

Escapement

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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Neither of us was watching the play too closely when I first noticed the slip. I was stretched back in front of the fire with the crossword, braising gently and toying with 17 down („told by antique clocks? 5, 5.“) while Helen was hemming an old petticoat, looking up only when the third lead, a heavy-chinned youth with a 42-inch neck and a base-surge voice, heaved manfully downscreen. The play was *My Sons, My Sons*, one of those Thursday night melodramas Channel 2 put out through the winter months, and had been running for about an hour; we'd reached that ebb somewhere round Act 3 Scene 3 just after the old farmer learns that his sons no longer respect him. The whole play must have been recorded on film, and it sounded extremely funny to switch from the old man's broken mutterings back to the showdown sequence fifteen minutes earlier when the eldest son starts drumming his chest and dragging in the high symbols. Somewhere an engineer was out of a job.

„They’ve got their reels crossed,” I told Helen. „This is where we came in.“

„Is it?“ she said, looking up. „I wasn’t watching. Tap the set.“

„Just wait and see. In a moment everyone in the studio will start apologizing.“

Helen peered at the screen. „I don’t think we’ve seen this,” she said. „I’m sure we haven’t. Quiet.“

I shrugged and went back to 17 down, thinking vaguely about sand dials and water clocks. The scene dragged on; the old man stood his ground, ranted over his turnips and thundered desperately for Ma. The studio must have decided to run it straight through again and pretend no one had noticed. Even so they’d be fifteen minutes behind their schedule.

Ten minutes later it happened again.

I sat up. „That’s funny,” I said slowly. „Haven’t they spotted it yet? They can’t all be asleep.“

„What’s the matter?“ Helen asked, looking up from her needle basket. „Is something wrong with the set?“

„I thought you were watching. I told you we’d seen this before. Now they’re playing it back for the third time.“

„They’re not,” Helen insisted. „I’m sure they aren’t. You must have read the book.“

„Heaven forbid.“ I watched the set closely. Any minute now an announcer spitting on a sandwich would splutter redfaced to the screen. I’m not one of those people who reach for their phones every time someone mispronounces meteorology, but this time I knew there’d be thousands who’d feel it their duty to keep the studio exchanges blocked all night. And for any goahead comedian on a rival station the lapse was a god-send.

„Do you mind if I change the programme?“ I asked Helen. „See if anything else is on.“

„Don’t. This is the most interesting part of the play. You’ll spoil it.“

„Darling, you’re not even watching. I’ll come back to it in a moment, I promise.“

On Channel 5 a panel of three professors and a chorus girl were staring hard at a Roman pot. The question-master, a suave-voiced Oxford don, kept up a lot of crazy patter about scraping the bottom of the barrow. The professors seemed stumped, but the girl looked as if she knew exactly what went into the pot but didn’t dare say it.

On 9 there was a lot of studio laughter and someone was giving a sports-car to an enormous woman in a cartwheel hat. The woman nervously ducked her head away from the camera and stared glumly at the car. The compadre opened the door for her and I was wondering whether she’d try to get into it when Helen cut in: „Harry, don’t be mean. You’re just playing.“

I turned back to the play on Channel 2. The same scene was on, nearing the end of its run.

„Now watch it,” I told Helen. She usually managed to catch on the third time round. „Put that sewing away, it’s getting on my nerves. God, I know this off by heart.“

„Sb!“ Helen told me. „Can’t you stop talking?“

I lit a cigarette and lay back in the sofa, waiting. The apologies, to say the least, would have to be magniloquent. Two ghost runs at £100 a minute totted up to a tidy heap of doubloons.

The scene drew to a close, the old man stared heavily at his boots, the dusk drew down and—We were back where we started from.

„Fantastic!“ I said, standing up and turning some snow off the screen. „It’s incredible.“

„I didn’t know you enjoyed this sort of play,“ Helen said calmly. „You never used to.“ She glanced over at the screen and then went back to her petticoat.

I watched her warily. A million years earlier I’d probably have run howling out of the cave and flung myself thankfully under the nearest dinosaur. Nothing in the meanwhile had lessened the dangers hemming in the undaunted husband.

„Darling,“ I explained patiently, just keeping the edge out of my voice, „in case you hadn’t noticed they are now playing this same scene through for the fourth time.“

„The fourth time?“ Helen said doubtfully. „Are they repeating it?“

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I was visualizing a studio full of announcers and engineers slumped unconscious over their mikes and valves, while an automatic camera pumped out the same reel. Eerie but unlikely. There were monitor receivers as well as the critics, agents, sponsors, and, unforgivably, the playwright himself weighing every minute and every word in their private currencies. They’d all have a lot to say under tomorrow’s headlines.

