THE CASE OF THE BACKWARDS CLOCK



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About This Book

At a Glance

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About the Story

The Series

Above the second-hand bookshop on Ivy Lane, in the market town of Foxton, four children run a detective club: Leo, who sees everything; Ada, who writes every case in the casebook; Sam, who knows everyone; and Bea, who believes nothing without proof. Their cases are the friendly kind — lost things, strange sounds, puzzles nobody can explain — and their golden rule never changes: look properly, because a mystery is rarely what it seems.

This Book

The church clock is slow. Everybody in Foxton knows it, and nobody has told anybody, because the clock has never been anybody's job.

Then Bea starts measuring. Eleven days, the same corner, twelve o'clock exactly — and the numbers do something no clock can do. The clock loses time all day. And in the night, somehow, it catches up.

Somebody is putting it right. Somebody is up in that tower before it is light.

The club builds six clever theories, and every one of them is wrong. The real answer is dull, and simple, and nobody has bothered to look at it for four months.

And when they find it, the hard part is only starting. Because a good man has not told this town one untrue word — and has let it believe one every morning at twenty to six.

Chapter 1: Twenty Past and Half Past

Saturday, the twenty-second of November. Half past five in the evening, and dark since four.

We were crossing the square on the way home from Edith Prewitt's birthday. Sam had cake in a paper napkin. Bea was carrying the flowers Officer Hobbs had brought, and Miss Prewitt had given away again.

Then Leo stopped dead in the middle of the cobbles.

"Ada. What does your watch say?"

"Half past five."

"The clock says twenty past."

"Then the clock is slow," said Sam. "It is a hundred years old."

"Yes," said Leo. He did not move. "It said the same thing on Tuesday. On Tuesday it was five minutes. Tonight it is ten."

We all looked up.

St. Chad's church stands on the south side of the square. It has a square stone tower, and the clock sits high up in it, with one white face looking out over the market.

A face is the front of a clock, the part with the numbers on it. Ours is white with black hands, and it has been up there longer than anybody in Foxton has been alive.

It said twenty past five. It was calm about it.

"It might be my watch," I said.

Leo turned and looked at me. Then he nodded twice. That is what he does instead of saying *good*.

Bea moved the flowers to her other arm. "Then check it," she said. "Tonight. Against something that cannot be wrong."

That is the whole of Saturday.



We had supper late. Then I stood in the kitchen with the radio on and my watch on the table in front of me.

The radio gives six sounds at the top of the hour. Five short and one long. The long one is the exact second, and it is right everywhere in the country at once. Dad calls them the pips.

To be *exact* is to be right to the last small part. Not near. Not about. Exact.

The pips went at seven o'clock. My watch said seven o'clock.

I wrote it down, and I wrote the time next to it. A fact you do not write down is only a memory. My watch was right on Saturday the twenty-second of November, at seven in the evening.

So the clock was wrong.

Mom came through for the milk pan and read my page upside down over my shoulder. She does that. She is faster at it than I am.

"The church clock," she said.

"It is ten minutes slow."

"It always has been," said Mom.

"It was five minutes slow on Tuesday."

Mom stopped with the pan in her hand.

"That," she said, "is a different thing."

On Sunday morning I found out how many people set themselves by that clock.

To *set* a watch is to move the hands to the right time. You set it by something you trust. Dad sets his by the radio. Mrs. Finch sets hers by the Marlow bus, which is a brave thing to do.

And half of Foxton sets itself by St. Chad's.

The service is at ten. We were there at five to, in our row, with the cold coming up through the floor. The organ started, and we sang the first hymn.

A hymn is a song people sing in church. This one had five verses, and nobody was quite together.

In the middle of the second verse the door at the back opened. Then it opened again. Then it stayed open.

I turned round. You are not supposed to do that.

Mrs. Cole came in from the sewing circle. Then two of the Vernon boys with their mother. Then Mr. Dabney in his brown coat, moving quietly along the back. Then four more people I only half know. Then Uncle Ted, who is Sam's uncle, holding his hat in both hands and looking sorry.

By the end of the hymn there were eleven extra people in that church, and every one of them had come in late.

I counted. I am the one who counts.

The vicar looked up from his book and watched the back row fill itself. The vicar of St. Chad's is a thin man with a mild face, and he is always doing four things at once.

"Good morning," he said. "I see the clock has been busy again."

People laughed. It was a small laugh, the laugh a town gives a joke it has heard before.

I looked along the side of the church at Mr. Larkin.

Mr. Larkin is the verger. He was standing at the end of the aisle in his brown coat, with a pile of books on his arm. He did not laugh at all. He looked at his shoes.

I did not think anything about it at the time. I am putting it in anyway, and here is my reason. It is what I saw, and the casebook takes what you saw, not what you worked out.

After the service I asked people.

That is not detective work yet. It is only asking. But Rule One says look properly, and you cannot look properly at a thing nobody will talk about.

I asked eight grown-ups on the path outside the church door.

Mrs. Cole said yes, the clock had gone off again, and it does that in the cold.

Uncle Ted said yes, and he had missed the start twice this month. He sets his watch by the clock every Saturday when he puts the stall up.

Mr. Dabney said yes. Then he said, "Ten minutes, near enough." That was the first number anybody gave me all morning.

Ned's mother from the bakery said yes, and Ned had said something about it too. Ned is up at four every morning, so Ned would know.

Miss Petherton said yes, and then said that the library clock is right and that she has always thought so.

Mrs. Ashby said yes, and then said something about the spoon in the museum, and I am not going to write that down again.

Two people I do not know well said yes.

Eight out of eight.

Then I asked the second question. It was Leo's idea and better than mine.

"Who have you told?"

That is where it stopped. Nobody had told anybody.

Not one of those eight people had said a word about it. Not to the vicar, not to the churchwarden, not to Mr. Larkin, not to anyone at all. They had all noticed, and they had all been late. And they had all decided the same thing, on their own, in their own kitchens: somebody else was dealing with it.

Mrs. Cole said, "Well, it is not my clock, is it."

Uncle Ted said, "The church sees to the church."

Mr. Dabney said, "Somebody winds it. I expect he knows."

Somebody else's is the most useful phrase in a town this size. It means a real job, a job a real person has to do, and a job nobody has actually given to anybody.

I wrote all eight answers on the back of the service sheet on the way home. Bea walked next to me and read them.

"Eight people," she said. "Four months of Sundays."

"We do not know it is four months."

"No," said Bea. "We do not know anything."

We stopped at the corner of Ivy Lane, at the bottom of our stairs, and Sam said what everybody was thinking, in the way Sam does.

"So it is slow. It is old. Old clocks go slow."

"On Tuesday it was five minutes," said Leo.

"So it got slower."

"Clocks do not get slower like that," said Leo. Then he stopped, and I watched him take his own sentence apart. "I do not know that. I think it. That is a different thing."

He looked at Bea when he said it. He was handing it to her, and he knew he was.

Bea had the flowers under one arm and her hands in her pockets. She stood in the cold and thought about it for a long moment.

"There are two questions," she said. "Nobody has answered either of them. How slow is it, exactly? And since when?"

"Ten minutes," said Sam. "Mr. Dabney said ten minutes."

"Mr. Dabney said *near enough*," said Bea. "Near enough is not a number."

She counted it out on her fingers, standing on our step in the dark.

"Eight grown-ups this morning, and four of us. That is twelve people, and all of them have looked up at that clock and seen it was wrong."

She put her hand down.

"And there is not one figure. Not one. In this whole town, nobody knows how much."

A figure is a number, written down, and it is the smallest thing you can own about anything.

Nobody said anything for a bit.

Then Sam said, "So that is a case, then."

And it was.

Chapter 2: Case Number Three

Monday, the twenty-fourth of November. Ten past four, and already going dark.

The attic over the shop is our club room. You get to it up the narrow stair behind the shelves at the back. Mom keeps the key on a red ribbon. There is one small window under the roof. In November you can see your breath in there by five o'clock.

Dusty was on the table when we came up. He was lying across the casebook with his paws folded. He did not move for anybody. Dusty is our cat. He is gray. He is a hundred years old in cat years. And he always sleeps on the exact thing you need next.

Sam lifted him off. Dusty allowed it, the way a king allows things.

I opened the book to a clean page.

Case Number One filled forty pages. Case Number Two took up sixty. Nine of those were folded and taped shut until Saturday. This was page one hundred and four.

I ruled the five questions down the side.

To *rule* a line is to draw it with a ruler. It is a small thing. It is also all the difference between a page you can read in a year and a page you cannot.

CASE NUMBER THREE

WHAT — the church clock loses time.

WHERE — the tower of St. Chad's, Foxton.

WHEN — *unknown.*

WHO — *unknown.*

WHY — *unknown.*

Three unknowns on the first page. That is the most we have ever started with.

Bea read it over my shoulder and put her finger on the word WHEN.

"That one is not unknown," she said. "That one is only unmeasured. It is sitting up there doing it right now."

Then Bea designed the measurement. It took her twenty minutes.

To *design* a thing is to work out how it will be done before you do it. Bea says most people do it the other way round, and then argue about the answer for a week.

She stood at the little window with her back to us and talked with her hands.

"One. My watch gets set every morning at seven, by the pips. Not near enough. Set."

"Two. The same corner of the square. Every day. The one by Mr. Mott's bench."

Leo said, "Does the corner matter?"

"Yes," said Bea. "Stand under the tower and look up, and the hands come at you sideways. Stand across the square and you see the face flat. If you read it from a new corner every day, you are measuring your feet, not the clock."

I wrote that down word for word. It is the best thing anybody said all week.

"Three. Twelve o'clock exactly. My watch, not the clock. When my watch says twelve, we both look up."

"Four. Two people. Every day. Not one."

"Why two?" said Sam.

"One person can read a clock wrong," said Bea. "Two people reading it wrong the same way is much rarer."

"Five." She turned round. "You both write it down before you say it out loud."

Sam pulled a face. "That is a silly one."

"That is the one that matters," said Bea. "If you tell me first, I will see what you saw. I will not be able to help it. Nobody can. So we write, and then we compare."

To *compare* two things is to put them side by side and look for the gap.

"Six. We write it as a minus."

She took the chalk and did it on the board.

Minus means less than nothing, or in this case less than right. Minus two means the clock is two minutes behind the true time. Minus ten means it is ten behind. If the clock were ever fast, we would write plus. We would also all fall over.

"Every day," said Bea. "Weekends too. Cold days too. Days when nothing at all has happened. Most of all on those."

That whole list is what a *measurement* is. It is not looking. It is looking the same way, on purpose, over and over, and writing it down every time.

School lets us out for lunch at ten to twelve. The square is two minutes from the gate. On Saturday there is no school, and on Sunday you can be home from church by half past eleven. So it could be done. There was no reason it could not be done. Bea does not take any other kind of reason.

We put the pairs on the board. Bea and me. Leo and Sam. Bea every single day, since it was her watch.

"Start when?" said Sam.

Bea looked at the window. It was ten to five and black outside.

"Tomorrow," she said, and then stopped. "No. Today. Ada and I were both in the square at twelve today. Write down what you saw, and do not tell me. I am not throwing a day away."

I told my mother and father at supper, at the beginning and not at the end. That is the club rule, and we have it written down. We do not go quiet on a grown-up to keep a case.

Dad said a clock was a nice safe thing to have a case about. Then he asked if we would look at the shop drain next.



Then Sam gave us the town, which is the thing Sam does and nobody else can.

He had been round the market, up to the bakery and back through the bus shelter. He had a whole afternoon of other people's grumbles in his pockets.

To *grumble* is to complain in a low voice, on and on, without expecting anybody to do anything about it. Foxton is very good at it.

