



Closing Time

In a secluded part of the library at Castle Obersee there was a very private collection of books. Children's books. Specifically, books belonging to Anteje when she was a child. The Anthologist was reluctant to poke about amongst these shelves, but fascination always got the better of him. The books were the antithesis of what Queen Anteje had become. They were innocent, she was ruthless when needs demanded; they were fantastical, she was down to earth; they were delicate in their illustrations, she projected a fearsome presence without even trying.

On rare occasions he would find her sitting alone with this collection and he would make some excuse and leave her to her memories. He knew little about her parents or how she came to inherit the throne. Village gossip said the family were just and fair and that some distant treachery put her on the throne before she was ready. Alternative versions hinted at a tragedy and the young Anteje finding herself in charge with all the pressures and threats that came with it. Her enemies suggested a deal with the Devil and the selling of her soul.

When the Anthologist discovered that a collection of fairy tales was missing the final volume he decided to find the lost book. Guinevere told him about a shop in a village called Weisshaus, which specialised in children's books. She offered to go with him, but when he suggested an early start she changed her mind.

He followed her instructions and found the single lane into the village. He recognised the short market place from her description, but what she hadn't told him was that the place would be deserted.

The butcher's shop was empty and the shelves half full. The meat was at risk of going rotten and some of the older cuts did smell suspicious. He found a smoked ham and called for the shopkeeper to pay, but there was no reply.

"Is anybody here?" He checked behind the displays and the counter, but he was alone in the shop. He left money under the table where the butcher's knives were stored and left. A solitary cat watched him, sly and arrogant, it had the answers, but wouldn't say.

In the fishmonger's shop he found the same abandon. Trays full of melting ice, fish hours away from going rancid. Such a waste. He took the freshest looking fillet and left the money in a box that already contained a few coins.

There was no risk of decay in the wine merchants, but he wasn't here for the wine. However, a bottle of the local beer took his fancy and he repeated the ritual: called out for the shopkeeper and left his payment when there was no reply.

In the bookshop, Guinevere's recommendation paid off. The Anthologist found the final volume of the series and with no appetite to browse any further he went to leave a payment on the shopkeeper's chair when he spotted a man across the street.

The noise he made clattering out of the bookshop alerted the stranger. "Hello."

"Hello." The stranger looked about in expectation of others.

"Sorry to trouble you. What's happened?" The Anthologist assumed the stranger would know what he was talking about.

"Happened?"

"The village. Is it a public holiday? Plague? Where is everyone?"

The stranger, shortened by the stooping of old age, stared at the dusty road and shrugged. "Gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes. Gone." He wiped his lips on his coat sleeve and pointed to the Anthologist's bag. "You been shopping then?"

"There were a few things I needed. I left the money. I haven't pinched them."

"Makes no difference." The stranger straightened. "If you follow me I'll explain."

His name was Leopold. He had lived in the village all his life, inherited his father's clock repair business and lived at the end of the market square. "I can see all the coming and going," he said with a grin. His house was small and squeezed between two larger buildings. A single window on the first floor made the house look like a cuckoo clock. "A bit ironic," said the Anthologist. "A clock repairer living in a cuckoo clock." His brevity was skewered when he stepped into the tiny living room and spotted the clock on the mantelpiece. "Holy mother of God, what the hell is that?"

"Take a seat," said Leopold. "Whisky?"

"Thank you." The chair was a metre away from the clock, a slender device made from wood that appeared to have been varnished with blood. Its shape resembled a chunk of wood fallen from an ancient oak or walnut, the edges jagged and sharp enough to cut any finger that ventured too close. The clock ticked and when Leopold offered the whisky he paused. The Anthologist paused and then realised the tick was on its own. He took a sip of the whisky and still there was no second tick.

"That's how it is," said Leopold. "Doesn't tick very often."

"Why not?"

"It's no ordinary clock. How's the whisky?"

"Superb. I haven't tasted whisky like this since I visited the Scottish isles."

"I appreciate the quality, but never touch the stuff."

"The village," said the Anthologist. "You were going to explain. . . ."

