

A CHRISTMAS TIME GHOST STORY

When John awoke on Christmas Eve, late at night, he lay in his bed for a moment or two before he remembered what the next day was. He knew he shouldn't try to see Santa Claus because that meant he might not get any presents, but he sneaked a look at the end of his bed to see if he had already been. No, the pillowcase that he had hung there was still empty. Sleepily he turned over, ready to settle down again and glanced at the clock to see what time it was - and then sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. Something was wrong. The clock face was all cloudy and the hands seemed to have disappeared. He rubbed his eyes again and had a look around the room; everything else looked all right, but when he looked at the clock, the face was still cloudy and indistinct.

Wide awake now, he quickly climbed out of bed and made his way downstairs to have a look at the Grandfather clock in the hall. He had put his torch in his pocket and when he arrived in the hall he pulled the torch out and shone it on the face of the clock - and had a shock. The hands had disappeared, just like they had on his bedside clock, although the pictures around the face were fine. The numbers, however, were blurring, misty and cloudy as if they were melting away.

Puzzled, he opened the door and peered inside to see if any of the ghosts were there. It seemed to be empty but the familiar yellow glow began to fill the inside and he quickly grabbed the ledge of the doorway before he shrank. He was in time and found himself small and standing on the narrow ledge, watching the pendulum swing to and fro - but there was something else wrong now and it took him a while before he realised what it was. There was no sound at all as the pendulum swung - no steady, slow tick-tock like there usually was. Everything was silent. It was quite unnerving. He looked up at the works and found himself floating upwards and through the gap where the pendulum hung, to land on the wide ledge that supported the huge brass clockwork movement that drove the hands and sounded the hours. It was totally silent - yet usually, apart from the gentle tick-tock that always filled the air here, lots of other little sounds could usually be heard as the wheels and cogs turned on their steel spindles, just a little at a time, and the enormous capstans holding the cords from which the weights hung unwound a little bit more. John could never remember a time when the clock had been silent - and it wasn't as if it had stopped because the pendulum still swung and the cogs were still moving. He wondered what Jellicoe would make of it all but there was no sign of the old clockmaker anywhere - nor of the other ghosts.

He walked throughout the face of the clock and turned and stood before the huge dial, the numbers still dissolving away, and looked into the picture

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nearest to him - the desert scene full of old ruins and palm trees. It seemed absolutely empty although he could feel the warm breeze that blew out of it as the hot sun beat down on the desert sand, and he walked over to the seaside scene, with the ship moored offshore. He could hear the cry of the gulls and the sound of the waves lapping the sands and again he felt a gentle breeze blow out of the picture bringing with it the smell of the sea. He saw that there were two figures on the sand closer to the sea and he stepped into the scene, taking off his slippers and putting them into his dressing gown pockets, so he could feel the sand between his toes as he ran down the beach. It was warm and very pleasant on the beach - quite unlike the weather outside the clock at home, where it was windy, cold and wet. As he drew closer to the figures on the beach he realised that it was Bunsen and Leticia, busy building a big sandcastle, with the aid of flower pots and two garden trowels.

Bunsen turned to see John running towards them and waved. Leticia turned and smiled.

"Hello, John," she said. "We didn't think we would see you tonight, not on Christmas Eve."

"Hello," said John, a bit breathless, "I didn't think I would be here either, but it isn't your Christmas Eve, is it? I thought you followed that older calendar."

"Well, yes and no," replied Bunsen. "You must remember that the calendar was changed a long time before I was born - and a bit before Jellicoe's time too. The others all follow the old calendar and Jellicoe and I get the best of both worlds because we sort of celebrate Christmas twice although we really save our big party for the old date. I always like to come to the seaside for my first Christmas Eve."

"And I thought I would join him," added Leticia. "We both like the seaside - I never had the chance to go when I was alive."

"And it's a real treat to go the seaside on Christmas Eve and have it nice and warm, too, eh, John?" laughed Bunsen.

John nodded. "I like your castle," he said. "It's huge. I have a proper bucket and spade but I can't build a castle like this."

"Ah, well, I borrowed the flower pots and trowels from Sir Percy's house," said Bunsen. "Old George let me have them. They work pretty well, don't they?"

They certainly did. The castle had a big mound in the centre with a wall at the base bristling with round towers. Piled high on top of the mound were towers, turrets and high walls. Leticia had set sea shells and pretty stones in the towers like windows and Bunsen had carefully shaped the sand so that the towers had pointed roofs. John began to help with the shells - and then suddenly remembered why he was there.

"I almost forgot," he said, "why I'm here, I mean. I woke up and looked at my clock and the face had gone all misty. There were no hands. I went downstairs to look at the Grandfather Clock and the face was the same - no hands and all the numbers fading away. There's no sound either - no ticking."

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The others looked at each other.

“Sure you’ve not been dreaming?” asked Leticia.

“No, I’m never sure that all this isn’t a dream,” said John, “but if it is, then the clock face fading is all part of it.”

“Something’s up!” said Bunsen.

“We had better tell Jellicoe,” added Leticia.

“Where is he?” asked John. “I looked around when I entered the clock but there was no-one about.”