"Right," he said. "The market sets up by the clock. Uncle Ted told me. They start at seven, the bell rings at eight, and the lot of them look at the tower. He says three weeks ago they were all set up and waiting about. It turned out they had done the whole thing eight minutes early."

"Eight," said Bea. She wrote it on the corner of the board with a question mark after it. She did not put it on the chart. What you hear is not a measurement. It does not go on the chart.

"The Marlow bus driver," said Sam. "He shouts out of his window at it. Every day, half past four, coming round the square. He has been at it since the summer."

"What does he shout?"

"He shouts, 'Wrong again.'"

Leo said, "Since the summer."

"That is what Mr. Dabney says. Mr. Dabney says the man has shouted at things all his life, so it does not prove much."

"It does not prove one thing," said Bea. "But it is worth a question mark."

"And the school bell," said Sam.

I looked up at that.

"Our bell," said Sam. "Mrs. Rye rings the end of lunch when the church clock says one. She has done it for years. And half the school comes in off the field by the church clock too. So the bell goes. The field is already empty. Then we all sit about for ten minutes with nothing going on at all."

"Ringing to nothing," said Leo.

"For weeks," said Sam.

Bea wrote that on the board too. Under it she wrote: *how many weeks?* And under that, in big letters, for the fourth time in two days: *SINCE WHEN.*

Here is where I run ahead of myself. I am going to put four days down at once. You cannot follow one page of the rest of this book without them.

Bea's chart, first four days. Twelve o'clock exactly, from the corner by Mr. Mott's bench. Two of us every day. Both writing before either spoke.

Monday. Minus two.

Tuesday. Minus four.

Wednesday. Minus five.

Look at those three. They are exactly what any grown-up in this town would tell you. An old clock, going slow, getting worse, a minute or two a day. There was frost on the cobbles on the third morning. Mrs. Cole would tell you that was the reason. She would be pleased about it, too.

On the Wednesday evening Leo drew a line down the chart with his finger and said the next day would be minus six. Minus seven, he said, if it froze again.

It froze again.

On Thursday, at twelve o'clock exactly, Bea and I stood at the corner by Mr. Mott's bench. We looked up at the church clock. We wrote down what it said before we spoke.

I wrote minus one.

Bea wrote minus one.

We stood there in the cold with our two bits of paper.

"That is not what a clock does," said Bea.

A clock loses. A clock stops. A clock does not, in the night, all by itself, in the dark, with nobody near it, *catch up*.

Chapter 3: A Clock Cannot Do That

By Friday the chart was on the attic wall, and it had a shape in it that nobody liked.

Bea had drawn it big, on the back of a roll of shop paper. Days along the bottom. Minutes down the side. A dot for each day, and a line joining the dots.

Monday, minus two. Tuesday, minus four. Wednesday, minus five. Thursday, minus one. Friday, minus three.

The line went down, down, down, then jumped up, then started down again.

"That is a zigzag," said Sam.

A *zigzag* is a line that goes one way, turns hard, and goes the other. Bea did not argue with the word. She only put her hand flat over the Thursday dot and left it there.

"Say it properly," said Leo.

So she said it properly, and I wrote it in the casebook in her words.

"A clock can run slow. A clock can stop. A clock can be wound badly and run slow again. Those are all things a clock does on its own." She took her hand off the paper. "A clock cannot get *ahead* of itself in the night. Not once. Not by four minutes."

Ahead means in front. Your watch is ahead when it says ten past and it is only five past.

"So it did not do it," said Leo.

"No," said Bea. "Somebody did it."

That is the sentence that opened Case Number Three properly. Everything before it was people being late for church.

Leo took the chalk.

"Then we need the list," he said. "Who can get at the works?"

The *mechanism* of a clock is the works. It is all the moving parts inside, the wheels and the weights, the whole engine of the thing. The mechanism of St. Chad's clock is up in the tower, in a room above the room where the bells are rung, in an iron frame the size of a kitchen table. Mr. Mott told us that last part, and Mr. Mott has never been up there either.

Leo wrote the list.

The vicar.

Mrs. Vane and Mr. Hollis, churchwardens.

The bell ringers, Wednesday nights.

Mr. Larkin, verger. Winds the clock. Every Friday since 1986.

A *verger* is the man who looks after a church. He keeps it clean and keeps it locked, he puts out the books, he rings the bell before a service, and he knows where everything is. Mr. Larkin has been the verger of St. Chad's since before my mother was married.

A *ringer* is a person who rings a church bell. Ours ring on Wednesday evenings, six of them, on ropes that come down through the ceiling.

To *wind* a clock is to pull its weight back up. A tower clock runs on a heavy weight on a rope. The weight comes down all week, very slowly, and turns the wheels as it goes. When it gets to the bottom, the clock stops. So once a week somebody winds it back to the top.

"Five names," said Leo. "One of them is up there every week."

"Then we go and ask him," I said.

Sam looked pleased. Sam always looks pleased when the plan is to go and talk to somebody.

"In daylight," said Leo. "Saying who we are."

Daylight is the plain light of the day. We have a rule about it now. We wrote it in the book after the last case. You knock in the daylight, you say your name, and you let the person shut the door if they want to. We had to learn that one the hard way, and Sam is the reason we learned it.

Friday afternoon, ten past four. The church was open, and the lights were on inside.

Friday is the day Mr. Larkin winds the clock. Everybody in Foxton knows that. It is one of the things this town keeps in its head, along with which day the fish van comes.

He was at the back of the church with a broom.

Mr. Larkin is short and wide. He is sixty-eight. He is bald on top with a gray ring round the sides, and his cheeks are red all year round. He wears a brown work coat over a shirt and a tie, and the tie is always straight.

"Well," he said. "Four of you. Four of you at once."

"We are the Ivy Lane Detectives," said Sam.

"I know what you are," said Mr. Larkin. "You are the ones who found Mrs. Finch's bicycle. And you are the ones who did that business at the town hall, and I have heard about that from six people, and every one of them got it wrong."

He put the broom against a pillar.

"Come through. The kettle is on. It is always on. It is on more than it is off."

The *vestry* is the room at the side of a church where the books and the cups and the robes are kept. St. Chad's vestry has a table with a green cloth, a cupboard, a sink, two chairs and a stool, and a smell of candles and floor soap. Mr. Larkin gave us tea in four different cups and did not ask a single question about why we had come.

Then he sat down on the stool and waited, with his hands on his knees, and let us ask.

I am putting his answers down here exactly. I wrote them at the time, in his words, on my knee, with the cup in my other hand. It took me two more weeks to see what was not in them.



Do you wind the clock?

"I do. Every Friday. I have wound that clock every Friday since 1986."

Is it losing time?

"It is. It has been losing since the summer. I am not going to tell you it has not."

Has anybody else been up there?

"Nobody has been up that ladder since August. Nobody at all."

Who else has a key to the tower?

"Mrs. Vane has one. The vicar has one. Mine is on my ring."

Why is it losing time?

"It is old, that clock. It is a very old clock. Ninety-four this year." He turned his cup round on his knee. "And clocks do not care for the cold. Never have. Ask anybody."

Can it be mended?

"Everything can be mended. It is what it costs that stops people."

He said that last one to the window, not to us.

Bea asked one more. She asked if we could go up and see it.

"No," said Mr. Larkin. He said it kindly and he said it at once. "Not my tower to say yes to. Mrs. Vane says who goes up that tower, and Mrs. Vane says nobody without a good reason and a grown-up. And she is right, and I would tell you the same in her place."

He looked at his tea.

"It is a bad ladder," he said. "It is an old ladder in a cold place. It has been a bad ladder for years."

Sulky is what my mother calls me when I go quiet and do not say what is the matter. Mr. Larkin used it about the clock, twice. He said it goes sulky in November. He said it always has.

We thanked him, and he saw us out through the porch, and he told Sam to give his mother a message about a hymn book. And that was that. He had answered every single thing we asked him. Nobody in that room told anybody one untrue word.

I want that written down plainly, this early, before anything else happens.

We went home past the bakery, and that is where the day turned over.

The bakery lights were on and the door was open, and Ned was carrying trays in from the yard. Ned is nineteen. He is up at four every morning of his life, and he is the only person in Foxton who is awake before the birds.

"Sam Potts," he said. "Officer Potts."

"That is not funny any more," said Sam.

"It is a bit funny." Ned put the trays down. "What are you four on with now? Something good?"

"The clock," said Sam.

"Course you are," said Ned. He wiped his hands. "Old Larkin will sort it. He is up there enough."

Sam said, "He winds it Fridays."

"He winds it Fridays," said Ned. "He is *there* every morning."

Nobody said anything.

Ned did not notice. Ned was still stacking trays.

"He comes down Church Lane at twenty to six, near enough. Every morning. I see him from the yard door. He has been doing it since the summer some time." He laughed. "I thought he had taken up early rising. I said to him, we shall have you on the bread next."

"Every morning," said Leo.

"Every morning," said Ned. "Weekends and all."

Bea had her hands in her pockets. She was looking at the wall of the bakery, at nothing at all.

"Twenty to six," she said.

And then she said the thing none of us wanted her to say, and she said it very quietly, in the dark, outside a warm door.

"What is he doing there at twenty to six?"

Chapter 4: Six Theories

Saturday, the twenty-ninth of November. Market day, and cold enough to see it.

This is the chapter where we were clever. I am going to put all of it down, in order, with the names on it. I am not going to make any of us sound better than we were.

A casebook holds what you thought at the time. If it only held the true answer, it would be one page long. It would also teach you nothing.

A *theory* is an idea about why a thing happens. It is not a fact. It is a shape. You try it on the facts and see if it fits.

We had six of them on the attic wall by ten o'clock.

1. The clock is old.

2. The cold.

3. The winding.

4. The bells.

5. Somebody is doing it for a joke.

6. Somebody gains by it.

Leo wrote them up. Then he did the thing that cost us four days.

He ranked them.

To *rank* things is to put them in order, best at the top. Leo ranked ours by how interesting they were. He did not say that out loud. He did not have to. The old clock went at the bottom. Number six went at the top. It went there for one reason: it was the only one with a person in it.

Bea watched him do it and said nothing at all. That is how I know she saw it too.

Here is what happened to the first four.

The clock is old. Old clocks lose. Old clocks stop. Old clocks do not gain four minutes on a Thursday morning. Bea crossed it out on the first day. She drew one line through it, not two, in case we came back.

The cold. Wednesday was the coldest day of the month, and it was minus five. That fits. Then Thursday was colder still. Thursday was minus one. Cold does not make a clock catch up. Nothing does.

The winding. This one was good for about an hour. Wind it in a hurry, or let it run right down, and it might run badly all week. Then Leo asked the question that killed it. Mr. Larkin winds it on Friday. The jump was on a Thursday.

The bells. The ringers ring on Wednesday evening. Six ropes, six people, and a whole tower shaking. And the first jump came the next morning. That one fits. Bea did not cross it out. For a day and a half it was the best thing we had.

To *fit* the facts means every fact sits inside your idea. None of them stick out. Bea's rule about fitting is short. Try to break your own theory first. Other people will.

Then there was number five, and number five is why Bea does not like theories.

Somebody is doing it for a joke.

"It fits," said Sam.

"It fits everything," said Bea. "That is the trouble with it. If the clock had gone fast, that would fit. If it had stopped, that would fit. If it played a tune on Tuesdays, that would fit."

"So?"

"So a theory that fits it all tells you nothing." She put her chalk down. "You cannot break it. And a thing you cannot break is no use to me."

We left it on the wall. It sat there for the rest of the case and did no work at all.

Number six was Leo's, and Leo held on to it for two days.

Somebody gains by it.

To *gain* is to get more than you had. A motive is the reason a person does a thing. It is the *why* of the five questions, standing on two legs.