"Oh, yes, the village." Leopold sat in a chair that faced the clock. "Do you ever wish you had more time?"

"All the time."

"So did I. But not any more. There was a time when I thought I would never achieve anything of the things I desired in life, but then one evening I had a visitor. Old Nick himself."

"Who?"

"Lucifer. Dressed all smart in his Sunday best, knocked on the door like a travelling salesman and offered me a clock. Well, you don't expect the Devil to look like that. I always pictured him like a goat with cloven hooves and what have you. In he came, settled himself down. Refused a drink, the same whisky you have there. Never touch the stuff, he said, tastes like muddy water to me, don't know how you lot drink it." The clock remained silent, a spy on the mantelpiece, one of a number of spies, the room was full of them: an umbrella stand, a shovel by the fire, a brass gas lamp next to a snuff box; all of them listening to every conversation. All of them waiting for the clock to tick again. "Can't say I like the look of it, but I have to hand it to him. He was a man of his word."

"You want all the time in the world, he said, well this clock will do it for you. Runs slow, he said. Runs so slow time will never pass."

The Anthologist checked his own watch and the clock's time was unrecognisable. "It's running several hours slow."

"Several hours." Leopold chortled. "It's running several months slow. He left it with me and didn't ask for any payment. Well I got suspicious then and pressed him. There must be catch, I said. Oh, there's always a catch, he said. But I'll come back to that. For a while it worked. It was good. I got on with things and where time normally flies when you're busy I'd look up and hardly a moment had passed." He sighed and settled in his chair knowing he had all the time in the world to tell his story.

"I was in the inn one evening, the Goose Feather just round the corner, and there was a right old argument going on. The Burgermeister causing a fracas. Always trying to impose his authority he was, which I suppose he's entitled to. He was threatening to enforce closing time. Sick and tired of drunken behaviour and the inns and pubs flouting the law, he said. He'd had enough. Closing

time would be enforced. And he was serious. Had a couple of constables with him who were big lads, had to be to carry the swords they had. Enormous they were. Well, I spotted an opportunity there, didn't I?"

"Did you?" The Anthologist had finished the whisky and waited for a refill.

"I said to the landlord, listen, I'll make you a clock. It'll run so slow you'll never reach closing time. He didn't believe me at first so I made a prototype for him. Let him have it on account, a trial period and he was over the moon. He snatched my arm off. In return keep me fed and watered, I said, no alcohol mind, just food and drink. And he kept his side of the bargain.

"I went to another inn, the Golden Keys down near the bakery. Offered the landlord there the same arrangement. A few clothes and shoes now and again, nothing special. He agreed. And the landlords were talking to one another. Word got about. The landlord at the Mutton and Mead took a clock off me as well. Paid for the wood for my fire. All in all it became a very convivial arrangement." Leopold closed his eyes for a moment. "And then one day things started to change."

He made no offer to top up the Anthologist's glass and instead remained comfortable in his chair as the weather outside started to grumble.

"I was at the bar in the Goose Feather when someone came in looking for the local builder. A man called Hoffmann. One of two brothers, people always mistook them for each other. Anyway, this fellow needed his roof fixing and had arranged to meet Hoffmann at mid-day, but Hoffmann couldn't be found anywhere. The gentleman hung on for an hour, had a drink or two for his troubles and a few days later his wife came in looking for *him*. He'd vanished. Then the saddler went missing. Horses running amok, they're owners couldn't do anything with them. Then the wife of the client of Hoffmann disappeared. The candle maker, the nurse, the magistrate, the vintner, lots of wailing and teeth gnashing when he went. The owner of the bookshop you were in took off about a week ago. One by one people disappearing. Doors left open, children abandoned. Well, I knew what was going on, but couldn't say."

"Why not?"

Leopold nodded to his silent clock. "Before he left, Lucifer told me, and I'm quoting him, the clock face is my face and should I see anyone drink alcohol, I'll come back for their soul."

And still the clock refused to tick. The Anthologist held his empty glass and glanced at the clock face, the metal plate cracked and discoloured around the rim. "Drink alcohol?"

"Yes."

