of trees that goes down to the gate," said De Viguers musingly. "They screened it some, and then the moon was very brilliant all that time, and — well, he was dealing with a town of fools, you know."

"How," queried the same speaker during the far more leisurely drive back to Corinne, "could an elaborate swindle like that pay

him, with its thousand risks of exposure and its comparatively slight profits?"

"Oh, I don't pretend," answered the Northerner, "to explain an honest man's vagaries, let alone those of a scamp. And as it turned out, it didn't pay him; and no one has lost anything—for keeps," — with a gleam in his eye that needs no interpretation.

One odd thing happened shortly after this, —the town clock of Corinne stopped for good and all. De Viguers says, from age; Sprague says from folks n-tampering with and a-feeling of the machinery when there wasn't nothing wrong with it; but Unc' Ashur says, and is believed: —

"Hit's all t'rough that ar white debbil w'u'kkin' on it wid dat mesheen. Can' tell me all dat ar 'lectricificity c'u'd be p'inted at er clock and not hu't hit any. No, sah, Mas' Henderson!"