“He’ll be enjoying his Christmas Eve in the Castle, I expect,” said Bunsen. “He said he was going to put up some decorations and have a bit of supper and said he would look in later. He hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Perhaps we should go and look for him,” suggested Leticia. Bunsen nodded and they all stood up - and went giddy as they suddenly shrank in size.

“What’s happening?” shouted Leticia.

“No idea,” replied Bunsen, looking wildly about as he suddenly found himself smaller than the flower pot he had been using as a bucket and in danger of being buried in sand as it toppled over, half full.

John looked around too. He was standing by one of the trowels, the handle now huge. They were all in front of the big gate of the castle, its arch made out of a big piece of rock Leticia had found and which Bunsen had built into the wall. On each side of the gate was a tower, and now they were so small, John thought that the towers looked massive and splendid, with their pointed roofs and shell windows.

“I’m worried,” said Leticia. “This shouldn’t be happening. Can we get out and back to the clock?”

“I don’t think we better try,” murmured Bunsen. “Just look over there.”

He pointed and they all looked in the direction of his finger - there were figures creeping along the beach in the distance, with long curved things in their hands that caught the sun and glittered.

“Cutlasses!” hissed Bunsen, “and the men holding them are pirates, I’m sure of it. As big as we were a few minutes ago, too. They’re looking for something.”

“Us possibly,” said Leticia. “Come on, let’s hide!”

She took John’s hand and led him into the castle. Bunsen followed and they ran over the drawbridge made of driftwood and into the courtyard. In front of them was the mound and cut into it and leading upwards were lots of steps.

“Funny, I don’t remember making those,” said Bunsen.

“Nor me,” said Leticia. “Come on, up we go. We can keep an eye on those pirates and hide amongst the towers at the top.”

“I hope they don’t decide to jump on the castle!” said John.

“A nasty thought,” agreed Bunsen.

They ran up the steps, puffing as they climbed because it was a long way. At the top they had a surprise - in the side of a tower was a door made out of shell and it was half open. A puzzled Leticia opened it further and peered in. She turned to the others.

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“There’s an inside! It’s hollow!” she said.

“I must have built the castle better than I thought,” said Bunsen in surprise.

They went in and the door shut behind them. Inside there was a wonderful room with a floor of mother-of-pearl while the walls were all set with tiny coloured shells making patterns and pictures. A great staircase wound up the sides of the room to the top of the tower.

“What do we do now?” asked John, looking up.

“Come on up, please!” boomed a deep voice from the top of the staircase and John and the ghosts looked at each other.

“What do you think?” asked Bunsen.

“Whoever it is, at least they said please!” said Leticia. “What have we got to lose?”

They went on up and found the staircase, like the floor, was all made of mother-of-pearl, and the banisters were carved like seahorses. At the top they walked into another wonderful round sea-shell room, but lit by big windows and with comfortable driftwood chairs carved into strange shapes. Sat in one of them was a big man dressed in a red cloak trimmed with white fur; he had a long flowing white beard and John knew at once who he was.

“It’s Santa!” he cried.

“The very same, young John,” rumbled the man, smiling. He rose out of his seat and shook each of them by the hand. He was very tall - as tall as Bunsen and broad too. “It’s good to see you again,” he went on. “You saved Christmas once before and stopped me being kidnapped by Red Sydney. I’m afraid I’m facing trouble again but I don’t know who from this time.”

“What’s happened?” asked Bunsen. “We don’t usually have a visit from you until Old Christmas Time.”

“That’s right,” agreed Leticia. “And then there’s all this trouble with the clock, and we’ve shrunk and found an inside in our castle. Any idea who has done all that?”

“Me, some of it at least,” said Santa. “I’ve usually got a fair bit of magic about me - well, you have to have, visiting all those children on Christmas Eve at about the same time and leaving presents. However, all my powers have been weakened by something. What little I’ve got left enabled me to make you small to avoid those gentry out there.” He gestured to the window and they looked out to see a group of fierce men armed with cutlasses, rings in their ears, big sea boots on their feet, searching for something on the beach.

“Pirates all right,” said Bunsen. “Red Sydney’s crew - I thought I had sent them to the bottom of Davy Jones’ Locker.”

“Rescued at the last minute, I’d say,” remarked Santa. “They’ve been brought here to find you - or me, or possibly all of us. I found myself suddenly flying over this beach when I should have been over John’s town and losing height rapidly. I saw that lot land in a boat and then young John here arrive and run down the beach to see you. I made myself small, landed here quickly and made the reindeer a comfortable stable below this tower and then arranged an

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inside to the castle as quickly as I could, after making you small so you could escape.”

“Suppose the pirates come and stamp on the castle?” asked John.

“I’m hoping that all they will see is a pile of seaweed-covered rock,” replied Santa. “It’s about the limit of what I can do now. Something has reduced my powers a great deal.”

“Let’s see if we have any powers,” said Leticia. “Bunsen, I’m going to try and vanish.” She took a deep breath and disappeared.

“That worked,” said Bunsen. “Now try and walk through the wall.”