"Ten minutes," said Leo. "Every day, in a town this size. Who is better off? Who is ten minutes better off?"

He had the answer already. People always do.

"The Marlow bus is due in the square at a quarter past eight. Ask anyone. It gets in at twenty past. Sometimes twenty-five past. It is late three days out of five, and it has been for years." He tapped the wall. "Set that clock ten minutes slow. Now the bus is never late again."

Sam said, "The driver?"

"He is in this square every day. Twice a day. And he shouts at the clock out of his window, where forty people can hear him." Leo looked round at us. "That is not a man who is cross with a clock. That is a man making sure the whole town knows he is cross with a clock."

I want to be fair to Leo. It is a very good theory. It has a person, a motive, a habit and a date. It even says why the whole thing started in the summer.

It was also the only theory we had that made a man a liar. And we had never met him.

I wrote it in the book. I wrote it in his own words. My hand was slow.

Sam said, "He gives my nan a lift up the hill with her bags."

"That is not evidence," said Leo.

"No," said Sam. "It is not."

We told Officer Hobbs at half past twelve, on the market, in front of the fish stall.

That is the rule and it has never once cost us anything. He was leaning against the wall by Mr. Mott's bench with a sandwich. He was in his coat, off duty in the way he is never quite off duty.



He listened to all six. He asked two questions. Had we gone near the tower? Had we spoken to the driver? The answers were no and no. He said good, twice.

Then he ate some of his sandwich and looked over the square at the church.

"Funny thing," he said.

We waited.

"Has anybody actually gone up there and had a look yet?"

That is eleven words.

I wrote them down, at the time, in the casebook, at the bottom of the page under the six theories. I did not underline them. I did not put a star by them. I wrote them the way you write down the weather.

Then Leo started on the bus timetable again. Officer Hobbs finished his sandwich and went off to speak to Mrs. Ashby about her window. And that was the last any of us thought about it for a week.

I have read that page since. It is the worst page in the book.

Embarrassment is the feeling you get when you want to put your coat over your own face. There is a lot of it in this chapter and there is more coming.

The other thing that happened on Saturday happened at the bread stall, and it was Bea, and it was the whole case.

Sam brought Ned over. Ned had flour up one arm and no coat on, in that cold. He did not seem to know it.

Bea did not say hello.

"You are up at four," she said.

"I am up at four."

"When you come out into the yard at five, what does the church clock say?"

Ned thought about it. You could see him going back through a hundred mornings.

"Wrong," he said. "Slow. Same as it is all day."

"And when you take the six o'clock trays out?"

"Right," said Ned.

Nobody said anything.

"Right?" said Bea.

"Right," said Ned. "Or as near as makes no odds. It comes right in the mornings. They all know that."

He looked round at our four faces.

"Do they not?"

Bea did three things when we got back to the attic. She did all three without taking her coat off.

First she ruled a new column down the side of the chart. A *column* is a line of figures going down a page, with a heading on top. Hers said: **TIME OF JUMP.**

A *jump* is what she calls it when the line on the chart goes up all at once, instead of sliding.

Then she wrote it against the Thursday row: *between five and six in the morning*. She put a small star beside it.

"What is the star?"

"The star means Ned said it and I did not measure it." She was already writing out a card for him. "He is going to write it down for me. Five o'clock and six o'clock, every morning, on this card. Before he says one word to anyone. Sam, take it up tonight."

Then she stood back and looked at her own chart, and the room got very quiet.

She had asked Mr. Dabney at the bus shelter on the way home. He walks the square at eleven every night. He has done it for thirty years. He says the clock is wrong at eleven, and has been all autumn.

So: wrong at eleven at night. Wrong at five in the morning. Right at six.

Not one of our six theories had a word to say about that. Not the cold, not the bells, not the winding, not the bus. Bea's numbers *refused* to fit any of them. To refuse is to say no, and numbers do it flatly.

A theory that cannot speak to your best fact does not fit. It has to go.

Leo looked at the six of them on the wall for a long time.

"Every day," he said. "Between five and six."

Sam had gone red in the face, and he never goes red.

"Twenty to six," he said.

Chapter 5: Twenty to Six

Sunday, the thirtieth of November. The first Sunday in Advent, and the coldest morning of the year so far.

Ned's card came down with the bread at eight o'clock. Sam brought it. It was still warm from the bakery. Ned had put Saturday on it out of his own head, from before the card ever reached him, and Bea starred that line the moment she saw it.

Saturday: 5 o'clock, wrong by 4. 6 o'clock, wrong by 4.

Sunday: 5 o'clock, wrong by 5. 6 o'clock, wrong by 1.

At twelve, from the corner by Mr. Mott's bench, Bea and I wrote minus one before either of us spoke.

So there it was, measured. Not heard. Not remembered. Measured on a Sunday, by two people who did not speak first.

Wrong by five at five o'clock. Right by six.

And Mr. Larkin has come down Church Lane at twenty to six every morning, weekends and all, since the summer.

Evidence *points at* a thing when all of it lies one way. Not proof. Pointing.

All of it pointed at a man I have known my whole life.

We had the argument in the attic at half past twelve. It was our second real one. It was worse than the first.

Bea went first and she was completely calm.

"We take the chart to Mrs. Vane."

"Today?"

"Today. She is the churchwarden. It is her tower and her clock. And her verger." Bea had the roll of paper under her arm already. "A chart is a chart. It does not care what name is on it. And I am not going to sit on a measurement to spare a name."

"It has *his* name in it," said Sam.

"It has a time in it," said Bea. "The name is yours. You put it there."

That was fair. It was also the only unkind thing she said all day. She looked sorry about it inside a second.

Leo went second, and Leo wanted the other thing.

"Three mornings," he said. "Nobody says a word to anybody. We sit on the churchyard wall at half past five, three days running. And we see it. Then we know. Then we go to Mrs. Vane with a thing nobody can argue with."

"Sit on the wall in the dark and watch a man let himself into his own church," I said.

"Watch what happens to the clock," said Leo.

"You cannot see the clock and not see him."

"That is not the point of it."

"It is the whole point of it."

Then I did the thing I had been trying not to do for ten minutes. I turned the casebook back to Case Number Two, page fifty-one. The page with the argument on it.

I did not read Bea's plan. I read Leo's own line. He gave me that one himself, three days after, cross with himself and honest at the same time.

"I wanted the shortest way to a fact. That is not the same as wanting the fact."

Leo sat very still.

"That is not fair," he said.

"No," I said. "It is only true. You said it. I only wrote it down."

Sam said, "Ada."

"I know."

To be fair, I put the book away then. I did not read the rest of the page. There is a lot more of it.

It was Sam who ended it. He did it in one sentence. He did not even stand up.

"We show it to Mr. Larkin."

Bea said, "He is the one it is about."

"That is why," said Sam.

He was sitting on the floor with his back against the shelves. Dusty was on his knee.

"It is his morning on that paper. Nobody else's. Say a person had a chart with my mornings on it. And say they took it to Mrs. Vane before they took it to me. I would not care what it said. I would only care that they went round me." He rubbed Dusty's ear. "And it would not be for a good reason. It would be for an easy one."

Leo said, "He may not tell us the truth."

"He has not told us one lie yet," said Sam. "Not one. Go and read your own notes."

Nobody said anything for a bit.

Then Bea rolled the chart up and held it out to Sam. That is Bea for *all right.*

"He reads it first," she said. "Then Mrs. Vane, tomorrow, whatever he says. I am not letting it sit."

"Agreed," I said.

"And Officer Hobbs tonight," said Leo.

"Agreed."

We had dinner at half past one. Grandma's plates, for the first Sunday in Advent. My mother had done a chicken.

Dad said grace. He says the same one his father said, and it is nine words long, and it always ends with the same three: *for all of it.*

Then I told them where we were going and why, with the chart on the table next to the gravy.

My mother read it twice.

"That is careful work," she said. "That is Bea, is it?"

"All of it."

"Then be as careful with the man as she was with the paper."

She said it to all four of us, as it happens, since Sam was eating with us again.

Dad said we could go at three and be back by four. He would be in the shop if we needed a grown-up. And we were to knock at the vestry door, and not go wandering about a church on a Sunday afternoon.

We knocked at ten past three.

The church was empty and half dark. There was a light under the vestry door. There was a smell of tea.

Mr. Larkin opened it in his brown coat with a duster in his hand.

"Well," he said. "Four of you again. Four at once, on a Sunday."

"May we come in?" I said. "We have got something to show you. It is about you."

I had thought about that sentence for an hour. It was the only honest way to start.

He looked at us for a second. Then he stepped back and held the door.

"Come in, then," he said. "Come in. The kettle is on."

We did not have the tea.

Bea put the chart on the green cloth. She turned it round before she let go of it. *The right way round* means the way up the other person can read. It is not the way up that suits you. She turned it with all the writing facing him. Then she stood back with her hands behind her.

"That is seven days," she said. "Every day at twelve o'clock, from the same corner. Two people. Both writing before either spoke."

Mr. Larkin put his duster on the table.

He put both hands flat on the green cloth, one on each side of the chart, and leaned over it, and read it.

He was not quick. He read the whole thing, along the bottom and down the side and along the bottom again. He went back to the days he had wound it on. He found the Thursday. He found the Sunday. He put one finger on the star. Then he read the little note about what a star means.



Then he came to the new column.

TIME OF JUMP.

Between five and six in the morning.

Between five and six in the morning.

Between five and six in the morning.

We stood there. The vestry clock ticked. Somewhere up in the tower a bird moved and knocked something. Twice. Then it stopped.

He did not straighten up for a long time. It was long enough for me to count the panes in the window twice. There are fourteen.

When he did straighten up, his face was red. His face is always red. That is no help to anybody.

"Twenty to six," he said.

Nobody said a word.

"That is me."

He said it to the chart, not to us.

"That is been me since August."

To *admit* a thing is to say it is true when you would rather it were not. That is the plainest one I have ever heard. I wrote it down exactly as he said it, wrong grammar and all. The words are his and not mine.

Then Sam said, "What are you doing up there, Mr. Larkin?"

And Mr. Larkin, who had answered every single question we had ever put to him, every one of them, all the way through, straight out and in his own words, twice over —

Mr. Larkin did not answer.

He picked up his duster. He folded it in half, and then in half again. He looked past all four of us at the vestry window. There was nothing out there to see except the dark.

"I think you had better be getting home," he said. "It gets dark early now. Your father will want you in."

Chapter 6: What Happened in August

Monday, the first of December. Four o'clock, and the lamps on in the square.

He would not say any more. So we did the other thing.

When a person stops talking, you go to the paper. Paper does not mind being asked. Paper does not go red in the face and fold a duster in half. This town keeps more paper about itself than you would believe. We know where all of it is.

Bea wrote the job on the board before we went out. Four words.

WHAT HAPPENED IN AUGUST.

He had said it himself. He said it in his own vestry, with his hands flat on a green cloth. *Since August.* And Ned said the summer. And the bus driver has been shouting at that clock since the summer. Three people. Three corners of Foxton. All of them pointing at the same eight weeks.

We went to Miss Petherton first.

The library keeps the *Foxton Weekly* from 1901 on. It lives in the back stacks. That is one long room with a step down into it, and it smells of old paper and hot pipes.

Miss Petherton took us in and got the August boxes out. Then she stood over us the whole time. That is her way of helping. You get used to it.

We had August in about nine minutes.

Friday the eighth of August, page three.

ST. CHAD'S: SOUTH PORCH ROOF. Work begins Monday and will take about three weeks. The church council thanks the town for putting up with the noise. The south door will be shut. Please use the tower door.

"Monday," said Leo. "That is the eleventh."

Friday the twenty-second of August, page eight, letters.

