

*Those dry cylindrical objects dropping out of the great clock so regularly, so remorselessly—should they mean anything to a weary old man?*

## HAWK IN THE DUSK

by William Bankier

NAPIER HAGBART HAD TAKEN his pill and had gone to bed, lowering a hundred and twenty pounds of cold bone and tissue onto the bare cot that covered almost half the floor area of the tiny room.

Below him and to the left, seventeen rooms of ornate furniture lay smothered in dust and silence. Twenty years ago, those rooms had sparkled with light and bloomed with the aroma of peonies and lemon oil and they had even rung with a certain amount of laughter when Hagbart was out of the house. In those days, a sullen maid used to mop and polish her way through those great rooms and then creep up the narrow stairs after supper to lay herself down on the same cot that supported Napier Hagbart's frame tonight.

Then one year, Paula Hagbart, blessed with her mother's disposition and penalized by the inheri-

tance of old Napier's rock jaw and crevice mouth, announced that she intended to marry a young teacher from the nearby agricultural college. She was 19 years old. Hagbart retaliated by striking her name from his will and followed through by cancelling her dowry. But the young couple were wed in spite of him and they settled down across town in a small apartment.

Left alone in the great old house with the prospect of living out her years in the sole company of her husband, Serena Hagbart took sick and died of an ailment which her doctor could diagnose as nothing more nor less than dismay.

After the funeral, Napier dismissed the maid with minimum wages, docking her half a day for the morning she spent at Mrs. Hagbart's graveside. Then he carried his belongings up the narrow stair-



way to the tiny room at the far corner of the house and settled down to live out his time.

It was a bare, oblong cell with a high ceiling. One narrow end of the room was occupied by a large window which Hagbart kept locked at all times against the entry of harsh vapours that might originate on the surface of the silver river at the foot of the hill and float upward through the branches of the black pines that lined the ridge. The opposite wall was a backdrop for a tall grandfather's clock, a sombre mahogany monster with a flat, pale face and a hypnotic pendulum that swung to and fro with an ominous tuck, tuck, tuck.

One long wall contained the doorway, a mahogany bureau and a wooden chair. The other was covered by Hagbart's cot. When Napier Hagbart stood up, the room was almost full.

The great clock had just struck nine, rasping out the notes from a cracked brass chime, when Hagbart reached up and pulled the cord that extinguished the overhead bulb. As always, before settling down into the bed, he remained propped on one elbow, staring out his window into the pale orange and blue and grey of the night sky. He was watching for a bird, a ritual he had followed all his life. When he was a boy, he used to stare into other distant skies and watch for a night hawk to describe some movement the definition of

which could be interpreted as promising bright events for the morrow. Of late, though, his skinny arm could hold him only a short while before the pain forced him to lie down, so there was less and less time to look for birds.

Tonight, however, just before his aching arm demanded release, a dark shape flew up from out of the pines and hovered against a pale cloud formation before plummeting down towards the river. A smile crossed the face of Napier Hagbart and he relaxed onto the pillow with a sigh. As he sank into sleep, his mind followed the lone bird as it dipped across the silver river and skimmed the reeds on the far shore.

The sound that awakened Napier Hagbart was not easy to identify. It was a rustling, crackling sound, sometimes followed by the click of an object hitting the linoleum covered floor. He lay in the dark, holding his breath, listening. The rustling, clicking, bouncing noise continued, somehow coordinated with the tuck, tuck, tuck of the grandfather's clock. For a hundred and twenty seconds, Hagbart lay still and waited for the foreign sound to cease. It did not. In fact, at one point, a sudden rustling, shifting noise from the floor indicated some sort of accumulation.

There came a time when further waiting was intolerable. Fumbling for the cord, Hagbart snapped on the light. For a few



moments, he was blinded by the glare. Then, when he could see, there was a further brief passage of time before he could identify the source of the sound. Then he saw it.

From the face of the great clock, right at the centre spot where the hands joined, a small, cylindrical object appeared and dropped onto the floor. Another followed, and another. They came in a steady flow, a little greater in frequency than the swinging of the pendulum. Sometimes they fell directly to the floor. Other times, their progress impeded by the movement of the second hand, two or three would pile up and drop simultaneously. Peering over the edge of the cot, Hagbart saw a large mound of the things covering the floor and obscuring the base of the clock to a depth of more than a foot. Whatever was happening, it had been going on for some time.