“Right ho,” came Leticia’s voice. There came a scream from the other side of the window.

“Oh dear, I forgot we were at the top of the tower,” said Bunsen.

“Whoops!”

A dishevelled Leticia arrived back at the top of the stairs.

“Any more bright ideas?” she snapped, trying to rearrange her hair.

“Yes, can we grow?” asked Bunsen. “I’ll try, should I?”

“Just be careful that you don’t overdo it and go through the roof,” warned Leticia.

“I’ll watch it,” said Bunsen, but knowing how vague Bunsen could be, John put his hands over his head just in case. Bunsen took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Nothing happened.

“Success?” asked Bunsen, opening his eyes. “Oh, I see. No luck. Well, we can’t get to our full size again. What about being able to wish something up?”

Leticia nodded and snapped her fingers. A glass of ginger beer appeared together with a small table. “There you are, John,” she said. “I hope it’s all right.”

John took the glass and sniffed there was a beautiful smell of fresh ginger beer. He sipped - it was gorgeous. He told Leticia so and she beamed.

“Good!” she said. “So, we have some powers left, at least. Can you become invisible?” she asked Santa.

He shook his head. “I’ve tried,” he said. “Usually, there is no problem. After all, I do it regularly. Wouldn’t do to put some pilot off while he’s trying to control a jumbo jet - and seeing an elderly man in red in a sleigh with a troop of flying reindeer cruising past the plane at several thousand feet might just do that. And then there’s the policemen in the towns. Can’t have them telling the sergeant they’ve seen Santa Claus up on a roof. I don’t think they would last too long in the job. I have an idea that it’s John and me that those pirates are after - possibly you as well but I’m not sure.”

“Is it Bulbul?” asked John. “After all, he can stop the ghost’s magic.”

“But only bits of it have stopped,” said Bunsen. “It’s very odd. We need help - Lady Matilda’s the expert in this sort of thing but getting to her might be a problem.”

“Or Oglai,” suggested John.

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Bunsen and Leticia looked at each other. "That's a good idea," said Leticia. "Problem is, how do we call on him?"

"Can he join us - or is this problem affecting him too?" said Bunsen.

John remembered something from a previous adventure. He turned to Santa.

"Have you seen a box of matches or perhaps a lamp lying about?" he asked. "It's the sort of thing a genie we know might use."

"Hmmm," murmured Santa, thinking hard and looking around. "No, I can't recall seeing anything like that since I arrived here." Then he caught sight of the table John's ginger beer had arrived on. "That's odd," he said, "The top of the table looks just like a huge coin with writing on it."

"So it does," said Leticia, looking hard at the table top. "Can't make any of it out though."

"It's Arabic," said Bunsen and the others looked at him in surprise.

"I used to read a lot in the library in the house where I was butler," he explained, "I always had a book open when I was polishing the silver."

"I thought it was a bottle," muttered Leticia. Bunsen ignored her.

"I can't read it, but it looks just like some Arabic writing I once saw in a book," he went on. "I assume you didn't intend to summon up a table with Arab writing on it when you called up John's ginger beer?" he asked Leticia. She shook her head.

John bent over the table, and traced out some of the letters with his fingers. "I bet Oglai could read it," he said, "I wish he was here." A little ginger beer had spilled on to the top and he rubbed off with the sleeve of his dressing gown. There was a puff of green smoke from the centre of the table and they all stood back in surprise. John hastily snatched away his ginger beer as the smoke grew in volume, writhed, billowed and settled on the floor. Gradually it cleared to reveal the little three-eyed green genie, Oglai.

"Your wish is my command, oh Master John!" he said, bowing low and then straightening up. "Or rather it isn't if it is a big wish. Something is affecting my powers. I have been trying to warn you that there is trouble afoot but I had great difficulty in getting through until you wished up the ginger beer, oh delightful and resourceful lady Leticia," he said, bowing to her. Leticia blushed and curtsied back. "Oh, Master Claus, how good it is to see you," he added, catching sight of Santa and again bowing. Santa bowed back.

"We gathered that there is trouble," said Leticia. "Can you tell us what is going on? Is it Bulbul?"

Oglai pondered a minute and removed his turban, taking from it the crystal ball and setting it on the table. They all gathered round.

"I will see what the Crystal will show," said Oglai. Mist filled the crystal as Oglai passed his hand over it. It cleared and they saw a tiny Bulbul trapped in the bottom of a huge glass jar somewhere in the stars, looking rather fed up. He was playing cards with the villains Sir Rufus the Red and the Red Miller and they were all cheating.

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“Interesting,” said Bunsen. “Where are Red Sydney and Hassan the Red Bearded, I wonder. Have they escaped?”

“Bulbul doesn’t look very threatening,” said Leticia.

“His powers have gone,” said Oglai. “But I agree, oh delightful lady; where indeed are the most evil Hassan and the dread Sydney.”

“Someone or something is at the bottom of this,” rumbled Santa in his deep voice. “And I don’t think it’s those two. Oglai, do you know if we can join the other ghosts?”

