

Jack Eustace

The Shop

From the get go, he'd found it inherently sinister. For one thing, it just *appeared*. Not in the common case of an old lot being taken over by a new business: the *whole building* was just there one day. On Wednesday, there'd been simply the patch of grass that made up the town green. And on Thursday, right across the road from where the grass had been the previous day, there was a shop.

And it wasn't even a case of someone dropping a whitewashed chunk of plastic. This wasn't an easy-make set-up-cardboard-stand IKEA sort of thing. The building was squat and square, sitting in on the edge of the green like it had been rooted there forever, as comfortable as you like. It had probably been redbrick at some point, but age had snuck up on it and gifted it with chips, faded stone and bleached edges. It had one window that squinted at you meanly with its filthy glass and two white columns held up the cover of the bright blue door, the only clean thing on the whole place. What got to him the most was the vines. How did vines creep up and strangle a building when they came from nowhere? Ivy bushes had just sprung up where the old brown stone met the green, and creepers had wormed their way up over the course of the night.

No one had seen it happen.

No one had been told it would happen.

No one had even heard of a shop called *Baskerville Horologists*.

And so, when Warren found himself walking opposite the hunched old place on that grey Thursday afternoon, he was curious. Curious in the same perilous way baboons are about campfires. Had it not been for the timely opening of the heavens, Warren would have likely kept walking away from the odd shop. But the rain began to come down hard like a storm of bullets and Warren, coat-less and still mildly curious, nipped across the road, between the two pillars, through the blue door and into the horologist's.

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Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock.

It was like a clockwork choir, the gears making a cacophony of brasswork and clicking wood. Warren shook droplets from his hair, wiped his muddy feet on a doormat and shut the door behind him. Despite the hunched exterior, the shop was surprisingly big on the inside. A balcony ringed the wall above him, numerous bookshelves standing side by side in the dim light. A handful of gauss lamps hung like cornstalks from the ceiling. The horologist's was like a labyrinth, numerous glass cases standing tall around him, making a maze of displayed clocks and dusty tomes on

cogs and chronology. Somewhere, off in the dark maze of the clock-shop, a gramophone was playing an crackling, crooning chanson that echoed around the crimson carpet and wooden-walled room. Everything outside, all the rain and mud seemed to stop at the doorstep.

He padded slowly through the shop, peering at the little clocks and the towering grandfathers. The owner, he thought, didn't seem to have ever heard of the term 'organization'. As he turned yet another corner, Warren heard the distant murmur of voices off in the distance. Feeling slightly anxious, and suddenly becoming aware that he had yet to see anyone, Warren cautiously walked in the direction of the noise. He passed a shelf of cuckoo clocks, the little birds made of varying materials; from etched wood to spun brass and bent iron. It was not the hour, so they lay in their nests, silent and still. Yet as he passed, Warren felt them watch him.

What he took for a conversation seemed to form itself as one voice, talking loudly among the ticks and the tocks. Warren turned and found himself in front of a wall of beads, hanging between a stack of cabinets and a selection of books and toolboxes, both rising higher than him. The voice, a man's it would appear, nattered somewhere in front of him.

"Frankly, I don't think that it's a very good idea that you sent it to me. Thomas...I am *not* calling him 'Lord Gyle': it's pretentious to the point of...fine, *Lord Gyle* needs to see this as an investment more than...it's not as if he sent me a damn fobwatch to fix; the bloody thing is as big as a car and can...you think this is something I can poke with a wrench and magically fix? I need to get *inside* the confounded contraption, and I don't think-

"Can I interest you in a clock?" a voice asked Warren from behind.

He turned and yelped, stumbled back through the beads with a rattle and a bang. Behind the beads, an old man on a high stool whirled around in a mixture of annoyance and surprise. His moustache, a grand grey thing, quivered as he turned.

"Herion!" he barked. "Stop scaring the customers!"

"Apologies sir; I merely thought to inquire as to if he-

"Herion, I am *this* close to using your head as a knife-sheathe," the old man growled.

Warren himself lay breathless on the floor, a bit lost as to what was going on.

Blearily, he sat up, finding himself face to face with Herion.

"Oh," was all he got out as the automaton helped him to his feet.

He was small and stout, spun from brass and beaten copper. The little metal man, wearing a black tailcoat over his shining bones and skin, nodded to him in apology.

"Apologies, sir. May I interest you in a clock *now*?"

Before Warren could respond, the old man snapped down at them. "Herion, get the boy a drink and shut up for even the briefest second."

"Yessir," the machine trilled as it darted away behind a hive of workbenches and toolkits. Warren gave himself a moment as he turned around. The old man had

seemingly forgotten him, and was perched upon a mighty stool. Its legs were taller than him and a ladder was needed to reach a plush seat. The old man, thin and wiry, was seated a desk that was drowning in disassembled clocks. Before him was an archaic old dial-phone; chipped red and up against his ear.