"You offered me a drink knowing the clock face was there?" He jumped up.

"I like things quiet," said Leopold. "Common hospitality too. I'm not a frugal host. Like to make my visitors welcome." He joined the Anthologist at the window. Half way up the hillside where a single hawthorn leaned towards a large rock a figure sat cross legged, finely dressed and drumming his fingers on his folded arms.

"And there he is."

"What? Who? Him? That's. . . ." He couldn't bring himself to say the name.

"He'll be wanting something of yours."

The storm gathered. A bank of heavy cloud rushed in to see the latest repossession. The Anthologist breathed heavily to deliver blood, much needed blood to his tightening muscles. Mouth dry, legs weakening he sat down again and tapped the chair arms. He could grab his bag and run, but he knew there was no outrunning the Devil. "Well, this is it," he said. "Stitched me up well and good, haven't you?"

"It's nothing personal." Leopold's face darkened in the diminishing light of the storm.

"Do you earn a commission from delivering all these souls? What's the deal? How many people have perished in this village?"

"I wasn't counting," said Leopold.

In his confused state the Anthologist wanted to return to the shops and get his money back, but he wouldn't be needing it now or any of the items he had bought for that matter. And he could sit there all day, it wouldn't make any difference, sit there waiting for the hideous clock to tick once more. Wait for evening and the chance that Anteje would send out a rescue party to look for him,

but what could they do? This dreadful day would never end.

"The agreement," he said. "Was it written down?"

Leopold twisted away from the window. "Written down?"

"Yes. Was it a written agreement or verbal?"

"I don't see what difference it makes. Verbal."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There was nothing written down. Gentlemens' agreement."

He had one chance to escape, one chance to get himself back to the safety of Castle Obersee.

BUT HOW DID HE DO IT? HAVING DRUNK ALCOHOL IN FRONT OF THE CLOCK
HOW DID THE ANTHOLOGIST ESCAPE HIS DIABOLICAL PREDICAMENT. WHAT
WOULD YOU DO IN HIS POSITION? CLICK THE LINK TO FIND OUT HOW THE TALE
ENDS.

With great weariness, the Anthologist lifted his bag and stepped outside. The wind had grown in strength, a precursor to the rain that would follow. The Devil had gone from his rock and the Anthologist wondered if Leopold was having him on, but he wasn't. On a path entering the edge of the forest the Devil stepped out in front of him.

"Hello," said the Anthologist.

"Hello." The Devil smiled amiably. "Travelling far?"

"Half a day or so. Not too far if you wear the right clothes and stick to the path."

"Very wise."

"Yes. Very wise."

"Thirsty, are you?"

"No."

"No." The Devil's demeanour sharpened, his eyes narrowed and a sinister smile pulled his mouth wide across his face. "Already had a tipple, haven't we?"

"A drop, yes."

"A drop indeed. Well, you know what happens next, don't you?"

"I do. And can I say I think it's a somewhat unfair agreement. However, a contract is a contract and I, well, you know. . . ."

"How very magnanimous of you. So many struggle, make excuses, try to escape their commitments."

The Anthologist rummaged in his bag. "Well that's just not playing ball is it?" He found a package he had bought earlier and handed it to the Devil. "There you are."

"And this is what?" He unwrapped the package and sniffed the small fillet of fish in his hands.

The Anthologist closed his bag and threw it over his shoulder. "That's my sole. You're welcome to it."

He left the Devil to rage. Ripping the fillet apart he hurled bits of it into the forest (including one piece that hit the Anthologist on the neck), but a deal was a deal, a gentlemens' agreement as Leopold had said.

Arriving back at the castle he met Guinevere in the library and offloaded the contents of his bag.

"Did you find the book?" She picked up the bottle of beer and studied the label.

"Yes. I did." He took the bottle off her.

"Was it expensive?"

"No."

"Bet you haggled for it?"

"No, not really. It was a somewhat uneventful purchase."

"Ten words where one will do," she said and left him to place the book amongst the others.

"Words," he called, but she wasn't listening. "Don't underestimate the power of words,

Guinevere. You never know when they'll come in handy."