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HILARY, DICKY AND DOC

Mr. Klein was sitting at the table in his shop. He sold clocks and watches, and he also repaired them when they were broken. This was what he was doing when his wife, Mrs. Klein, came in from the back room and brought him a cup of tea. Seeing the clock he was working on still in pieces, she checked the time. This was easy to do because there were many clocks in the shop of all shapes and sizes; and they always told the correct time because Mr. Klein was very fussy and made sure that they did. According to every clock in the shop it was coming up to twelve o'clock midday. "You'd better hurry with that Mr. Klein," she said, "The customer will be here soon and he'll expect his clock to be ready for him."

Mr. Klein looked up at one of the clocks in his shop and smiled. "Not a problem," he answered, "I told him it would be ready at one o'clock, and it will be." He paused to listen. Apart from the two of them talking, the shop had been quiet, but at exactly the same time, all of the clocks in the shop started making noises. First there was much whirring and clicking, and then the sounds of chimes and gongs telling that it was twelve o'clock. Once his clocks had all finished chiming, Mr. Klein got back to work and Mrs. Klein was on her way out. Then something odd happened. One clock hanging on the wall began to chime all on its own. Mr. Klein tutted, and Mrs. Klein said: "That one's late. It needs fixing, Mr. Klein."

"Later," said Mr. Klein, "I must finish this one first."

The two people weren't the only ones to notice that a clock in the shop was running slow. Hilary and Dicky were mice. There was also Doc who claimed he was a mouse, although he was much bigger than the other two. They thought he might be a rat, but never said so for fear of hurting Doc's feelings. "That was Doc's clock, wasn't it?" asked Hilary.

"Yes," replied Dicky, "He probably forgot to put it right."

This was something else they never mentioned, certainly not to Mr. and Mrs. Klein. As far as they knew, the two people had no idea that they had mice in the shop; and Mr. Klein didn't seem aware that he had help keeping the clocks on time. Throughout every day, the two mice, and the rat who thought he was a mouse, ran around the shop, and climbed into any clock that was running too fast or too slow; and they would put them right. So, when one didn't chime exactly on time, it was a disappointment for everyone. "Where is Doc, anyway?" asked Hilary.

"Sleeping, I guess," said Dicky, "He's always sleeping."

Following a loud yawn, Doc appeared from behind a cardboard box. "I can't help it if I get tired," he explained. "And it's not my fault - you give me all the big clocks and it's hard work keeping them on time."

"That's because YOU are big," said Hilary, "And it takes a big mouse to fix big clocks."

"I suppose so," said Doc and started to walk off.

"Where are you going now?" asked Dicky, "Not to sleep again, surely?"

"Certainly not," stated Doc, sounding quite hurt, "I'm going to put that clock right; and when I have, I will stay awake until I hear it chime one o'clock at exactly one o'clock like all the others; then I might have a nap."

Doc went to the clock on the wall, jumped so that he could hang onto the long thing hanging down from it, then ran up it and inside to the workings. He was there for about a minute before he appeared again, ran down the hanging-thing and went back to the others. "There," he said looking very pleased with himself, "All fixed."

"Let's hope so," said Dicky, "We'll know soon enough."

It was approaching one o'clock and the mice waited. Mr. Klein had finished fixing the clock he had been working on, and decided he would put the wall-clock right. He was just opening the small window at the front of the clock when the shop-door opened and the customer came in. So Mr. Klein had to leave putting the clock right till later. He was seeing to the customer when all the clocks started to chime - just once each, it being one o'clock. Mr. Klein knew the different chimes of every clock in his shop, and he was surprised to hear the wall-clock striking the hour at exactly the same time as all of the others. He frowned. "That's strange," he muttered to himself, "How could that be?"

He mentioned it to Mrs. Klein later. "Not so strange," she said, "And you know why, Mr. Klein." She gave her husband a wink and added: "It's a pity the same thing doesn't happen to the town clock. It's ten minutes slow now, and getting slower all the time."

"I did offer to fix it for them," explained Mr. Klein, "But they said not to bother, that it didn't matter."

"Of course it matters!" said Mrs. Klein, shaking her head in dismay, "It's New Year's Eve and everyone in town will be gathered in the square to welcome in the New Year. They count down the seconds to midnight, and that's when the clock should chime and everyone cheers. Only, this year they'll be doing it ten minutes late."

"If it chimes at all," said Mr. Klein, "It might stop altogether and that would disappoint everyone in town." He cleared his throat so that he could speak louder: "What it needs is for someone who knows what they are doing to sneak in and fix it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Klein, also quite loudly, "I wonder who would be clever enough and brave enough to try?"

Doc had been waiting with the other mice for the clocks to chime one o'clock. And they couldn't help but hear the people talking about the town clock. "They were almost shouting," he said, "As if they wanted us to hear."

"No, no," said Hilary, "They don't even know they've got mice, never mind mice who can fix clocks."

"I'm not so sure," said Dicky, "Anyway, whether they meant to or not, they've told us what we have to do."

"What's that?" asked Doc with a yawn.

Hilary moaned: "Fix the town clock, of course. So you'd best wake yourself up. It won't be easy, and it has to be working properly by midnight tonight!"

As soon as it was safe, the two mice and the one who thought he was a mouse scuttled out of the back door of the shop, along the street, and made their way into clock-tower in the town square. There, they climbed up into the workings of the clock itself and did what they had to. They knew exactly what had to be done seeing as the town clock was pretty much the same as any clock, only bigger. It was as well that there were three of them, because some of the parts were really stiff, and Doc would never have managed on his own.

Back at the shop they waited. Every so often, one of them would scuttle out into the street to look at the town square and see how many people were gathering there. "There are lots and lots," said Dicky on his return, "I'd say nearly the whole town has come out to welcome in the New Year. Let's hope we've done a good job."

They didn't have to go outside again to find out. People had started counting and there were so many of them that nobody could have failed to hear. "...Five! Four! Three! Two! One!" they counted, then all shouted together: "Happy New Year!" At exactly the same time, the big bell in the town clock began to chime midnight and everyone in the square let out a big cheer.

"Well I'll be," said Mr. Klein, "They must have fixed the town clock."

"And Just in time," added Mrs. Klein, "Happy New Year, Mr. Klein."

"Happy New Year to you too, Mrs. Klein." He noticed his wife walk to the table, cut a piece of cheese and head towards the cardboard box in the corner. "Is that for the mice?" he asked.

"It certainly is," she said, "They've had a very busy day and I'm sure they'll be hungry." She placed the cheese on the floor beside the cardboard box and said quietly: "Happy New Year you three. Don't stay up too late. You have to get back to your normal job tomorrow keeping OUR clocks running on time."

"Did you hear that?" said Hilary in surprise from behind the cardboard box, "They know about us and the clocks."

"I guess they've probably known all the time," said Dicky, "And wasn't it nice of Mrs. Klein to bring us the cheese?"

"Yes," said Hilary, "We'd better get some before Doc wakes up."

"Is he asleep AGAIN?" said Dicky. They looked to see Doc curled up in the corner and both whispered together: "Happy New Year Doc."

And Hilary added: "We'll save you some cheese for breakfast."