Then a sudden thought struck the old man and made the tiny bristles of hair on his pale skin stand erect in revulsion. What if these objects were alive, some sort of termites or worms finding their way into the clock from a rotting partition and invading his room in this bizarre manner?

Leaning over the edge of the cot, Hagbart was able to scrutinize one of the things at close range. It did not appear to be alive. Finally, after watching it for some

minutes, during which time it lay perfectly still, he summoned the courage to pick it up.

It was a brown hollow object about three inches long and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch in diameter. Contrary to his first appraisal, the thing was not completely cylindrical but had an odd shape to it; not a symmetrical pattern but a definite narrowing at one end and a sort of curved seam as if it had been folded and sealed. The material involved was beyond Hagbart's experience. It was very light in weight, brown in colour, smooth textured, with a sort of lacquered gloss and, withal, a mummified look of great age. In a way, the little shape reminded Hagbart of the dried body of a dead grasshopper when all the organic matter has decomposed leaving nothing but the exterior skeleton.

On an impulse, the old man squeezed the thing between his bony fingers. It resisted the pressure only momentarily, then crumbled into brittle shards and fell to the counterpane. Hagbart whisked the crumbs away and then lay back upon the pillow. He regarded the clock where the strange dry shells were popping out one after the other. It was three-thirty in the morning. Then his gaze fell to the swinging pendulum and, lulled by its hypnotic rhythm, he fell asleep.

For some reason, Napier Hagbart slept hours past his normal



time of awakening. When he opened his eyes again he was staring directly into the baleful face of the clock which indicated the hour of ten. The room was full of light from the window and the overhead bulb burned dimly by comparison. He pulled the cord and extinguished it.

Then he noticed the level of the objects falling from the clock and his heart skipped inside his flat chest. They now covered the entire floor almost to the level of the cot. And still they dropped steadily from the round, pale face, oozing from the central spot, tumbling to the pile, rolling and clicking each to its random resting place. Panic popped beads of cold sweat onto Hagbart's shiny forehead. He would have to do something. But he could not bring himself to step out of bed into that brown, clicking mass of hollow husks that seemed to press and move about him now like some slow tide in a thick sea. He could imagine them crunching beneath his bare feet and pressing against his calves and the idea was too much. The most he could do was reach to the far wall where he grasped the wooden chair and pulled it over and onto the bed.

Not a moment too soon. For as he stood the chair up and balanced it against the wall, several of the things rattled over the end of the bed and came to rest in the hollow where the old man had

been lying a moment before. Climbing onto the seat, Hagbart hooked his heels onto one of the rungs and wrapped his night-shirted arms about his knees.

There was time now to think and Napier Hagbart began to wonder about the odd little shells that were dropping so mysteriously from the face of his grandfather's clock. What could they be? They were not alive. Therefore they were not making their own way into the clock from some outside source. So they must be coming from the clock itself.

But what sort of thing, what product, was manufactured by a clock? Time?

A thought occurred to Hagbart and with it an uneasy pang made itself felt in the pit of his stomach. He watched the clock and waited till the second hand pointed straight up. Then he began counting the objects as they fell. When the second hand pointed straight up again, he had his total: 60. In one minute the clock produced exactly 60 of these dry, brown husks.

Could they be seconds? Was the clock measuring out the lifeless corpses of passing time? If so, whose time was it? The answer to that question seemed all too plain. It was his clock, the room was his, and he was the only person present. If these hollow, worthless images were the seconds of a life, they were surely his own.



The realization had a depressing effect on the old man. He lowered his small white head onto his forearms and closed his eyes, a curled up snail of a man perched on the chair above the cot. When he opened his eyes again a considerable period of time had passed and the brown shells now covered the bed to a depth of at least three inches.

Curiosity regarding the strange objects gripped him again and Napier Hagbart reached down from the chair and picked one of them up. It appeared to be exactly the same as the one he had inspected earlier; almost weightless, delicately folded and joined in a spiral seam, dry and hollow and shining with the dull lacquer finish that reminded Hagbart of ancient caskets he had seen exhibited in some museum.

Then something different caught his eye, a faint inscription which had escaped his notice before. It ran lengthwise, just below the seam. Squinting at the shell held just at the thin tip of his nose, Hagbart made out the numerals, 83,670. Here was a new element in the mystery. Dropping the shell back onto the pile, he picked up another and searched it for numerals. He found them in the same place: 83,600.