Sir, — Would someone kindly tell the church that its clock is now a good ten minutes behind the wireless? I have missed a bus and a dentist. — PUNCTUAL, Foxton.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Then Bea turned her chart over and started a second one on the back. This one ran backward, with August at the left-hand end.

Two dates on it. The eleventh, work begins. The twenty-second, the clock is ten minutes out, and a person in this town is cross enough to write to a newspaper about it.

Eleven days between them.

"They *line up*," said Leo.

When two sets of dates *line up*, they sit next to each other and match. It does not prove one thing made the other happen. It does mean you would be a fool not to look.

Miss Petherton read the letter over Sam's shoulder. She had been waiting to do that for nine minutes.

"That is Mrs. Dean," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Dentist," she said. "And *kindly*. She has been writing *kindly* to that paper since 1974."

She put the box back herself. Then she stopped with her hand on the lid.

"The eleventh of August," she said. "That is a Monday I remember. They had a lorry on the grass and a man on the tower roof all week, and I could not hear myself think."



Then the museum. It is one room and a hallway, and Mrs. Ashby is in charge of both.

A *parish* is the piece of a town that belongs to one church. Ours puts out a *newsletter*. That is two sheets of paper folded once, printed every month, left in a pile by the door for anyone to take. It has the services in it, and the flower list, and who is ill, and what the roof is doing.

Mrs. Ashby keeps every one of them, in order, in a gray box. Of course she does.

"August. September," she said, going through it with two fingers. "There you are. And do not put them back in the wrong order. I shall know."

The next newsletter had the roof in it. Work finished. Thanks to all. The porch is dry. The money came to more than we hoped.

And then, at the bottom of the second page, in small print, three lines.

Our thanks as always to Mr. Larkin, who is giving the clock extra attention this autumn. Foxton would not know when to get up without him.

I read it twice. Sam read it out loud, and that was worse.

Extra attention.

Nobody had printed one untrue word. There it was, in the parish newsletter, in print, for the whole town to read. The exact thing that was happening. And it came out sounding like a kind old man being helpful.

Mrs. Ashby did not notice any of that. She was busy putting the gray box back.

"You four have not been in to see the spoon," she said.

"We saw the spoon in October," said Sam.

"It has been cleaned," said Mrs. Ashby.

We went to the church at half past five. I want to be clear about why, since it looks bad written down.

We did not go to look for a thing. Bea had said we would take the chart up to Mrs. Vane on Monday, whatever happened. Mrs. Vane lives at the top of Church Lane. You go past the church door to get there. And the door was open and the light was on.

Mr. Larkin was in the vestry with the tea things from the sewing circle. He had six cups in his hands and two more under his arm.

He looked up. He did not look pleased and he did not look cross. He looked tired.

"You are back," he said.

"We are going up to Mrs. Vane," I said. "We said we would. We are telling you first."

"Right," said Mr. Larkin.

Then he stood there with eight cups.

"Well," he said. "You can dry, then. If you are stopping."

So we dried the cups, all four of us, in a row. Nobody asked him one single question. That was Sam's idea, and I think it was the best manners any of us have ever managed.

Tea towels are the cloths you dry cups with. When they are wet you hang them over the rail inside the cupboard door.

The *cupboard* in St. Chad's vestry is tall and brown. It goes right up to the ceiling. I opened it to hang the towels up, and I had to move a thing out of the way to get at the rail.

It was heavy. That is what I noticed first. My hand was on it before I looked at it.

It was a roll of *wire mesh*, up on its end, as tall as Sam and about as thick as my leg. Mesh is wire made into a net, in little squares. You put it over a hole to keep a thing out and let the air through.

This roll was black. It was new. It had never been up anywhere in its life.

There was a brown card wired to the top of it.

A *label* is a small card tied to a thing, with writing on it. It says what the thing is, or where it goes.

ST. CHAD'S FOXTON — 4 PANELS, BELFRY OPENINGS.

REFIT AFTER ROOF WORKS.

R. J. HOLT & SON, BUILDERS, MARLOW. 11 AUG.

The *belfry* is the top of the tower, where the bells are. It has long stone openings in the walls to let the sound out. They are open to the sky. They have to be, or you would not hear the bells down in the square.

To *refit* a thing is to put it back where it was before. A *contractor* is the firm you pay to do a job on a building. Holt & Son were the contractors for the porch roof.

I stood there with two wet tea towels in my other hand.

"Leo," I said.

We did not touch one other thing in that cupboard. We shut it. We thanked Mr. Larkin. We went out through the porch and stood under the lamp at the churchyard gate in the cold.

Leo was counting on his fingers. He never does that.

"The eleventh of August," he said. "August. September. October. November. Today is the first of December."

"Four months," said Sam.

"Nearly four," said Leo. "That roll has stood in that cupboard for nearly four months."

"So?" said Sam.

Leo looked at him. Then he pointed straight up, over the wall, at the top of the tower. It was black against a sky that was not quite black yet.

"So the belfry has stood open for nearly four months."

We all looked up.

And then Bea said it. She said it flat, in six words. It is the most ordinary sentence in this whole book, and every one of us had walked past it for eight days.

"Then something has been getting in."

Sam said, "What?"

"I do not know."

"Bats," said Sam. "Owls. Rats. A cat could not get up there."

"I do not know," said Bea again, and she said it in the way she says it, which is not the way most people say it. She was not sad about it. She had a new thing to find out and she was pleased.

"Then we ask," I said. "We ask the one person who says who goes up that tower."

Leo was still looking at the top of the tower with his hands in his pockets.

"Four months," he said. "And not one of us went and looked. Not one person in this town."

"We are eleven, twelve and thirteen," said Sam. "We are not allowed up there."

"I know," said Leo. "I did not say it was our fault. I said nobody looked."

Chapter 7: Nobody Has Been Up

Monday, the first of December, six o'clock. Up the hill, in the dark, with the chart under Bea's arm.

Mrs. Vane lives at the top of Church Lane in a house with a green gate and a light over the door. She is one of the two churchwardens of St. Chad's. She is also the chair of the church council, and she has been both for nine years.

A *council* is a group of people who run a thing together. The church council runs St. Chad's. The money, the roof, the boiler, the gutters, the grass and the clock. There are nine of them. They meet four times a year in the church room. They keep minutes.

Mrs. Vane is tall. Her hair is gray and cut short. She had a pen in her hand when she opened the door. She still had it in her hand an hour later.

"Yes?" she said.

"We are the Ivy Lane Detectives," said Sam. "May we show you a chart?"

Mrs. Vane looked at the four of us on her step in the cold.

"Is this about my clock?"

"Yes," said Bea.

"Good," said Mrs. Vane. "Come in and wipe your feet."



She read the chart the way Mr. Larkin had read it. Properly. All the way through. Twice.

She did not say *how clever*. She did not say *what nice young people*. She asked five questions, and every one of them was a good one. Was the watch set daily? Same corner every day? Two readers? Did we write before we spoke? And who is the boy at the bakery, and will he say all this to a grown-up?

Then she put her pen down on the paper.

"Right," she said. "Now I have to tell you two things. You will like the first one less than you think."

She went and got her coat.

"The papers are in the vestry. I am not carrying that box up this hill for anybody. Come on."

So we walked back down Church Lane in the dark, all five of us. Mrs. Vane let us in at the tower door with her own key.

Mr. Larkin was in the church putting out hymn books for Wednesday. He looked up when the five of us came in. He did not say a word.

Mrs. Vane put the box on the vestry table and pushed the green cloth to one side.

"First thing," she said. "You asked me who has been up in that tower since August."

"Yes," said Leo.

"Nobody has."

Nobody said anything.

"I want you to hear it properly. So I shall say it in full." Mrs. Vane counted it off on her fingers, the way Bea does. I had not expected that at all. "The ringers do not go up. They ring from the chamber below, and their ropes come down to them. The vicar has not been up in four years. He is frightened of the ladder and he says so out loud, and I like him for it. Mr. Hollis is seventy-four. I have been up twice in nine years, and both times a builder went first."

She put her hand flat on the box.

"And Mr. Larkin winds it from the ringing chamber. He has always wound it from there. The winding does not need the ladder."

"So the last person up that ladder —"

"Was a man from Holt & Son, in August, doing the roof." She looked at us over her glasses. "Four months ago. And I will tell you what he was up there for. He took the mesh out of the belfry openings. His men needed to get their poles through."

I had my casebook open on my knee. I turned back four pages. And there it was, on the bottom line, under the six theories, in my own flat handwriting.

Officer Hobbs: "Has anybody actually gone up there and had a look yet?"

Eleven words. I had written them down on Saturday. Then I had gone straight back to the bus timetable.

I turned the book round and showed it to Leo. I did not say a word.

He read it. He went a color I have not seen on him before.

"He said it out loud," said Leo. "He said it to all four of us. Over a sandwich."

"He did," I said.

"And we —"

"Yes."

Leo sat back. Then he said the thing I have put at the top of the page in the casebook. I have put a box round it. I am going to keep it for the rest of my life.

"We had the answer on Saturday. We just did not think it was interesting."

"Second thing," said Mrs. Vane, and opened the box.

She took out one sheet of paper with a printed heading on it. She put it on the table, the right way round, without being asked.

A *quotation* is a piece of paper from a firm. It says what a job will cost. A *firm* is a business, a group of people who do work for money. This one was in the city, sixty miles away. It had a picture of a clock face at the top, and one long word under it. None of us knew the word. It turned out to mean clocks.

TOWER CLOCK, ST. CHAD'S, FOXTON. INSPECTION AND REPORT. DISMANTLE. WORKSHOP OVERHAUL. REFIT AND SET GOING.

At the bottom there was a *sum*. A sum is the total. It is the figure at the end, after all of it is added up.

£4,180.

Sam whistled. You are not supposed to do that in a church either.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vane.

Then she took out a second sheet and put it next to the first one.

Maintenance is the money a building has for keeping itself up. Not for new things. For gutters, boilers, bulbs, drains, doors, the grass and the clock. It is the money that stops a building from falling down slowly.

The whole maintenance money for St. Chad's, for one year, the lot, was **£1,450**.

"That is no secret," said Mrs. Vane. "It is printed in the newsletter every April. Nine people read it."

Bea looked from one sheet to the other. Her mouth had gone thin.

"It is three times," she said. "It is nearly three times the whole year."

"It is."

"For a clock."

"For a clock," said Mrs. Vane. "And there are two gutters down on the north side. And a boiler that is fifty years old."

Nobody said anything for a bit.

"So what happens?" said Leo.

"The council meets a week on Thursday," said Mrs. Vane. "The eleventh. That paper goes on the table. And I will tell you now what nine sensible people will do with it. I would very likely do it myself."

She held up one finger.

"One of them will say we cannot spend three years of gutter money on a clock. That person will be right."

Two fingers.

"One of them will say a wrong clock is worse than no clock at all. Half a town setting itself by a wrong clock is worse still. That person will be right too."

Three fingers.

"And then one of them will move that we stop the clock. Let the hands stand still, and start it again when the money is there. And it will be carried. And I shall have to *vote* for it."

To *vote* is to put your hand up and be counted. To *stop* a clock is to let the weight down and take the pendulum off. The hands stay where they are.

"How long," said Bea, "is *when the money is there*?"

Mrs. Vane did not soften it. That is the thing about her.

"In a town this size?" she said. "There is a stopped clock in Marlow. It stopped in 1998."

I want to write down that Mrs. Vane was not unkind. She was not. To be *unkind* is to make a person feel small on purpose. She did not do one bit of that.

She had the figures out on the table for four young people she had never really talked to before. The right way round. We could read them for ourselves. She answered every question. She said the honest thing about her own vote before anyone asked her to.

Then she said, "Eleven days. Bring me anything better than that paper before Thursday week. If you do, I will put you on the agenda myself."

"Eleven days counting today?" said Bea.