“Oh mighty Santa,” said Oglai, “your magic is much greater than my own feeble powers. If yours does not work, then truly we are in trouble. But I may be able to tell you where the other most honourable ghosts are.” He passed his hands over the crystal again and the mist filled it. When it cleared they saw the Eastern room in the house where Bunsen had been the butler, with the firelight reflecting off the blue and white tiles on the walls and the gilded stalactites on the ceiling. Lady Matilda, Sir Percy and the Abbot were standing staring at the grandfather clock in the room - the clock that was a younger version of the one that stood in John’s hallway in his house. The hood of the clock was off, revealing the works and Jellicoe was standing on a chair at the side of the clock and trying to make it go. The face had become all misty, the hands had disappeared and the ghosts were looking at it with very puzzled expressions.

“There they are,” said Bunsen, “How are we going to meet up with them?”

“They’ve found out that something is up with the clock,” said Leticia. “It looks as if Jellicoe is stumped and if he can’t fix the clock then no one can.”

“I don’t think the problem lies with the clock,” said Santa. “It’s some sort of magic and it’s affecting the clock and us as well.”

“I can suggest a way that three of us might be able to join the most beautiful Lady Matilda, the valiant Sir Percy, the venerable Abbot and the ingenious Jellicoe,” said Oglai. “My magic carpet is at your disposal, if my magic will still make it go.”

“A magic carpet!” said Santa, “I’ve never travelled by one of those. But only three of us, you say?”

“Oh yes, I have only a three seater carpet available. My larger model is at the menders - the moths have been at it. Even a three seater is a bit of a squeeze.”

“That means two of us must stay behind,” said Leticia.

“A pity my sleigh is not working,” said Santa. “It can take a passenger, but I found it was losing height badly when I appeared over the beach.”

“But it may now work,” said Oglai. “Consider, oh mighty Santa, your sleigh began to lose height when you were full size. Now that you are small, perhaps you may again fly.”

“It’s worth trying,” said Santa. “Come on, my sleigh is down in the stables under the Tower. Let’s see if it will fly.”

“Where is your carpet?” John asked Oglai.

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The little genie smiled and removed his turban again, reached into it and took out a rolled up carpet, about two feet long. He carefully put the crystal ball back inside his turban and replaced it on his head.

“Jolly useful turban, that,” observed Bunsen. “Saves on carrying luggage if you can carry everything in your hat.”

“Of course,” said Oglai. “Have turban, will travel. Let me see if my carpet will still work.”

He unrolled it and set it down in the middle of the room, sat in the centre of it and moved his hands gently in the air. The carpet rose and glided round the room before settling down again. Oglai smiled, got off and rolled up the carpet.

“So far, so good,” he said. “Now, most honourable Master Claus, we must see if your excellent sleigh can fly.”

Santa led them down the mother-of-pearl stairs, through another door and then down another set of wide steps that lead to a big vaulted hall. To one side was a big red sleigh on brass runners, the back of it filled with sacks stuffed full of parcels wrapped in bright paper. On the other side were comfortable wooden stalls occupied by four reindeer, munching contentedly on oats. They greeted Santa by nuzzling him and rubbing their noses in his beard.

“Good boys! Good girls!,” he said in a low voice as he stroked them. He turned to the others. “Meet my friends,” he said. “This is Polly, this one here is Buttercup, here’s Hercules and this one is Samson.”

“I didn’t know you had lady reindeer,” observed Leticia, as she stroked the gentle creatures, who responded by rubbing their heads against her.

“Of course!” replied Santa. “We’ll harness them up. I’ve been thinking about the flying problem,” he said to Oglai, who was tickling one of the reindeer under the chin. “When we were full size we started to lose height rapidly once we were over this beach, but when I went small, we seemed to fly better. If we keep this size - and at the moment we don’t seem to have a choice - then we might be able to fly quite well.”

“That is most well observed,” said Oglai. “Indeed, the magic that is stopping us from using our powers is most strange, as if it is not yet full and the power that it has ebbs and flows. By going small you may have thwarted it and it does not yet realise what has happened. When small, we may well all be able to fly.”

“Well, I hope you both know what you’re talking about,” said Leticia, “for I’m sure I don’t understand it, and the last thing I want happen is to be flying over the sea and suddenly not be flying at all.”

“Could be a very wet conclusion to our adventures,” agreed Bunsen.

“We shall have to take the chance,” said Santa. “It won’t be long before whatever is after us catches up with what we’ve done and tries to stop us.”

He showed John and the others how to harness the reindeer to the sleigh, using shiny brown leather straps and brass buckles. The reindeer stood patiently while they were fastened in and then began to gently paw the ground.

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“Steady, my lovelies,” rumbled Santa. “Patience! We shall soon be off.” He turned to the others. “I suggest John sits beside me,” he said. “Oglai, if you would like to take Leticia and Bunsen and go first - I don’t know my way round here so I’ll follow you.”

“Very well,” nodded Oglai, spreading the carpet on the floor, “Please to be seated,” he said Bunsen and Leticia. “Fasten your safety belts and hold on tight!”

They sat themselves side by side on the carpet behind Oglai - it was a bit of a squeeze. Little straps grew out of the carpet for them to fasten themselves on with. Oglai waved his hands and the carpet rose in the air.