So, the things were numbered. Some of Hagbart's panic left him as he considered this new factor. Why would the odd little images

have figures stamped on them, like serial numbers on some machined product? He picked up another and checked its inscription; 50,257. A smaller number. But this one had come from the other side of the chair, closer to the end of the bed, nearer the clock which was their source. Should not the number be a higher one?

The Hagbart mind was still remarkably acute. An idea occurred to him. Leaning as far as he could towards the end of the room, and bracing one arm against the wall, he was able to extend the other arm close to the base of the clock. The shells reached a peak here, and rolled down the little slope to other parts of the room. By nimble finger work, Hagbart was able to grasp a couple of the newest as they rattled past.

Pushing himself back to a sitting position, he studied their numbers. They were 43,315, and 43,314. The shells were being produced in declining sequence of numbers!

With this new piece of information to consider, Napier Hagbart sat up and did some calculation. The meaning of the episode seemed clear to him now. The clock was measuring out the seconds of his life and would, presumably, count down the thousands and hundreds to the number one, and then zero. At which time, it would seem to follow, his life would end.



Mental arithmetic had always been one of Hagbart's skills. Now he began breaking down the larger figure into minutes and hours, simplifying the problem by starting with an even 43,000. Figuring 3600 seconds per hour and cancelling out zeros, he ended up with an answer of something over eleven hours. Was this to be the extent of his life? Taking a deep breath, the old man checked himself mentally for signs of decay or malfunction. He felt fine. He had never been sick a day in his life. Surely he was not going to die at 64 years of age merely because a clock said he would!

Then the fact came home to him very clearly. Of course he would die, because by the time another 43,000 seconds had spilled from the clock, they would fill the room close to the ceiling and he would drown in the dry corpses of his own expired time!

The instinct for survival bubbled and threshed to the surface within Hagbart's frame. He must do what he should have done hours ago. Get to the door and open it and escape into the body of the house. There was capacity there to contain the damned things forever. Without another thought, Napier Hagbart stepped forward and plunged into the grinding brown sea.

The sensation was repulsive in the extreme. Whereas the shells, taken individually, were inert, as

a body they seemed to possess some talent for movement, a slow swelling and subsiding, a rising and falling in gentle undulations that suggested the presence of some sort of life.

Hagbart found himself immersed up to the chest in this uncomfortable ocean, his arms spread out across the surface, his feet unable to penetrate to the floor. Forward motion among the sliding shells was almost impossible. Instead, Hagbart found himself sinking further into the stuff, which absorbed his movements like some swamp of dry quicksand.

The hopelessness of the effort soon came home to the old man and he made his way back to the chair while it was still within reach. The seat of the chair was now covered with the shells so there was nothing else for it. He had to climb onto the chair and stand on the seat, his back braced against the wall for support.

And so the morning passed and the early hours of the afternoon while the level of the spent seconds climbed past Hagbart's knees and reached the region of his hips. Napier passed the time alternately dozing and thinking back through the years for some clue as to why this should be happening to him. He had never heard of anybody else dying this way and his selection as the subject for such a gross experiment seemed highly unjust.



By early evening, when the rays of the sun began to find their way through what was left of the window, Napier Hagbart was feeling the pangs of hunger. This, in itself, seemed odd what with death so close upon him. The shells were about his chest now and he had his arms spread out across the surface. Standing was easy because the pressure of the things held his body erect.

A recent ejection from the clock rolled close to Hagbart's hand and he picked it up. The number was 4301; something over an hour to go.

There was little to look at now. On the right, the dour face of the clock spewing out its clicking shells; on the left, the small rectangle of glass glinting with the last rays of the sun. Hagbart found himself straining to see a bird, but the glare of the sun obscured his view. He was not to be permitted a final flight over the silver river.

Suddenly there sprang into his mind the image of a red tricycle, the kind a little girl would ride. He saw it on the sidewalk outside their house on a warm summer day. Seated on it, now, was Paula Hagbart, a thin elf of a girl, erect over the handle bars, the soft waves of her brown hair flowing over her shoulders and down her straight back.

Then she was off the trike and running into the great house and Hagbart saw himself carrying the

vehicle into the house and setting it down in the darkest recess of the hall closet. It was a punishment. He could not recall the offense now but he did remember the months and years that followed. Paula had never asked for the tricycle again and he had never offered it to her. So she had gone through her childhood without the use of it and the thing must still be stored away where he had put it on that day.