"Counting today."

Bea wrote it on the back of her hand.

And that was when the doorway spoke.

A *doorway* is the gap a door goes in. Mr. Larkin had been standing in ours for I do not know how long. He had a hymn book in both hands, held up against his chest. That is how you hold a hymn book when you have forgotten you are holding it.

"There is no call," he said, "for anybody to be paying four thousand pounds to a firm in the city."

Mrs. Vane turned round in her chair.

"Mr. Larkin."

"There is no call for it," he said again. "It is not a four-thousand-pound job. It never was."

"And how do you know that?"

Mr. Larkin looked at the box on the table. He looked at the two sheets of paper. He looked at all five of us looking back at him.

"I know what is wrong with that clock," he said.

And then he stood there in the doorway with the hymn book against his chest. He did not say another word.

Chapter 8: The Ladder

Tuesday, the second of December. Four o'clock. Two of us, not four.

That was Sam's idea. He had it on Monday night on the way home. He said it in nine words.

"Four is too many when a man is ashamed."

To be *ashamed* is to feel small about a thing you have done. Or a thing you are. And to want nobody to see it. It is not the same as being sorry. You can be ashamed of a thing that is not even your fault.

Bea did not like it. Bea said the chart was hers and she should be there.

"You would ask him for a number," said Sam.

"I would."

"He has not got a number. He has got a reason."

Bea thought about that for a moment. Then she said, "All right." Then she gave me the chart to take. That was the second thing that week that cost her something.

Leo did not argue at all. Leo has been very quiet since Monday.

My mother said yes. She said the church door, not the vestry. She said she would come along at five if we were not back.

We went in at the tower door.

Mr. Larkin was in the church with a box of candle ends. He looked at the two of us. Then he looked past us at the door. I watched him work out that nobody else was coming.

"Just the two," he said.

"Just the two," said Sam.

He put the box down on the end of a pew.

"You had better come through, then," he said. "Not the vestry. Come through here."

The tower door is small and made of black wood. It is inside the church, at the west end, on the left. Behind it there is a stone stair going up, round and round. Every step is worn in the middle.

At the top of the first flight there is a room. It is not big. It is about the size of our attic. It is square. It has a stone floor, one narrow window, and a wooden box against the wall.

This is the *ringing chamber*. It is where the six ringers stand on a Wednesday evening. The bell ropes come down through six round holes in the ceiling. Each rope has a woolly striped part on it for your hands.

Above that ceiling is the clock room. You get to it up a ladder.

I want to write the ladder down properly. It is the whole case.

It is wooden. It is old. It is fixed to the wall at the top. It goes up nearly straight, through a hole in the corner of the ceiling. That hole is the *trap door*. A trap door is a door in a floor or a ceiling, with a flap that lifts up. It is about as wide as a person, and not one bit wider.

I counted the rungs on the way home and there are seventeen.

Mr. Larkin sat down on the wooden box. That is where the ringers put their coats. Sam sat on the floor with his back against the wall. I sat on the bottom rung.

Nobody said anything for a bit.

Then Mr. Larkin said, "How old do you think I am?"

That is not a question you can answer.

"Sixty-eight," he said. "I shall be sixty-nine in March."

He looked up at the trap door.

"I went up that ladder on the twelfth of August," he said. "The men had been on the roof the day before. I wanted to see what they had left me. I got halfway."

Here is what he told us. I have it in the casebook in his own words. I have not changed one of them.

He got to about the ninth rung, and the room went round.

Dizzy is when your head swims and the floor is not where you left it. It happens to old people. It happens on ladders. It is nobody's fault at all.

"I did not fall," he said. "I want that said. I did not fall. I have never fallen. I put my arms through the rungs and I held on."

To *hold on* is to keep hold of a thing when letting go would be very bad.

"I held on for a long time. Long enough to get cold. Then I came down one at a time. I sat where I am sitting now. My legs went. I sat here till a quarter past seven."

Sam said, "Did you tell anybody?"

"No," said Mr. Larkin.

"Why not?"

And Mr. Larkin gave us three reasons, one after the other. I have thought about all three since. Every one of them is *decent*, which means fair and ordinary and nothing to be ashamed of.

"One. I have wound that clock every Friday since 1986. Forty years next spring. In this town I am the man who does the clock. Ask anybody in the market who does the clock. They will say Larkin. It is not much of a thing to be. It is what I am."

"Two. The church has no money. You have seen the paper. A man from the city wants four thousand pounds to look at that clock. And I was not going to be the man who cost this church four thousand pounds. Not over a heap of sticks and a bad head."

"Three." He stopped there for a bit. "Three is that I am sixty-eight. And I got frightened on a ladder in my own tower. And I would rather the whole of Foxton did not know it."

He put his hands on his knees.

"That is the worst one," he said. "And that is the true one."

Then he told us the other half. That is the half that made the chart.

You cannot get into the clock room without the ladder. But you can get your head and your shoulders through that trap door from about the third rung. And then you can *reach* in.

To *reach* is to stretch out your arm and get to a thing without going to it.

There is a wheel just inside, on the right. It is the wheel that turns the hands. Turn it forward and the hands go round the face. It is stiff. It is meant to be stiff. It is the thing you use when the clocks change in the autumn.

"Forward only," said Mr. Larkin. "You never take them back. Never. And you do not take them forward past the hour either. Do that and the whole thing lets off and the bell goes. So it has to be done between the strikes. And it has to be done early. And it has to be done in the dark. Or the whole square is standing there watching a man in a tower."

"Twenty to six," said Sam.

"Twenty to six," said Mr. Larkin. "Every morning since the twenty-fifth of August."

"Why the twenty-fifth?" said Sam.

"There was a letter in the paper that week," said Mr. Larkin. "About the clock. From a lady who had missed a bus and a dentist. I read it on the Friday. I started on the Monday. I have not missed a morning since.

"Some mornings there is nothing to do. I stand up there on three rungs and look at it and come down again. And some mornings it is five minutes out. Then I *push it forward.* Then I come down. Then I go home and have my breakfast. It got to ten the week before you started that chart of yours, and that frightened me, and I have not let it past five since."

To *push forward* the hands means exactly what it says. You move them on to where they ought to be.

He rubbed his face with one hand.

"Four months of it," he said. "In the dark. Before the milk."

Then Sam asked the question I could not get out. He asked it kindly. I could not have done that either.

"Mr. Larkin. Did you ever tell anybody it was all right?"

"No," said Mr. Larkin.

"Did you ever say the clock was fine?"

"No."

"Did you say anything untrue at all?"

Untrue means not true. It is a colder word than *a lie*. It also fits more things.

"Not one word," said Mr. Larkin.

He said it straight out, and he was right. I have checked. I have every answer he ever gave us written down, from the first day in the vestry. There is not one untrue word in any of them. He told us the clock was losing. He told us it was ninety-four years old. He told us nobody had been up that ladder since August. And nobody had. He goes up three rungs. Three rungs is not up.

He is always telling the truth. That is the whole trouble with him.

And then he said the thing this book is about. He said it to the floor. I wrote it down on my knee in the ringing chamber, with a pencil that needed sharpening.

"I have not told this town one untrue word since August," he said. "I have just let it believe one every morning at twenty to six."

To *believe* a thing is to hold it in your head as true. You can put a thing in a person's head without ever saying it. You do it by saying nothing at all, and letting them go on.

Sam said, quietly, "Yes."

"Somebody asked me, back in September, if the clock was slow." Mr. Larkin turned his hands over. "And I said yes. And they said, oh dear. And I said yes. Then they went away. They thought it was slow. They thought Larkin was seeing to it. And Larkin was seeing to it. Every morning at twenty to six."

He looked up at the trap door.

"That is not seeing to it," he said. "That is holding a thing up with your hands and calling it mended."

Nobody said anything for a long time after that.

The bell ropes moved a little. There is always a draft in that room.

Then Mr. Larkin took his key ring out of his coat pocket. It is a big one. There must be fifteen keys on it. He knows all of them in the dark.

He found one, a long iron one with a square end. He worked it off the ring with his thumbs. It took him a bit of doing.

Then he leaned over and put it down on the wooden box between us.

"That is the trap door," he said. "Somebody is going up that ladder this week."



Sam looked at the key. Then he looked at me. Then he looked back at the key.

"It will not be me," said Mr. Larkin. "And it will not be you two either, so put that out of your heads right now."

Chapter 9: Ned Goes Up

Wednesday, the third of December. Seven o'clock in the morning, and black dark.

It took one evening to set up. In a town this size you can arrange nearly anything in one evening. You only have to knock on four doors, and we knocked on four.

Sam did the first one. He went to the bakery at half past six on Tuesday, on his own, and asked for Ned.

I was not there. I have it from Ned, and Ned tells it his way.

"He stood in the yard with his hands in his pockets," said Ned. "And he said, I am asking you for a job. It is not paid and it starts at seven in the morning. And I said, is it the clock. And he said yes. And I said, about time."

Then Sam said the other thing, and Ned told me that part twice.

"He said, and I am asking you first this time. Not last."

That is Sam paying back something from October. It is between him and Ned. Ned did not make him say any more about it, and neither will I.

The other three doors were mine and Leo's.

Mrs. Vane wrote her permission out on a sheet of church paper and signed it, and she wrote the time on it too. *Wednesday 3 December, from 7 a.m. Access to the clock room granted to Mr. E. Hurst.* Ned's name is Edward Hurst. None of us knew that.

Officer Hobbs was told on Tuesday night at the corner of Ivy Lane. He read the permission. Then he said three things. The ladder was a grown-up's business and not ours, we were to stay off it, and he would look in at seven himself.

He did look in. He stood at the back of the ringing chamber with his hat under his arm for the whole hour, and said almost nothing.

The vicar came at five to seven with the key to the outside light. He had a hat on and no coat, and that is very like him.

And Mr. Larkin was there at half past six, before any of us, with the tower door already open and the lamps on.

Ned came in at seven with his own lamp.

A *lamp* here is not a lamp on a table. It is a metal one with a big round front and a handle, the sort you carry. Ned's runs on a battery and it is as bright as a car.

He had it on a *strap* over his shoulder. A strap is a long band of leather or cloth. You put it over your shoulder to carry a thing. Ned's strap left both his hands free, and both hands is what you want on a ladder.

He had a coal *sack* rolled up under his arm, and two buckets and a rope as well.

A sack is a big bag made of rough cloth. You can get a lot in a sack. That is the point of a sack.

"Right," he said. "Whose tower is it?"

"Mine," said Mrs. Vane.

"Right. What am I not to touch?"

And that is when Mr. Larkin took over. He did it well, and I was glad about it all morning.

He stood at the foot of the ladder with one hand on the third rung. Then he told Ned the whole room from below, from memory, in the dark.

The frame is iron and it stands in the middle. The weights hang on the far side, and you keep away from them. The rope is a wire rope, and you do not put your hand near it. The pendulum swings on the wall side, on its own. It is long, and you do not touch it for any reason at all.

"You do not stop that pendulum," said Mr. Larkin. "You do not lean on it. You do not put a coat near it. Nothing. Stop that, and the clock stops. Then I shall have to start it again. I would rather not."

"Understood," said Ned.

"And the *works*."

The *works* of a clock are all the wheels and pins and rods together, the whole inside of it. It is the same as the mechanism. Mr. Larkin says works. The paper from the city says mechanism. They mean the same thing.

"The works you leave alone. Sticks come out. Nothing else comes out." Mr. Larkin took his hand off the rung. "And Ned. If you go dizzy up there, you come down. Do not wait to see if it passes."

Ned looked at him for a second.

"Yes," he said. "I will."

Then he went up.

The trap door was heavier than it looked, and it banged. Then Ned's boots went out of the light, and then his lamp went too. The ceiling of the ringing chamber went bright round the edges of the hole.