“Now,” said Santa, as John settled himself down beside him on the long bench seat at the front of the sleigh, “let’s see what we can do! Open the gates!” he boomed and at the end of the room two huge gates swung open. Oglai’s carpet whooshed down the hall and disappeared into the blue sky, Bunsen and Leticia hanging on with knuckles white and eyes tight shut. Santa flipped the reins and the reindeer began to pull. They gathered speed and the sleigh moved smoothly on its runners down the hall, then rose a little in the air. Santa peered down and grunted, then flicked the reins again and the reindeer began to gallop, their hooves beating the air as they reached the great doors. Now they jumped high into the air and the sleigh followed, going faster and faster, higher in the air now, banking over the beach with the sandcastle far below. Ahead of them they could see Oglai’s carpet heading out over the sea, and down on the beach they saw the pirates, still searching - but they never noticed the tiny sleigh, high above them, as it turned and set out after Oglai, flying over the blue sea which was now lit red on the horizon by a setting sun. They headed into the huge red ball, as it sank slowly below the horizon, and they both had to shade their eyes with their hands against the glare. Then they veered away, as Oglai flew higher and into a sky that was now a deeper blue and set with the first few stars of night.

John loved that journey and remembered it long after. The air was still warm and behind them the sliver of sun above the sea glowed red while below them the sea glittered, reflecting red and gold. The few stars twinkled in the deep blue sky and Santa began to sing in a deep base voice, old carols from many years ago. Bells on the sleigh and harness jingled in time to the music and as it grew darker and darker, lanterns on the sleigh began to glow - and it also grew colder. Flakes of snow began to fall - huge ones. Because they were so small, and the snow flakes were full size, it was like being hit by a fluffy ice-cold dinner plate and John began to shiver. Santa noticed and pulled a great big fur rug out from under the seat, arranging it around John so that only his face could be seen - it was a beautifully warm rug and John snuggled down into it. Santa also pulled a lever that lifted a glass screen up in front of them and stopped the snow getting into their faces. A windscreen wiper began to clear the snow from the screen but it snowed ever faster and the wiper had a hard time keeping up. Ahead John could see Oglai’s carpet, its occupants with their heads down and looking very cold and miserable as the snow began to cover

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them. Then John noticed that the flakes of snow were growing smaller and smaller and he realised that they must be growing in size now. The sleigh was passing over open snow-covered country, lit up white by a full moon that came out from behind the clouds as the snow slackened and stopped. Below them was a big house full of towers, turrets and pinnacles and John realised that it was the house where Bunsen had once been the butler. The carpet in front of them swooped low and landed by the front door, with three snowmen on board. As the sleigh landed gently in the front garden, John saw the snowmen slowly and stiffly get up, stretching their legs and arms and shaking themselves to get the snow off. A very cold Oglai, Bunsen and Leticia emerged, shivering. John helped Santa to cover the steaming reindeer with blankets and give them a feed from their nosebags, and a good pat and stroke for doing so well. Then they joined Oglai and the others as they banged on the front door, Leticia shouting "H-h-h-urry up, we're all f-f-f-freezing out here!"

The door opened a crack, and peering suspiciously out they saw Sir Percy, one hand on his head to stop it falling off and in the other hand his sword. Beside him stood Abbott Baldwin, clutching a poker. Once they saw who it was, Sir Percy and the Abbott quickly opened the door wider and Sir Percy ushered their visitors in and rapidly took them through to the Eastern Room where there was a roaring fire. As they all gathered round to warm themselves John heard the Abbot bolting and locking the front door and pushing something heavy against it.

"Hello, John, it is good to see you again - and you too Oglai," said Sir Percy. "And as for you sir, well I think I know who you are." he continued, shaking Santa by the hand. "You are always welcome!"

Oglai looked around the room; "So good to be back in this most glorious chamber!" he said, and John agreed. The firelight played on the brass ornaments scattered about on the heavily carved dark wood furniture and the golden stalactites on the ceiling gleamed. On the wall opposite the fireplace stood the Grandfather Clock, the face all misty and indistinct.

"This was where we used to have the family Christmas tree," said Bunsen. "They all used to gather round here on Christmas Eve - I remember the first time I saw a tree at Christmas in the house. They only became fashionable when I was a young man."

"That's right," nodded Jellicoe, "we had garlands of holly, ivy and yew but no tree in my day."

"I think we should have a tree now to make our guests feel comfortable," said Bunsen. "Let me see. Have I still got the power to wish one up, I wonder?"

He concentrated hard and a strange twinkling object began to take shape on the floor. It soon resolved itself into a big fir tree, almost as tall as the room itself, glittering with tinsel and coloured glass baubles. Little glass birds perched amongst the branches and there were gingerbread shapes hanging here and there, coloured and gilded, of coaches, men and women, houses and animals.

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“Splendid!” laughed Santa. “Just what we need on Christmas Eve, eh, John?”

John agreed but was amazed to see that the tree was lit up by real little candles fastened onto the branches.

“Isn’t it a bit dangerous?” he asked.

