

The most incredible thing

Whosoever could do the most incredible thing was to have the King's daughter and half of his kingdom.

The young men, yes, and the old ones too, bent their heads, their muscles, and their hearts upon winning. To do what they thought was the most incredible thing, two ate themselves to death, and one died of overdrinking. Even the boys in the street practiced spitting on their own backs, which they supposed was the most incredible thing anyone could do.

On a certain day there was to be an exhibition of things most incredible and everyone showed his best work. Judges were appointed, ranging from children of three to old men of ninety. It was a grand exposition of things out of the ordinary, but everybody promptly agreed that most incredible of all was a great hall clock - an extraordinary contraption, outside and in.

When the clock struck, out came lifelike figures to tell the hour. There were twelve separate performances of these moving figures, with speaking and singing. People said that nothing so incredible had ever before been seen.

The clock struck one, and there stood Moses on the mountain, writing in the tablets of the law the first great commandment: "There is only one true God." The clock struck two, and there were Adam and Eve, just as they first met in the Garden of Eden. Were ever two people so lucky! They didn't own so much as a clothes-closet, and they didn't need one. At the stroke of three the three Holy Kings appeared. One was as black as a coal, but he couldn't help that. The sun had blackened him. These kings brought incense and precious gifts. When the stroke of four sounded, the seasons advanced in their order. Spring carried a budding bough of beech, on which a cuckoo sang. Summer had for her sign a grasshopper on a ripening ear of wheat. Autumn had only an empty stork's nest, for the birds had flown away. Winter's tame crow perched on the corner of the stove, and told old tales of bygone days. At five o'clock there was a procession of the five senses. Sight was represented by a man who made spectacles. Hearing was a noisy coppersmith. Smell was a flower girl with violets for sale. Taste came dressed as a cook. Feeling was a mourner, with crape down to his heels. As the clock struck six, there sat a gambler, throwing dice for the highest cast of all,

and they fell with the sixes up. Then came the seven days of the week, or they might be the seven deadly sins. People could not be sure which they were, for they were not easy to distinguish. Next came a choir of monks, to sing the eight o'clock evensong. At the stroke of nine, the nine muses appeared. One was an astronomer, one kept the books of history, and the others were connected with the theater. Ten o'clock struck, and Moses came forth again, this time with the tables in which were written all ten of God's commandments. When the clock struck again, boys and girls danced out. They played and sang this song:

"All the way to heaven

The clock struck eleven."

And eleven it struck. Then came the stroke of twelve. Out marched the night watchman, wearing his cap and carrying his morning star - which is a truncheon tipped with spikes. He sang the old watch song:

"'Twas at the midnight hour

Our Savior He was born-"

and as he sang the roses about him unfolded into the heads of angels, with rainbow-tinted wings.

It was good to hear. It was charming to see. The whole thing was a work of extraordinary craftsmanship, and everyone agreed that it was the most incredible thing. The artist who had made it was young, generous, and sincere, a true friend, and a great help to his poor father and mother. He was altogether worthy of the Princess and of half the kingdom.

On the day that they were to proclaim who had won, the whole town was bedecked and be-draped. The Princess sat on her throne. It had been newly stuffed with horsehair for the occasion, but it was still far from comfortable or pleasant. The judges winked knowingly at the man they had chosen, who stood there so happy and proud. His fortune was made, for had he not done the most incredible thing!

"No!" a tall, bony, powerful fellow bawled out. "Leave it to me, I am the man to do the most incredible thing," and then he swung his ax at the craftsman's clock. Crack, crash, smash! There lay the whole thing. Here rolled the wheels, and there flew the hairsprings. It was wrecked and ruined. "I did that," said the lout. "My work beat his, and bowled you over, all in one stroke. I have done the most incredible thing."

"To destroy such a work of art!" said the judges. "Why it's the most incredible thing we've ever seen." And the people said so too. So he was awarded the Princess and half the kingdom, because a law is a law, even if it happens to be a most incredible one.

They blew trumpets from the ramparts and the city towers, and they announced, "The wedding will now take place." The Princess was not especially happy about it, but she looked pretty and she wore her most expensive clothes. The church was at its best by candle-light, late in the evening. The ladies of the court sang in processions, and escorted the bride. The lords sung, and accompanied the groom. From the way he strutted and swaggered along, you'd think that nothing could ever bowl him over.

Then the singing stopped. It was so still that you could have heard a pin fall in the street. But it was not quiet for long. Crash! crash! the great church doors flew open, and boom! boom! all the works of the clock came marching down the church aisle and halted between the bride and the groom.

Dead men cannot walk the earth. That's true, but a work of art does not die. Its shape may be shattered, but the spirit of art cannot be broken. The spirit of art jested, and that was no joke.

. To all appearances it stood there as if it were whole, and had never been wrecked. The clock struck one hour right after another, from one to twelve, and all the figures poured forth. First Moses came, shining as if bright flames issued from his forehead. He cast the heavy stone tablets of the law at the bridegroom's feet, and tied them to the church floor. "I cannot lift them again," said Moses, "for you have broken my arms. Stand where you are!"

Then came Adam and Eve, the three Wise Men of the East, and the four Seasons. Each told him the disagreeable truth. "Shame on you!" But he was not ashamed.

All the figures of all the hours marched out of the clock, and they grew wondrous big. There was scarcely room for the living people. And at the stroke of twelve out strode the watchman, with his cap and his many-spiked morning star. There was a strange commotion. The watchman went straight to the bridegroom, and smote him on the forehead with his morning star.

"Lie where you are," said the watchman. "A blow for a blow. We have taken out vengeance and the master's too, so now we will vanish."

And vanish they did, every cogwheel and figure. But the candles of the church flared up like flowers of fire, and the gilded stars under the roof cast down long clear shafts of light, and the organ sounded though no man had touched it. The people all said that they had lived to see the most incredible thing.

"Now," the Princess commanded, "summon the right man, the craftsman who made the work of art. He shall be my husband and my lord."

He stood beside her in the church. All the people were in his train. Everyone was happy for him, everyone blessed him, and there was no one who was envious. And that was the most incredible thing.

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