We got the boring jobs. Boring jobs are the whole of detective work.

Bea had the times. She stood under the light with her watch and wrote down when each thing came down, to the minute.

Leo had the paper. Everything that came down, he drew. He is not much of an artist but he is very exact.

Sam had the rope. Ned filled a bucket up there, and Sam let it down, and sent it back up empty.

I had the casebook.

Nothing happened for four minutes. Then Ned's voice came down through the hole.

"Oh," he said.

Then, after a bit: "Oh, that is *daft*."

Then: "Bucket."

Here is what came down, in order, with the times, out of Bea's book.

7:09. One bucket of sticks.

7:14. One bucket of sticks.

7:20. One bucket of sticks. Ned said we were going to need the sack.

7:31. The coal sack, tied at the neck. Sam and Leo took it together and still bumped it on the floor.

7:38. One bucket of sticks, small stuff and dust.

Two buckets is what a thing looks like from below. Four buckets and a coal sack is what it was.

They were dry sticks. Most of them were shorter than my hand and all of them were a bit bent. There were bits of blue string in with them, and a strip off a feed sack, and one piece of somebody's washing line.

And there was a smell. It came down with the first bucket and it stayed in that room all morning. It is not a bad smell. It is a dry, sharp, feathery smell. It is the smell of birds, and once you know it you know it forever.

Jackdaws. Everybody in Foxton knows jackdaws. They are the black ones with the gray backs to their heads and the pale eye, and there are thirty of them on that tower every evening of the year. They drop sticks into any hole they can find. They have been doing it since August, through four open belfry openings. Nobody put a net back.



The important part came down at 7:24. It was words, not sticks.

Ned put his head through the hole, upside down, with his hair hanging.

"Mrs. Vane."

"Yes."

"The heap is up against the works. Hard up against. There are two wheels here with sticks *pressed* on them. Right in. Packed in tight."

To *press* against a thing is to push on it and stay there. It is not a knock. It is a push that does not stop.

"Which wheels?" said Mr. Larkin, from the bottom of the ladder.

Ned's head went away. There was a pause.

"The ones on the front," he said. "The ones with the long rod going out to the face."

Mr. Larkin sat down on the wooden box.

He did not say anything. He put both hands on his knees and looked at the floor of the ringing chamber, and I saw his mouth move once and no sound came out.

Bea wrote 7:24 in her book and drew a line under it.

There was one more thing, and Mr. Larkin made Ned do it twice.

"Is it *empty*?"

"Yes."

"Look again. Properly. Round the back of it and underneath."

Ned's lamp moved about up there for a good minute.

"It is empty," he called down. "No eggs. No birds. Nothing living in it at all. It is old and it is dry. There is nobody home."

"Say it again," said Mr. Larkin.

"It is empty."

"Right," said Mr. Larkin. "Then December is the month to do it, and this is December, and that is that."

Mrs. Vane wrote that in the church book afterward, in one line. Then she wrote a second line under it about putting a box on the outside of the tower for them in the spring. I will come back to that.

Ned came down at ten to eight with his lamp swinging and cobwebs all down one arm.

He was pleased with himself, and he had a right to be.

Then he stopped on the fourth rung from the bottom.

"Hold on," he said. "There is one more thing and I do not like it."

He came the rest of the way down and stood in the middle of the floor and opened his hand.

There was a little steel *rod* lying on his palm. A rod is a straight round bar. This one was about as long as my finger and about as thick as a pencil, and it was black with old oil.

And it was worn away.

Not all round. Just on one side, in the middle, in a smooth curve. It had gone from a round bar to a bar with a bite out of it. It was the shape of the moon when the moon is only half there.

That is what a *half moon* is. It is the only thing I could think of to write down at the time, and I have not thought of a better one since.

"Where has that come out of?" said Mr. Larkin.

To *come out* of a thing is to leave the place it belongs in.

"Out of the works," said Ned. "Out of the front of them. And Mr. Larkin, I did not pull it. I only put two fingers on it to see if it was loose."

He turned his hand over and back.

"It came out on its own."

Chapter 10: The Clock Was Right All Along

Thursday, the fourth of December. Half past four, in the attic, with the sack of sticks in the yard downstairs.

Mr. Larkin set the hands right on Wednesday morning at eight o'clock. Six people watched. Mrs. Vane held the lamp. He did it from the third rung. He said he was not going to make a speech about it, and then he made a short one anyway.

"Ninety-four years," he said. "And that is the first time I have set that clock where it belongs since August."

Then the clock ran.

Wednesday, twelve o'clock. Bea and I stood at the corner by Mr. Mott's bench and wrote before we spoke.

Zero.

Both of us. Zero.

That is the tenth day of Bea's chart, and the first zero on it. She has drawn a small square round it.

Now here is the thing, and it is the funny one. It took Leo about nine seconds to see it. It took me about a day.

The clock was never slow.

Not once. Not for one hour in four months.

The pendulum swung the way it always swings. The wheels turned the way they always turn. The weight came down at the same rate every week. Mr. Larkin can tell you what that rate is to the inch, and he did.

The clock was *keeping time* the whole autumn. It just could not tell anybody.

The sticks were packed against the two wheels that turn the hands. So the hands were *held back*.

To *hold back* is to stop a thing going forward at the speed it wants to go. You do not stop it. You drag on it.

The wheels turned. The hands slipped. Every day the hands fell another minute or two behind the works that drive them. And Foxton looked up at that face and said, *the old clock is slow.*

All along means the whole time, from the start, without anybody knowing.

The clock was right all along. It was the face that was lying. And a face cannot lie on purpose.

"A clock face is not the clock," said Bea. "I am putting that on the wall."

She did put it on the wall. It is still there.

There is one more part of it. It is the part I like best.

The bell strikes the hours off the same wheels. So all autumn, when the face said six, the bell struck six.

That means the bell was ten minutes late as well. Every hour. Every day. For four months.

Nobody noticed that either. And I will tell you exactly why. Half this town sets its watch by that clock. So when the bell was ten minutes late, half this town was ten minutes late with it. And everybody agreed with everybody.

A whole market town, all wrong together, all in step.

Miss Petherton says that is the most Foxton thing she has ever heard.

Leo did his part on Thursday and he did it without being asked.

We came up the attic stairs. The six theories were still on the wall from Saturday. Ranked. In his handwriting. Number six at the top, with a box round it.

He took them down himself, one at a time. He did not screw any of them up. He put them in a flat pile on the table for me. A casebook keeps what you thought.

Then he stood there with his hands in his pockets.

"I want to say the reason out loud," he said. "So Ada can put it in."

"Go on."

"I was reasoning from the interesting end."

He said it plainly. He did not look at the floor when he said it. That is the whole of Leo Frost in one sentence.

"I had a fact on Saturday. It was in front of me. Officer Hobbs said it out loud over a sandwich. *Has anybody gone up there and had a look.*" He tapped the table. "And it was not interesting. So I went and built a man with a motive instead. He was a nice piece of work. And he was made of nothing."

Sam said, "The bus driver is going to be all right, then."

"The bus driver never knew," said Leo. "That is not the same as being all right. That is only being lucky."

Bea said, "Check the dull one first."

"Check the dull one first," said Leo.

That is going in the front of the casebook, under Rule One, in capitals. Bea is doing the letters.

At five o'clock Mr. Mott came up to look at the rod. I want to write down how he did it.

Frank Mott has mended bicycles in this town for forty years. He has a bench on the market on Saturdays now, under a board with his name on it. He has a gray coat and a flat cap. He takes the cap off indoors.

He did not touch the rod when he came in. He put both hands behind his back. He looked at it on the table.

"Who does it belong to?"

"The church," said Mrs. Vane. She had come up our attic stairs. I did not expect that at all.

"Then may I pick it up?"

"You may."

Ada Quill's note, in the casebook, at the time: *He asked. He always asks now. He has asked every time since the piano.*

He picked it up. He turned it over twice. He held it up to the little window under the roof and looked along it. Then he put it down and said the honest thing straight away.



"This is not my work."

"You mend things," said Sam.

"I mend bicycles," said Mr. Mott. "I have never had a tower clock to bits in my life. And I am not going to start on one that is ninety-four years old. A man who says he can do a thing he has never done is no good to you at all."

Then he sat down. He turned the rod over one more time. Then he said the useful thing.

"But I know what it is."

Here is what it is. Mr. Mott drew it for us on the back of Leo's theories.

Deep in the works there is a little *cage*. It is two round plates with six steel rods running between them, standing in a ring. A cage with six bars, and the whole of it would sit in the palm of my hand.

The teeth of a big wheel come round and push on those rods, one after another. That is how one wheel turns the next.

"They call it a lantern pinion," said Mr. Mott. "That is what the old boys called it. There will be four or five pinions in that clock."

Our rod was one of the six bars. Every time a tooth pushed on it, it rubbed. A tooth has rubbed it every hour of every day since 1931.

To *wear out* is to be slowly rubbed away by use. Nothing breaks. It just gets thinner.

Ninety-four years of that. And one side of a steel rod goes from round to a half moon. That is *worn*.

"And a worn one is loose," said Mr. Mott. "And a loose one lets a tooth slip past now and then. Slip a tooth, lose a bit of time, all at once."

Bea sat up very straight.

"A jump," she said.

"If you like."

"Not a slide. A jump."

"Ah," said Mr. Mott. "You have got two different faults, then. And you have been adding them together all month. That will have been a nuisance."

Bea looked at him the way she looks at Miss Prewitt.

"Can it be mended?" said Mrs. Vane.

"Not by me," said Mr. Mott. "It wants a new rod, the same to about a hair. Same length. Same thickness. Both ends square. And that wants a *lathe*."

A lathe is a machine that spins a piece of metal round very fast. You hold a sharp tool against it. It takes the outside off, thinner and thinner. You stop

when the metal is exactly round and exactly the size you want. Doing that is called *turning* a part.

"So we have to send it to the city," said Mrs. Vane.

"No," said Mr. Mott. He stood up. "We have to *telephone* Marlow."

To telephone somebody is to ring them up. Mr. Mott says telephone, in full, every time.

He used the phone in our shop, downstairs, standing up with his cap in his hand. We all sat on the stairs. That is not eavesdropping if the door is open and they know you are there.

It was Tom Webb.

Mr. Webb has the big bicycle shop in Marlow. He was Mr. Mott's apprentice once, forty years ago. He drives a small blue van. He sent Mr. Mott a box of free spare parts in October. There is a whole page about him in Case Number One.

He also has a lathe in the shed behind his shop.

Mr. Mott talked for six minutes. Then he came to the bottom of our stairs.

"He will turn one Saturday morning," he said. "He will not take a penny for it. He says do not offer. He says he means it."

Mrs. Vane wrote that down.

"There is one thing," said Mr. Mott. "He has a question, and he wants the answer before he starts. He wants to know how long that clock has been running with a heap of sticks in it."

"Since August," said Leo. "The eleventh."

Mr. Mott shook his head.

"That is what I told him. He says that is not what he asked." Mr. Mott looked round at all of us. He was not smiling now. "He says a rod does not wear away in four months. He says that one has been going for years. And he says if one of the six is worn that far —"

He stopped.

"Go on," said Bea.

"He says there may be *more than one*."

Chapter 11: Eleven Days and a Costed List

Friday, the fifth of December. Four o'clock in the attic, with the good pens out.

First, Thursday, since I have to put it in.

Thursday was day eleven of Bea's chart. At twelve o'clock we wrote minus two.

Sam had seen it happen. He was in the square at about half past nine, on an errand for his uncle. He was looking up at the clock. The long hand moved. Not round. Not smoothly. It went back a little and dropped, all at once, and settled.