“Could be,” nodded Bunsen, “we used to have occasional accidents - more than one tree has gone up in flames!”

“I think we might make our guests even more comfortable with something else,” said Sir Percy, “and if I know old Christmas - which, forgive me, sir, is what we called you, I think you would like some mulled wine and mince pies.”

He snapped his fingers and a tray of steaming drinks, accompanied by a plate of mince pies, appeared on one of the brass topped tables. Bunsen did his butler act and handed round the pies and drinks with a bow.

“Quite right!” laughed Santa, helping himself to a drink and a mince pie and thanking Sir Percy and Bunsen. “I don’t mind being called Old Christmas. I have many names.”

There was a glass of ginger beer for John - and he noticed that when he had finished handing round the drinks, Bunsen reached for a glass of mulled wine himself only to find it became a glass of ginger beer, too. Bunsen sighed but sipped his ginger beer - and John noticed that Leticia was smiling at him. He thought that she might have had something to do with wishing up Bunsen’s drink.

“This is all very well,” said Lady Matilda, a little impatiently. “It’s lovely to see John and Oglai again and you too, sir, but we need to concentrate on the matter in hand. We have a problem!”

“The most beautiful lady is quite right!” agreed Oglai. Lady Matilda blushed, the Abbott choked on his mince pie and Lady Matilda hit him on the back - rather hard.

Jellicoe agreed with them. “Yes” he said, “it’s got to be sorted out. Something’s up and it’s got me confused. I’m afraid John is in danger - and so are you, sir,” he said to Santa.

Sir Percy sighed and put down his glass. “Oh well,” he said, “I suppose you’re right, of course. We had better work out what’s going wrong.”

The Abbott took another glass from the tray. “No reason why we shouldn’t work it all out in comfort,” he said, and helped himself to another mince pie. “Personally I always think better on a full stomach.”

Sir Percy brightened up and nodded, and he too had another mince pie. Lady Matilda looked exasperated.

“Do you think we ought to check on your reindeer?” she asked Santa.

Santa nodded. “Yes,” he said. “They will be all right with their blankets, but I would like to know that they are safe.”

“I’ll go,” said Bunsen. “I’m warmer now and I know where there is a big coat. You stay here and talk about the problems with the magic. I don’t know much about it but I’m sure you do.”

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"I'll join you," said the Abbott, grasping his poker in one hand and a mince pie in the other. The pair of them left the room.

"When did you first notice that the clock had gone all peculiar," Leticia asked Jellicoe.

"It was Lady Matilda who first noticed something was up," replied Jellicoe.

"Yes, that's right," agreed Lady Matilda. "I was in my house - the one I used to live in. I go there occasionally to have a look at the garden. I'd taken Percy and the Abbott with me and we were strolling through the Long Gallery when we noticed that the clock there looked odd and wasn't making a sound although the pendulum was moving all right."

"We decided we would consult Jellicoe," continued Sir Percy, "so we left the house - no problem there - and went back to our clock, walked into the castle picture and called on Jellicoe."

"But on the way, we noticed that our clock was also behaving very oddly," said Lady Matilda.

Jellicoe took up the story. "I had a good look at our clock but of course the works are so big I couldn't really do much. I thought I would have a look at Lady Matilda's clock instead but when we tried to go into the picture of her house we found ourselves here instead and I found this clock was behaving very strangely too. At least it's smaller here in this house so I can examine it more closely but I have to admit I'm really nonplussed. I just don't know what's happening - or why we couldn't go into Lady Matilda's house.

"And we can't leave either," added Lady Matilda. "We've tried. Not all our powers have gone, it's true, but a lot of them have."

Oglai had been listening intently and keeping one of his three eyes on the clock face. "It is very strange," he said. "Powers ebb and flow, like the tide of the sea. So do the numbers on the clock," he pointed and John saw that the numbers did indeed seem to fade in and out, sometimes almost disappearing altogether.

"My clock by my bed is doing that too," he said and Lady Matilda gasped.

"If it's happening in the real world too, then there is something very serious going on," she said.

"But it cannot keep it up all the time," pointed out Oglai. "It is as if whatever is doing this is not yet strong enough to complete the task - whatever it is."

Santa had been listening closely, frowning as he tried to understand the problem. Before he could say anything, though, the Abbott and Bunsen burst into the room, breathless.

"There are men all round the house," said Bunsen. "We're surrounded!"

"We managed to become invisible," said the Abbott, "in time to make sure the reindeer were safe. Then as we headed back to the house, we suddenly went visible again!"

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“But they didn’t follow us,” added Bunsen. “They saw us clearly enough but let us get back into the house and bolt the doors. It’s as if they were waiting for something.”

The room seemed to go cold suddenly. The lights dimmed, and it seemed to John as if the room became much, much larger, as if it would take him an age just to cross over the short distance from where he was standing to reach Jellicoe, only a yard away. They all shivered and Sir Percy put a protective arm around Lady Matilda, grasping his sword tightly in the other hand. Leticia drew closer to Bunsen.

“I’ve not felt like this since I was alive,” said Jellicoe quietly. “It’s the feeling I used to get when we told each other ghost stories on Christmas Eve.”