The dried shells shifted and pressed up under Hagbart's armpits as more seconds dropped from the tall clock. The memory of the little girl's erect figure on the new tricycle would not erase itself from Napier's mind and a great pang of remorse tugged at his innards as he contemplated the vision. On how many other occasions had he denied the girl what should have been her right; pleasures and privileges which, once withdrawn, could never be replaced?

A great sense of urgency seized Napier Hagbart at this moment. He could visualize the locked safe in the room below and, in it, the last will and testament leaving all his wealth to obscure foundations. All this had to be changed. But how? Time was running out; worse, his final seconds were weighing in upon him, due to crush out his life within the hour.

The faculties of an alert mind did not desert Hagbart in this late hour. Extending one hand as high



as he could, he found he was able to reach the dull plaster ceiling. With fumbling fingers, he unfastened a large safety pin that clasped the collar of his nightshirt. In his excitement the old man scarcely felt the pain as he thrust the point of the pin into the ball of his thumb and squeezed a crimson drop of blood to the surface.

"Tuck, tuck, tuck," said the great clock, its hollow voice muffled beneath thousands of the empty seconds of its owner's life.

Squinting up at the ceiling, Hagbart carried a drop of blood up on the tip of the pin and scratched the letters in a thin line. It was slow going and it required additional punctures to obtain the necessary crimson ink. But finally it was done. In spidery script upon the shabby ceiling, the claret message stood out:

August 8, 1961. To Paula, all my worldly goods.

Napier Hagbart

An immense feeling of satisfaction and relief swept through the old man as he observed his work. Then the shells shifted and rolled and a new level reached almost to his chin. With the hand nearest the clock, Hagbart selected the most recent emission and held it close to his eyes. Thirty-one!

Good heavens, so close? He had finished just in time. Well, good

bye, Paula. Too bad there had not been occasion for a final visit and a talk. So little time now for anything. Hagbart turned his eyes towards the window . . . nothing there now but darkness at the thin slit of visible glass. Of course, it must be late in the night. Looking back at the clock, he saw both hands perpendicular; nearly midnight. A heavy wave of fatigue flowed over the old man. This feels more like it, he thought.

Catching another shell as it rolled from the clock, he scrutinized it. Number eight! Well, he would soon know what it was all about. Watching the clock face intently, he counted his last seconds as they appeared: five, four, three, two, one . . . and that was all.

Napier Hagbart waited and watched for a few moments to see what would happen. But there were no seconds left to fall upon him from the clock, so with a deep sigh, he closed his eyes.

Then the clock began to strike, but instead of the harsh, tuneless clang that had been its voice before, now it sang out in notes of pure silver. Majestically they mounted to the number twelve, and as each tone rang out, a stream of golden drops sprayed from the face of the clock and fell upon the upturned forehead of the old man. Hagbart did not open his eyes, but he could feel the cool anointing of the golden drops.



Some of them fell on his closed eyelids and some splashed over his dry lips. These he gathered with his tongue and their taste was of honey and fine wine.

Then, after the final stroke of twelve, there was a pause, an absolute silence unbroken even by the tuck, tuck, tuck of the pendulum which was now stilled forever . . .

By purest chance, Paula Hagbart called on her father the following afternoon and found the door of his room locked tight. She summoned help and two police officers came. After forcing their way into the room, they sent for an Inspector.

Later, alone with Paula, he asked, "Have you any idea why your father would stand on a chair and write his will on the ceiling in blood?"

"He was a lonely old man," was all Paula could say. "I should have visited him more often."

"Well, you have a lot of friends in this town, Miss Hagbart. And Napier had a bit of a reputation as an eccentric. Chances are the court will recognize this as his true

wish and you'll end up with this house and all the money."

"The money would be useful. I've never cared for the house."

As they prepared to leave, the Inspector drew a small brown object from his pocket and showed it to Paula. "Ever seen one of these before?"

She studied it, shook her head.

"We found several of them under the body, on the floor. Looks like a dried bug to me."

Paula left the room and stood at the head of the stairs. The Inspector stayed behind a moment. It was a pleasant evening, and the room could use an airing. He thrust the sash up half way, then left. There was no breeze at that moment, and yet, the threadbare curtain stirred gently, as if something had left the room for the cool evening air outside—something which might even then be winging its way slowly over the black pines in search of the night birds; might fly with them, perhaps, that very night, as they dipped across the surface of the silver river and skimmed the reeds on the distant shore.