"A bird landing," said Sam, and then he shook his head. "No. Not that either."

That is the missing rod. A tooth came round, found nothing to push, and slipped past.

Bea put it on the chart in a different color.

"Two faults," she said. "One is a slide. One is a jump. I have been adding them up for eleven days and calling the answer one thing."

Then she wrote it under the chart. She made me read it out loud before she would let me copy it in.

If two faults are on at once, every measurement you take is both of them added together. You cannot see either one on its own. Take one away, and there is the other.

There is a coincidence there and Bea saw it before I did. Eleven days of chart. And eleven days from Mrs. Vane's kitchen to the council. She liked that far more than it deserves.

Now the list. This is my favorite kind of chapter. It was the best afternoon of the whole case.

A *costed* list is a list of jobs with the price of each job next to it. Anybody can write down what ought to be done. A costed list says what it will cost, item by item, out loud, where people can argue with it.

The paper from the city was one sheet with one figure on it. So Bea made one sheet with five.

She wrote it herself, in her own handwriting. Hers is the tidiest of the four of us by a long way. She ruled the lines. She ruled a box round the bottom. She would not let Sam near it with a pen.

It took her two goes and an hour and a half.

ST. CHAD'S CLOCK — WHAT IT ACTUALLY NEEDS

1. One steel rod for the pinion. Turned on a lathe by Mr. T. Webb, Marlow. **£0.** *(Mr. Webb will not take payment and asks not to be offered any.)*

2. Refit the wire mesh over the four belfry openings. £0. *(Four panels, bought and paid for by the church in August. They are standing in the vestry cupboard. Label attached.)*

3. Clear, clean and oil the works. £0. *(Mr. F. Mott and Mr. E. Hurst. One Saturday morning. Both have offered.)*

4. One nest box, fixed to the outside of the tower. £11.

TOTAL: £11.

To *oil* a thing is to put oil on the parts that rub. Then they slide instead of grinding. Mr. Mott says a clock is not oiled to make it run. It is oiled to stop it eating itself.

A *nest box* is a wooden box with a hole in the front. You fix it up high, and birds go in and build in it. Bea priced it at the yard on Ivy Lane. One board. Four screws. A length of wire and a hinge. And Mr. Mott to cut the hole.

That is the thing about the jackdaws. They have been coming to that tower a great deal longer than any of us. The mesh keeps them out of the works. The box gives them a hole of their own on the outside. A stick in there does no harm to anybody. Mrs. Vane wrote it in the church book on Wednesday.

It is going up in the spring, before they start building. That is all there is to say about it.

Then Bea did the sum. She did it three times. Then she sat back in the chair with her arms folded and looked at the ceiling.

"Four thousand one hundred and eighty," she said. "Divided by eleven."

"Do not," said Leo.

"Three hundred and eighty."

"Bea."

"Exactly three hundred and eighty. Not about. *Exactly*." She unfolded her arms. "Ada. Write down that the *factor* is three hundred and eighty."

A factor is how many times bigger one number is than another. Ours was three hundred and eighty. It went at the bottom of the page in a box. I have never seen her happier.

There is one more line on that sheet. It is mine, and I had to argue for it.

At the bottom, under the total, Bea had left a space. I said we should put a line in it.

And that somebody goes up once a month and looks, and writes the date on the beam.

"That is not a cost," said Bea.

"No."

"Then it does not go on a costed list."

"It goes on this one," I said. "The clock was wrong for four months. And it was wrong for four months for one reason. Nobody looked at it. If we leave that line off the paper, we have mended the clock and left the hole."

Bea thought about it for about four seconds. That is her way of saying she agreed at once and is not going to say so.

"Under the box," she said. "Not in it. It is not money."

"Under the box."

And then she wrote a second little section under it all, in smaller letters. She headed it **NOT COSTED — FOR THE COUNCIL**. There was one thing in it.

The ladder in the tower is old. We are not able to price it. Somebody who knows about ladders should look at it.

She would not put a figure on it. She was right, and I have thought about that since as well. A costed list with a made-up number on it is not a costed list any more. It is a wish.

Saturday, the sixth of December, half past eight in the morning.

A small blue van came round the square. It parked half on the cobbles by the churchyard gate.

Tom Webb is about sixty. He is big and slow-moving, with enormous hands. He had the new rod in a matchbox, in cotton wool. The old one was in the other half of the same box. You could put them side by side.

They were the same. Exactly the same, except one had a bite out of it.

"Twenty minutes on the lathe," he said. "You will want to give me something to do that is actually hard."

Then he went up the ladder with Ned. Mr. Mott came in the tower door at nine with his tools in a bicycle bag. After that it was the loudest church in England.

All four of them had an opinion.

Mr. Webb was up there doing it. Ned was up there holding the lamp and saying what he could see. Mr. Mott was on the ladder at about rung six, giving advice up through the trap door. And Mr. Larkin was at the bottom, on his box. He told all three of them how that clock likes to be handled, out of forty years of Fridays.

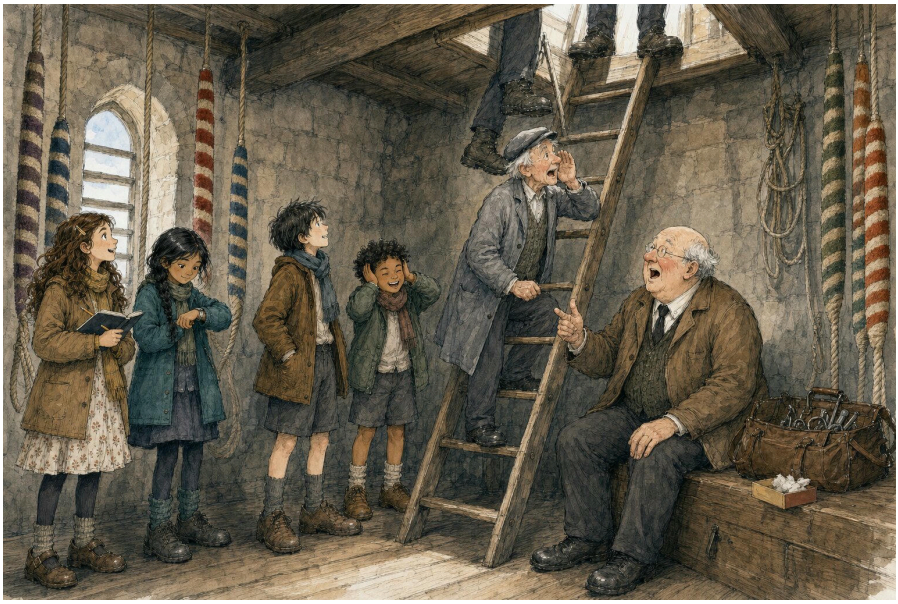
"Left. No, *your* left."

"It wants easing, not knocking."

"Frank, get off my ladder."

"It is not your ladder, it is Mrs. Vane's ladder."

I wrote most of it down. Nobody minded. That is one of the useful things about being thirteen and quiet.



The new rod went in at twenty past nine. Mr. Webb said it went in the way a thing goes in when it is the right size. He says you can feel that and you cannot describe it.

They cleaned the works and oiled them. It took them to half past eleven. Mr. Larkin never once went higher than the third rung, and nobody said one word about that all morning.

At about ten o'clock Ned called down through the hole.

"There is writing on this beam."

A *beam* is one of the great oak timbers that hold a floor or a roof up. There is one right by the trap door. It is nearly black. It is as thick as I am.

"There is," said Mr. Larkin, from his box. He did not look up.

"Names."

"There are."

Ned's lamp came round. "Ashworth," he read. "Then Pike. Pike again. Then —"

"Hollis," said Mr. Larkin.

Ned stopped. "How do you —"

"Hollis. Nineteen sixty-one. That is our Mr. Hollis's father." Mr. Larkin still did not look up. "Then Vine. Then me."

To *service* a thing is to clean it, oil it and put right what is worn, before it goes wrong. Every man who ever serviced that clock wrote his name on that beam in pencil, with the year. Then he went back down the ladder. They have been doing it since 1931.

Leo went up two rungs. That is as far as Officer Hobbs would allow. He copied it out with Ned holding the lamp. Then he drew the beam. Then he wrote the names out in *capitals*. Capitals are the big letters, and that is how they are written up there.

The last line on that beam says:

LARKIN 1986

And under it, in the same soft pencil, going down the beam in a neat little column, there is a year. And another year. And another.

Every one since. All of them.

I stood in the ringing chamber and read Leo's copy of it. Then I got out Bea's sheet, with the total in the box. And the line I had argued about for ten minutes on Friday afternoon.

And that somebody goes up once a month and looks, and writes the date on the beam.

We thought we had invented that on Friday.

It has been up there since 1931.

Chapter 12: The Council

Thursday, the eleventh of December. Seven o'clock at night, in the church room, with the heater on and not making any difference.

The church room is behind the vestry. It has a long table, twelve hard chairs and a green heater on wheels. There is a picture of the church from 1900, with a tree in front of it that is not there any more.

Nine people sit round that table four times a year and decide everything.

An *agenda* is the list of things a meeting is going to talk about. It is in order, and it is written out beforehand. Mrs. Vane types it herself. Item four was *The tower clock*. Under item four, in her own hand, she had added a line.

4a. Presentation from B. Khan and A. Quill (5 minutes).

That is why we were in the room. Finding a thing out does not get you in. You get in when a grown-up puts you on the paper.

Sam and Leo sat on two chairs by the door with their coats on their knees. Officer Hobbs stood at the back, in uniform and off duty. He does that, and nobody has ever asked him about it.

And Mr. Larkin stood by the heater all evening. He did not sit down once. There was a chair free.

Item four took an hour and ten minutes. I am going to put down the four parts that matter.

One. Bea read the list.

She stood at the end of the table with her sheet in both hands. She did not shake at all. She read the four items, and the price of each one, and where each price came from. She did not say *we think*. She said what was bought, and what was offered, and by whom.

Then she read the total.

Then she said, “The paper from the city is four thousand one hundred and eighty pounds. Mine is eleven pounds. That is a factor of three hundred and eighty. I have checked it three times.”

Mr. Hollis said, “And who is going to stand behind all these noughts?”

“Mr. Webb of Marlow, for the rod,” said Bea. “Mr. Mott and Mr. Hurst, for the work. And the mesh is already bought. It is standing behind itself.”

There was a small noise round that table. It is the noise nine grown-ups make when they have decided about somebody.



Two. Mrs. Vane’s news.

She had telephoned Holt & Son on the Monday.

They are coming on the fifteenth to put the four mesh panels back over the belfry openings. There is no charge. They were the ones who took them out. The man on the telephone said he was sorry twice.

"He said the note went out of the folder when the job closed," said Mrs. Vane. "That is all it was. A note went out of a folder in August. And this town has been ten minutes late ever since."

Three. I read the case.

I read it out of the casebook, standing up. From the parcel — no. Not the parcel. That was the last one. I have the two of them in my head together now.

I read it from the Saturday night in the square, all the way to the beam.

I read the six theories. All of them. The cold and the bells and the winding and the joke and the old clock. And the ranking. And who put them in that order, and why.

And I read the sixth one. This is the part I had thought about most.

"There was a sixth theory," I said. "It had a man's name in it. He never knew about it. He never did one single thing. He is not going to be named in this room, and he is not named in the book. And if any of you work out who it was, I would take it kindly if you did not say."

Nobody said. And nobody has.

Then I read Officer Hobbs's eleven words. I read where I wrote them, and what I did with them. What I did with them was nothing at all, for eight days.

Officer Hobbs looked hard at the ceiling of the church room.

Four. Mr. Larkin.

He did it himself. Nobody asked him to. He did it before Mrs. Vane could get to item five.