The Abbott nodded. “Fancy ghosts feeling afraid of ghosts!” he said. “I know just what you mean, though.” He was standing close to John and put an arm round him. John held his hand tight, pleased to have someone to hold on to - the Abbott may have been a ghost but he felt solid and comforting enough.

Then the firelight grew low and it became even colder. The doors at each end of the room burst open and framed in each was a fearsome figure. In one was Red Sydney the Pirate, a wickedly curved cutlass in his hand. In the other was Hassan the Red Bearded, holding a huge scimitar.

“Avast there!” roared Red Sydney. “Nobody move!”

“Or taste my steel,” rasped Hassan, swinging his huge sword.

Sir Percy was as brave as a lion and leapt forward to engage Red Sydney, his sword swishing through the air. The Abbott pushed John towards Jellicoe who put his arm around the boy, while Abbott Baldwin bravely went for Hassan with his poker. Then there was a clap of thunder which stopped everyone in their tracks. From the floor in front of the Grandfather Clock rose a black shape that billowed like a sail in the wind and resolved itself into a tall, hooded figure which reached up with two bony white hands to pull back the hood and reveal a strange, terrible white face, framed in wild silver hair, the eyes a dead grey, the mouth a thin, cruel black line. The features of the face seemed to be going in and out of focus all the time, never clearly revealed, and when the figure spoke, it was as if the voice came from a very long way away, echoing and reedy, crackling and rustling like paper when it is crinkled up.

“Good evening,” it said. “Let me introduce myself or do you already know a little of who I am. I am the ghost that even ghosts are afraid of. I am the Ghost of Time Passed, and tonight I intend to stop time at this Christmas Eve. There will be no more Christmases! I shall rule over all time and you will be my slaves!”

“And how do you intend to do that,” asked Jellicoe, quietly. John noticed that Hassan and Red Sydney were cringing away from the figure, obviously frightened of it.

“I have already done it!” crowed the figure. “I have captured the spirit of this one particular time, the spirit of Christmas himself. If I keep him prisoner here for ever, then time will stop. Your fire will wither and the tree will crumble, and all of you will be under my power! No more presents!” he

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hissed at John. "Your parents will never wake, and you will never sleep again, or grow old, or play. His sinister voice seemed to reach deep into John's mind, and the dead grey eyes bored deep into his brain. John shivered and felt very afraid. Jellicoe drew the boy closer to him, and Santa rose from his chair and placed himself between John and the figure.

The dreadful Ghost of Time Passed stretched out his hand towards Santa and stepped forward onto the Persian rug with the strange design in the middle. Then things happened fast. Oglai reached out and grabbed the rug, tugging hard, and pulling it out from underneath the feet of the Ghost; he fell backwards with a yell of anger and bashed his head on the Grandfather Clock. As he lay there stunned, Red Sydney and Hassan leapt forward, swords waving. The Abbott bravely stepped forward to confront Hassan and his huge scimitar with the poker and it might have gone badly with the Abbott had Oglai not muttered a strange word. The Persian carpet leapt up and flew straight at Hassan, enveloping him. The Abbott brought the poker down smartly on a lump in the carpet he guessed might be Hassan's head and the lump under the carpet slumped to the floor with a groan. The Abbott gave the lump another wallop with the poker to be sure.

Meanwhile Sir Percy had jumped forward to take on Red Sydney whose great cutlass whistled through the air. He advanced on the pirate with one hand clamped on his head to stop it falling off, the other with sword outstretched. Red Sydney slashed at him and good swordsman that he was, Sir Percy parried the blow with his own sword, only to see it shatter in two. All seemed to be up with Sir Percy when Red Sydney went down in a hail of mince pies thrown by Lady Matilda and Leticia while Bunsen finished him off by banging him over the head with the tray the drinks had been on.

The ghosts threw themselves on the figure in black as he struggled to rise while Oglai pushed Santa and John towards the door saying, "Quickly, you must flee. They cannot hold him for long!"

They all three raced out the door as Jellicoe called out, "Make it sound! That's the answer. Make it sound!"

"Make what sound?" puffed John, "What does he mean?"

"Perhaps he means the Clock," replied Santa. "How do we reach it? Come on, let's see if we can take off."

They ran out the front door and down the path, thick with fallen snow, towards the sleigh. But coming the other way, and fast, were the pirates of Red Sydney, waving a variety of weapons. Oglai whipped off his turban and drew out the Crystal Ball. He bowled it along the path towards the pirates, and as it rolled, it grew, gathering snow until it became a huge snowball and knocked the pirates all over the place like ninepins. Santa and John reached the sleigh, pulled the blankets off the reindeer and unhooked the nosebags, while Oglai clambered up the giant snowball and threw little snowballs at the pirates who were trying to pick themselves up from drifts all round the garden. Santa and John jumped into the seat, Santa cracked the reins and the reindeer galloped across the garden, scattering the odd pirate, until they jumped into the air just

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short of the garden wall. Up went the sleigh into the cold night air, and John and Santa waved to Oglai, who was still hurling snowballs with wonderful accuracy at the pirates.