“As I was saying,” the old man continued. “Tell Thomas...*Lord Gyle* for god’s sake, that it’s a ‘no’ until he sends me more to-”

He then frowned and knuckled his head, and Warren decided that the other end of the line was being difficult.

“Look, I *understand*. Really, I do. But I just *can’t*, okay? There are...factors...”

Something bad was said and the old man jumped up and slammed his hands on the workbench. The room rattled. “Your plans, your so-called hobbies; they mean diddly-squat here! This is *not* your damn little club; this is my shop, and we do things different!”

He panted heavily, then listened to the phone like it was talking nonsense. His neck snapped around to Warren, seeming to just notice him.

He blinked.

The man blinked back.

Then he did a double-take back to the phone. “I may have a solution.” He turned to Warren and jerked his head. “You. Stay there.”

Warren said nothing.

The elder frowned. “You deaf or something?”

Warren shook his head.

“Then answer when spoken to,” he said, turning back to the speaker. “It’ll work. He may be nothing more than a teenager-”

“I’m right here.”

“Wonderful for you!” he growled, slamming the phone down.

At handful of points in our lives, we are often faced with do-or-die choices. Warren, as you must understand, was suitably out-of-sorts. Not afraid; it’s just that he was in the company of a mentally impaired automaton, an elderly grouch and a mysterious phone. However, the surreality of the entire situation was getting to him a bit, and a little part of his brain was saying ‘*Well, if you go along with it, maybe it’ll start to make sense.*’

The old man gruffly appraised Warren as he clambered down to face him. He was rather short up close. “Solomon Baskerville,” he barked. “But you’re going to call me Mr Baskerville.”

Warren nodded dumbly. *Better just go with it.*

“Now!” Baskerville yelled all of a sudden and dragged Warren into the depths of the shop. “The matter at hand is one of great delicacy; if you mess up, you’ll cook!”

Herion tottered after them with a cup of green tea in a floral china-pot.

“So what is it?” Warren asked.

“It’s a time-machine.”

“A-”

“Yes.”

“Oh. I see. That’s a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

“*Sudden?*”

“Well, I mean, one minute it’s a standard clock-shop with the surprise robot-attendant. And then a time machine comes right out of nowhere!”

“Is there a problem?”

“Not at all!” Warren exclaimed. “I’d just like to have a word or two with the author, that’s all.”

But Warren couldn’t, because he was hunched up inside the ancient brick of a time-machine, a little torch in hand. He peered around the spherical chamber that made up the command-bridge of the thing. On the outside, it was a large, square slab of pitted stone and a ring of clear glass running around the side. Down the tiny manhole-ish hatch that led to where Warren squatted, was an eclectic selection of brass knobs, glass buttons and spinning balls all engraved in unusual markings.

“It’s a bit small,” he called up to Baskerville.

“Built for something much smaller and cleverer than you!” the old watchmaker yelled down. “Never mind that: can you fix it?”

“Remind me why I should be so gifted?” Warren asked as he clambered back up to where Baskerville and Herion stood. He gratefully took the cup of tea and sat on the edge of the machine as the old man tugged his moustache.

“It needs...how do I say it?”

“Imagination?” Herion piped up.

“Yes, but that sounds ridiculous,” Baskerville snapped.

Warren blew on the tea. “Imagination? What for?”

Baskerville snorted and tapped a foot on the roof of the stone box. “It’s a bloody time-machine, lad. The entire concept is utterly hypothetical until you start thinking otherwise.”

“Meaning?”

“The machine doesn’t work if you don’t believe it does,” Herion butted in.

Warren turned and raised an eyebrow at Baskerville as he growled at Herion. The automaton sipped his tea, gave off a few sparks, and decided to set it down. “If that’s the case,” Warren went on. “Then why doesn’t it work for you?”

Baskerville hawked and spat on the time-machine. “I worked on the condemned piece of rock a few years ago when Thomas Gyle first found it under Babylon. Managing to put all the gears and tubes in place nearly drove me insane; I stopped believing in this thing long ago lad. I didn’t want to believe.”

“And Herion?”

“He’s an automaton: he doesn’t actually think. He just *thinks* he can think.”

“I don’t-”

“C’mon lad; get down there and *dream*.”

“About what?”

Baskerville frowned and folded his arms. “It’s all of space and time, Warren. A lot of it hasn’t even happened yet. It’s the closest to infinity that you’re ever going to get; you’ll think of *something*.”

Can’t argue there, Warren thought as he lowered himself back into the machine. He sipped his tea and sat back comfortably in a tiny leather chair. The inside of the machine was lit by a warm glow. Warren paused, then put his hand on a vast red orb. It glowed under his hand.

I wonder what Babylon looked like-

The air detonated as time and space collided.

The hairs on Warren’s head rose and in a sudden crack of light and sound, the time-machine vanished in wind and light. Outside on the ground, Herion shrieked and dropped his teapot. Baskerville was grinning for the first time in years. The shop smelt like vinegar and spilt tea. It had worked: Warren had vanished deep into a tale too vast and infinite to put to paper.