He came away from the heater and stood at the end of the table. His hands were behind his back. That is how he stands at the church door on a Sunday.

And he told them.

The twelfth of August. The ninth rung. The room going round. Holding on with his arms through the rungs. Coming down one at a time. Sitting in the ringing chamber till a quarter past seven with his legs gone.

Then the letter in the paper on the twenty-second. And then every morning from the twenty-fifth. Twenty to six. Three rungs. The wheel on the right. Forward only, never past the hour.

Then he gave them the reasons, the same three, in the same order.

"And the last one is the true one," he said. "It was money and it was pride, in about equal parts. And the pride was the bigger part of the two. I have had a fortnight to work that out."

That is the second time in two months. A grown-up in this town has used the word *pride* to me and meant it about themselves. I did not expect it to come round again so soon. I am beginning to think it sits under a great many other things.

And then he said the rest of it. He had not said this part even to Sam and me.

"I never told this church one untrue word. I want that in the minutes. And I want the other half in the minutes too. It is the half that matters." He looked down the table. "I let it think one. Every morning for four months. There is not a great deal of daylight between those two. I have been standing in it since August, and it is a cold place to stand."

Nobody scolded him.

To *scold* is to tell somebody off, out loud, in front of other people. I had been afraid of that all week. So had Sam. It did not happen.

Mr. Hollis said, "Sixty-eight, Bill. You should have said."

And Mr. Larkin said, "Yes."

And that was the whole of it.

Then the vicar spoke, and he took his own *share*. Your share is your part of a thing, when it is divided up between all the people it belongs to.

"Four months," he said. "I want the number in the minutes as well. For four months that clock was wrong. Eight hundred people looked at it every day. Not one of us climbed a ladder to see. I did not. I have a key in my pocket, and I did not."

He turned his cup round on the table.

"Mr. Larkin has spent four months holding this up with his hands at twenty to six in the morning. He should not have done it alone. And I can tell you why he did. Not one of us asked him one useful question."

Then he said, "I am sorry, Bill," and Mr. Larkin said, "Right," and that was that as well.

Nobody made a speech. This town does not go in for speeches. It goes in for *right*, and *yes*, and getting on with the next thing.

The vote.

Mrs. Vane read it out. Then they put their hands up. I copied it down as it went.

That the quotation from the city be not accepted. Carried, nine to none.

That the repair be done locally on the terms of the costed list. Carried, nine to none.

That Holt & Son refit the mesh on the fifteenth. Carried.

That the tower ladder be looked at by a builder before anybody else goes up it, and a new one costed for the spring. Carried.

That the clock be looked at once a month, and the date written on the beam, and that this be entered in the church book as a standing job. Carried.

And then the last one. Mrs. Vane had written it on the agenda in pencil, at the bottom. She read it out in exactly the same voice as all the others.

That Mr. W. Larkin continue as the keeper of the clock, and that Mr. E. Hurst go up the ladder for him.

Carried, nine to none.

Mr. Larkin looked at the picture of the church with the tree in front of it and said nothing at all.

Then Bea put her hand up. You are not supposed to do that at a church council meeting.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Vane.

"You have not *tested* it."

To test a thing is to try it out on purpose and see if it does what it is supposed to do. It is not the same as hoping.

"The rod went in on Saturday," said Bea. "It has run since Saturday. It has run well. That is not the same as knowing." She had her chart with her. Of course she had. "Set it right tonight, at nine, by the pips. If it is right at nine tomorrow night, it is mended. If it is not, we have another fault. And we need to find it before the spring."

Mrs. Vane looked at her for a second.

"Carried," she said. "Who is doing the *timing*?"

"I am," said Bea.

And that is where I knew what my Friday was going to be.

Timing is watching a clock against the true time and writing down the difference. You cannot do twenty-four hours of it by yourself.

We *set the clock right* at nine o'clock that night, in the dark. The radio stood on the vestry windowsill with the door propped open, and we could all hear the pips. Mr. Larkin was on the third rung with the lamp. Ned was above him. Bea called the seconds up through the trap door.

Then we came out into the churchyard. Bea got out a piece of paper. The night was already ruled on it in *shifts*.

A shift is a turn at a job that goes on longer than one person can do it. You do your hours. Then the next person does theirs. The job never stops.

Four names. Twenty-four hours. Two of us at a time. In December.

"You have got me down for five in the morning," said Sam.

"Twenty to six, actually," said Bea. "It seemed right."

Chapter 13: Case Number Three

Friday, the twelfth of December. A day and a night long, and the coldest one of the year.

Bea's shift paper had four names on it when we went to bed on Thursday.

By eight the next morning it had eleven.

I do not know how. I know Sam told Ned at four in the morning. I know Ned told two people before six. After that this town did what this town does.

Here is the paper as it ended up. I have copied it in.

9–2. Mr. Dabney. *(He walks the square at eleven in any case. He said he would just keep going.)*

2–4. Bea and Leo, from the churchyard wall, with the flask.

4–6. Ned. *(Up anyway. Would not be argued with.)*

6–8. Ada and Sam.

8–11. Mr. Mott, from his bench, with a coat over his knees.

11–1. Miss Petherton, from the library step. *(She brought a chair out. In this weather.)*

1–3. Mrs. Ashby.

3–5. Mr. Speight, over from the town hall, on his own steps.

5–7. Sam and Leo.

7–9. All four of us, and about thirty other people.

Every one of them wrote the time on the sheet. Then what the clock said. Then their own name next to it. Bea made the boxes. Nobody wrote in the wrong box.

Four months, and not one person in this town looked up that tower.

One day, and eleven of them stood in the cold and did nothing else at all.

I have thought about that a great deal. I have not got a clever thing to say about it. I am putting it down the way it was.

At nine o'clock on Friday night there were more people in the square than on market day.

Bea stood on the bottom step of the town hall. The radio from our kitchen stood on the step beside her. The whole square went quiet.

The whole town knows the pips now. Ask anyone in Foxton what the pips are.

Five short. Then the long one.

And then the bell.

To *strike* is what a clock does when it hits a bell to tell you the hour. Nine o'clock is nine strikes. You count them.

The first stroke came. Bea's hand went up. She counted under her breath. Then she wrote on the paper without looking up.

Then she said it out loud so the square could hear.

"Eight *seconds*."

A second is the smallest bit of time on a watch. Sixty of them make a minute. There are eighty-six thousand four hundred of them in a day. Bea can say that number without stopping to think.

"Eight seconds slow in twenty-four hours," she said. "Not eight minutes. Eight seconds."

Someone at the back started clapping. About two hundred people joined in. That is not how a measurement is supposed to be treated. Bea did not seem to mind at all.

Then Mr. Larkin said, "Right," and went to get a penny.

Here is the last true thing in this case. It is my favorite one in the whole book.

The *pendulum* is the long swinging rod that makes a clock keep time. Ours is longer than the clock room is high. So it hangs down through a slot in the

floor, on down the inside of the tower. At the bottom of it there is a heavy round weight. That weight is what the whole clock is counting.

Just above the weight there is a little brass shelf, no bigger than a saucer. It is called the *tray*. It is not there for nothing.

If the clock is a few seconds slow, you put a coin on the tray. That is all. A weight on the tray makes the pendulum swing a very little bit faster. And a clock that swings faster runs faster. To *gain* is to get ahead. It is the opposite of losing.

On this clock, one old *penny* is worth about eight seconds a day. Mr. Larkin says so. He did not work it out, and he did not read it anywhere.

He knows it for a very good reason. There are already three pennies on that tray.

One man put one there. Then another man. The bottom one has 1936 on it and it is worn nearly smooth.

You do not need the ladder to get to the tray. The weight swings level with a little door off the stone stair, halfway up. Mr. Larkin has known that for forty years. He walked up those stairs with a penny in his hand and put the fourth one on. Then he came down again and had a cup of tea.

Bea made all four of us stand there and watch her write it in the casebook.

A penny on the tray = about 8 seconds a day, gained. Not a trick. This is how it is done.

"Put *this is how it is done* in big letters," she said.

It is in big letters.

Saturday. Twelve o'clock exactly, from the corner by Mr. Mott's bench. Two of us. Both writing before either spoke.

Zero.

Sunday. Zero.

Monday. Zero.

Bea closed the chart on the Wednesday with twenty-four days on it. She would not take it down off the wall.

And I closed the five questions.

CASE NUMBER THREE — THE BACKWARDS CLOCK

WHAT. The clock of St. Chad's lost time, and then caught it up again in the night.

WHERE. The clock room, above the ringing chamber, in the tower.

WHEN. From the eleventh of August to the third of December. One hundred and fifteen days.

WHO. Mr. William Larkin, verger of this parish since 1986. Every morning at twenty to six. On three rungs of a ladder. In the dark.

WHY.

And under WHY I wrote it in two parts. It took me the whole of a Sunday afternoon.

The first part is the part you can hold in your hand. Four mesh panels came out in August and never went back. Jackdaws put four buckets and a coal sack of sticks against the wheels that turn the hands. The hands were held back. The clock was right all along. And under all of that, one steel rod worn to a half moon by ninety-four years of teeth.

The second part is Bea's, and she asked me to put it in, and she asked me twice.

I want that written down. Bea Khan does not believe a thing she cannot measure. And she came up our stairs on the Sunday and asked me to put a line in the casebook with no number in it anywhere.

He was ashamed. That is not on the chart, and it is the answer.

The Sunday before Christmas, the square was full.

There is a carol service at six o'clock. A *carol* is a Christmas song. Half of them are older than the church. All of them are older than the clock.

They put a tree by the fountain and lamps all round the market side. People come out who do not come out for anything else all year. Mrs. Finch rode down on her black bicycle. Miss Prewitt came with her sister on her arm. Bea carried the music, and got told off for carrying it wrong.

We stood by the church gate, all four of us.

At one minute to six, the square went quiet.

And then the bell struck six. The right six. On the right minute and the right second, over the top of eight hundred people. The first carol started underneath it.



I looked for Mr. Larkin.

He was standing at the church door with the books. Brown coat, tie straight, in the light out of the porch.

And he was not looking up.

That is how I knew it was finished. For four months that man could not cross this square without his eyes going up to that tower. He did not look up once all evening. He had no reason to.

Bea saw me looking and said one word.

"Write that."

And that is Case Number Three.

Forty-one pages. One chart. One costed list. One drawing of a beam. And six theories that were all wrong.

Officer Hobbs came to the shop on the Monday and said one thing about it. He said, "You checked the dull one in the end." Then he bought a book about trees, and paid for it, and would not be talked out of paying for it.

Sam said we ought to get that framed. Leo said we ought to have it carved on the beam. Bea has already asked Mrs. Vane.

There is one more thing, and it happened on the way home from the carol service.

We went the long way, over the old bridge. Sam wanted to see if the river was up after all the rain. It was. It was black and fast and loud under the arches.

The *current* is the way the water moves, and the speed it moves at. Ours runs from the mill, under the old bridge, and out past the railway halt.

Leo was talking about the ladder. Bea was arguing about the nest box. Then Sam stopped in the middle of the bridge with his hand out flat.

"Wait," he said.

There was something white in the water.

It came down out of the dark on the far side of the bridge, turning slowly. It kept up with the current and it did not sink. It was small. It was white. It was going by fast, and we all leaned over the rail together.

It was a boat.

Someone had *folded* it out of paper. To fold is to bend a thing over on itself, along a straight line, and press it flat. This one was folded properly. It was folded the way you fold a paper boat when you have made about a hundred of them. A sharp flat bottom, and one three-cornered sail standing up in the middle.

The paper was *lined paper*. That is the sort with blue lines printed across it, out of an exercise book.

And there was writing on the sail. One line of it. In pencil. In capitals, going across.

It went under us and out the other side and away down the river in the dark. Not one of us could read a word of it.

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