Then they were off, flying at high speed through the air, looking behind them to see if they were being pursued. They were - a big black shape was gathering in the sky behind them, obscuring the stars, and the sleigh slowed down.

"I'm going small," yelled Santa and they shrank to the miniature size they had been in the sandcastle. The sleigh picked up speed again and Santa muttered, "If only I knew which way to go."

John tugged at his sleeve and pointed. The night sky was full of stars and the Constellations were moving and calling to him faintly. Orion was beckoning and John pointed to him - Santa understood and turned the sleigh, heading straight for the huge star-figure. Pegasus the Winged Horse beat his wings and a hurricane blew against the vast black cloud following them and slowed it down. Taurus the Bull and the Great Bear charged it, but could do no more than push it back a little. The cloud was too big and too powerful - but it was enough to let the sleigh get well ahead, flying over the sea now in the direction where Orion was pointing. Down below, in the light of the full moon, John and Santa saw the beach where Bunsen and Leticia had built their castle.

"That's the way into the clock," shouted John. "Land on the beach, Santa!" and Santa headed down, landing the sleigh smoothly on the sand.

"I'm not sure what you mean, young John," said Santa, "but you seem to know what you are doing. Lead on! Where do we go now?"

John lead the way up the beach towards the huge, dim back-to-front clock face that he could see lit up in the moonlight ahead, the hands gone and the figures appearing and disappearing but still clearly visible in the white light. They went through, John casting a look back to see the black cloud still there behind them, very small in the star-spangled sky but growing as it passed over the sea. They ran through the clock face and John lead the way into the clock itself, right into the huge brass and steel works.

"Make the Clock sound, that's what Jellicoe was shouting," said John, looking round.

"Yes, but how?" asked Santa. "Everything is disappearing!"

It was. The pendulum had almost stopped, the cogs and wheels seemed to be slowing right down, and bits of the clock were fading - some pieces had already vanished. Desperately they pulled, pushed and tugged at the pendulum and cogs, to no effect. Then a blackness came through the clock face and billowed and grew - and the Ghost of Time Passed took shape, towering over them, as tall as the works themselves.

"Too late!" he hissed. "Too late! Now I will destroy time!" and he reached out his long bony fingers.

His hands drew close to John who was standing on a bit of the frame near the bell. Desperate to avoid the grasping fingers, John stepped back - and fell into space. He grabbed desperately at a bit of metal over his head and clung

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on to it - it moved under his weight and struck the bell with a dull, muffled "Dong!" It was the hammer that struck the hours. At the sound the Ghost of Time Passed put his hands over his ears and wailed.

"Stop it," he shouted.

"That's the answer," shouted Santa to John. "Hit the bell!"

The hammer was on a spring and John swung himself about so that the hammer hit the bell again. "Dong!" it boomed, louder now, and the Ghost shrieked "NO!"

Santa had rapidly climbed up the frame and pulled John to safety. Together they pulled on the hammer as hard as they could so it kept hitting the bell, sounding louder and sharper each time that it did so. "Dong!" and the Ghost cowered away - and deep in the works something stirred. "Dong!" and the Ghost began to shrink, while the pendulum swung more easily. "Dong!" and the Ghost screamed while the pendulum swung faster still and the whirring in the works grew louder. "Dong!" and the missing bits of the works re-appeared, "Dong!" and the Ghost began to fade, still wailing faintly. "Dong!" and the first tick-tock sounded. "Dong!" and the ghost began to shrivel. "Dong!" and the tick-tock grew steadier and more even. "Dong!" and the ghost faded away altogether, with a last despairing wail. Perspiring heavily, Santa and John looked at each other and stopped pulling on the hammer. "Dong!" went the clock, on its own now.

"You did it, young John," gasped Santa. "You've saved Christmas again!"

"Saved by the bell," came a voice, and John turned to see old Jellicoe standing close by. The other ghosts appeared, along with Oglai, all smiling and John ran to them, hugging them while they congratulated him.

"Best Christmas present any one can have!" boomed Santa. "Good friends! It's time for me to go - I had better get my sleigh."

They lead Santa back through the Clock and onto the beach, and on the way they made sure that the hands of the Clock were back where they should be, the time showing five minutes past twelve.

"Just in time!" laughed Santa, but before he boarded the sleigh he gave John a great big hug. "Thank you," he said quietly, "I'll see you again, I'm sure - and a very Merry Christmas to you, young man."

"Thank you" whispered John, very tired, as he buried his head in the white fur of Santa's coat. He felt terribly weary all of a sudden, and seemed to sink into the white warm fur a long, long way. Then he seemed to float - and woke, to find himself in his own bed, nice and warm, and with the clock by his bedside showing eight o'clock, the hands in the proper place. At the end of his bed was a pillowcase full of parcels wrapped in brightly coloured paper, and on the top was small package done up in gold tissue which John opened first. Inside was a mince pie, a sea shell and a little coin with strange Arab writing on it. On the inside of the gold tissue was written, "See you soon! Merry Christmas! From you know who." John smiled.

"Yes," he said to himself. "I'll see you all again soon, I'm sure."

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THE END?