



Time

By Stephen Hughes

(Adult Category)

Time had been an obsession passed down from his father, but for the past year, time was measured only by night and day. The nights had brought cold, discomfort and a dread of the dawn. The days had brought a longing for the dark to descend.

Jack stared up at the astrological clock in the minster that no longer recorded the passing of time. The minster clock had been maintained by his father for as long as Jack could remember, but at the outbreak of war his father suffered a stroke and the clock was neglected.

Jack had three brothers. John, the eldest, was a soldier and had left for Belgium in the autumn of 1914. James and Robert took the king's shilling the next year. Jack, still only sixteen, tried to sign up with his brothers. He thought it was his boyish looks and his underdeveloped stature that made the sergeant turn him away, but in truth it had been the intervention of his mother, supported by his older brothers.

The almost inevitable telegram arrived the same year, informing his parents that John had been killed in action. His father died of a heart attack a week later and on that same day the minster clock gave up the will to live.

James and Robert followed John to their needless deaths in successive years. Jack was conscripted in January 1917 and after training was sent to the front in time to take part in the "Battle of Mud" at Passchendaele. The next twelve months cemented his belief that time had been suspended and that each day was but a moment in a never-ending nightmare. In July 1918 Jack was wounded at the second battle of Marne, the beginning of the German army collapse.

The Great War had finally ended and Jack had returned to Wimborne. The minster clock represented a halt in time for Jack. He could see no way forward and his own internal clock could only run backwards.

As Jack stared up at the clock a voice came from his side. An elderly man, with a kind but sad face, followed Jack's stare. He spoke neither to Jack nor the clock: *apparently that clock once kept perfect time and stroked the hour to keep Wimborne in step. Unfortunately the man that kept it running died some years ago and some say that the clock stopped when he died.*

It did said Jack, that man was my father.

I'm sorry, said the man, I'm the new rector of this parish and I've yet to become acquainted to its parishioners.

That's quite all right rector, but don't you have anyone else to maintain the clock?

No, nobody has the first idea how the ancient clock works. Not surprising as it's been in existence since the fourteenth century. I don't suppose you have any knowledge of its working do you?

No vicar. Well not really. The mechanism is not the original. It was updated in the eighteenth century. I accompanied my father on many occasions and used to watch him work on the clock. He would always tell me what he was doing but I guess I just never listened.

I believe your father had four sons. Would any of your brothers have any knowledge of its workings?

Jack took several seconds to reply. He simply answered; *No*, and walked away.

That night, as the dark descended, bringing the nightmares only his surviving comrades could share, he thought of the clock. He couldn't resurrect his father and brothers, but could he bring that old clock back to life?

Jack told his mother of his visit to the minster and the conversation with the Rector. She stroked his forehead, swallowed her own grief and said; *Jack. You have to move forward. Your wounds have healed and you've been back in Wimborne several weeks. I know you're no longer a religious man, but you can still speak to the rector.*

Over the next few weeks, Jack visited the minster and with the permission of the rector, worked on the clock in the tower. It wasn't so much that the clock needed repairing, but more a question of cleaning and oiling.

He restored the wooden grenadier soldier that should animate when a bell struck the hour. The clock would now work, but Jack decided not to tell the rector just yet. He spent long nights and most days drawing up and creating an alteration to the mechanism, ignoring any guilt he may have felt by making the change.

Finally he completed his project and announced to the rector that at midnight on 31st December 1919, the clock would strike twelve and relive.

The rector announced to his congregation that this would take place, hoping to swell the numbers at New Year. At ten to midnight the minster was packed and the minster green was crowded with curious onlookers.

At midnight, the Grenadier guard stood proud as the bell struck twelve times and the orb, representing the sun, began to move around the earth at the centre astronomical clock. The midnight mass continued and the revellers outside kissed sang and danced.

At fifteen minutes past midnight, everyone inside and outside the minister stopped in silence. The Grenadier guard moved and began to strike the quarter hour on a bell each side of its frame. The more cynical members of the congregation whispered disparaging remarks about the clocks poor repair.

Jack and his mother stood in the square, apart from the revellers. They turned and smiled at each other before turning to walk home. They alone knew that from now on the clock would strike every quarter and that the Grenadier guard would perform its salute, first striking the bell to its right followed by the appropriate quarter on the bell to its left.

The first three quarter chimes would represent his brothers and the hourly chime his father. The Great War could and never should be forgotten. Each quarter strike would be a reminder for each of the four years of the Great War, but for Jack and his mother, time would now move forward.