„Sit down and stop fidgeting,“ Helen said. „Have you lost your bone?“

I felt round the cushions and ran my hand along the carpet below the sofa.

„My cigarette,“ I said. „I must have thrown it into the fire. I don’t think I dropped it.“

I turned back to the set and switched on the give-away programme, noting the time, 9.03, so that I could get back to Channel 2 at 9.15. When the explanation came I just had to hear it.

„I thought you were enjoying the play,“ Helen said. „Why’ve you turned it off?“

I gave her what sometimes passes in our flat for a withering frown and settled back.

The enormous woman was still at it in front of the cameras, working her way up a pyramid of questions on cookery. The audience was subdued but interest mounted. Eventually she answered the jackpot question and the audience roared and thumped their seats like a lot of madmen. The compere led her across the stage to another sports car.

„She’ll have a stable of them soon,“ I said aside to Helen.

The woman shook hands and awkwardly dipped the brim of her hat, smiling nervously with embarrassment.

The gesture was oddly familiar.

I jumped up and switched to Channel 5. The panel were still staring hard at their pot.

Then I started to realize what was going on.

All three programmes were repeating themselves.

„Helen,“ I said over my shoulder. „Get me a scotch and soda, will you?“

„What is the matter? Have you strained your back?“

„Quickly, quickly!“ I snapped my fingers.

„Hold on.“ She got up and went into the pantry.

I looked at the time, 9.12. Then I returned to the play and kept my eyes glued to the screen. Helen came back and put something down on the end-table.

„There you are. You all right?“

When it switched I thought I was ready for it, but the surprise must have knocked me flat. I found myself lying out on the sofa. The first thing I did was reach round for the drink.

„Where did you put it?“ I asked Helen.

„What?“

„The scotch. You brought it in a couple of minutes ago. It was on the table.“

„You’ve been dreaming,“ she said gently. She leant forward and started watching the play.

I went into the pantry and found the bottle. As I filled a tumbler I noticed the clock over the kitchen sink .9.07. An hour slow, now that I thought about it. But my wristwatch said 9.05, and always ran perfectly. And the clock on the mantelpiece in the lounge also said 9.05.

Before I really started worrying I had to make sure.

Mulivaney, our neighbour in the flat above, opened his door when I knocked.

„Hello, Bartley. Corkscrew?“

„No, no,“ I told him. „What’s the right time? Our clocks are going crazy.“

He glanced at his wrist. „Nearly ten past.“

„Nine or ten?“

He looked at his watch again. „Nine, should be. What’s up?“

„I don’t know whether I’m losing my—“ I started to say. Then I stopped.

Mullvaney eyed me curiously. Over his shoulder I heard a wave of studio applause, broken by the creamy, unctuous voice of the giveaway compadre.

„How long’s that programme been on?“ I asked him.

„About twenty minutes. Aren’t you watching?“

„No,“ I said, adding casually, „Is anything wrong with your set?“

He shook his head. „Nothing. Why?“

„Mine’s chasing its tail. Anyway, thanks.“

„OK,“ he said. He watched me go down the stairs and shrugged as he shut his door.

I went into the hall, picked up the phone and dialled.

„Hello, Tom?“ Tom Farnold works the desk next to mine at the office. „Tom, Harry here. What time do you make it?“

„Time the liberals were back.“

„No, seriously.“

„Let’s see. Twelve past nine. By the way, did you find those pickles I left for you in the safe?“

„Yeah, thanks. Listen, Tom,“ I went on, „the goddamdest things are happening here. We were watching Diller’s play on Channel 2 when—“ „I’m watching it now. Hurry it up.“

„You are? Well, how do you explain this repetition business? And the way the clocks are stuck between 9 and 9.15?“

Tom laughed. „I don't know,“ he said. „I suggest you go outside and give the house a shake.“

I reached out for the glass I had with me on the hall table, wondering how to explain to—The next moment I found myself back on the sofa. I was holding the newspaper and looking at 17 down. A part of my mind was thinking about antique clocks.

I pulled myself out of it and glanced across at Helen. She was sitting quietly with her needle basket. The all too familiar play was repeating itself and by the clock on the mantelpiece it was still just after 9.

I went back into the hail and dialled Tom again, trying not to stampede myself. In some way, I hadn't begun to understand how, a section of time was spinning round in a circle, with myself in the centre.

„Tom,“ I asked quickly as soon as he picked up the phone. „Did I call you five minutes ago?“

„Who's that again?“

„Harry here. Harry Bartley. Sorry, Tom.“ I paused and rephrased the question, trying to make it sound intelligible. „Tom, did you phone me up about five minutes ago? We've had a little trouble with the line here.“

„No,“ he told me. „Wasn't me. By the way, did you get those pickles I left in the safe?“

„Thanks a lot,“ I said, beginning to panic. „Are you watching the play, Tom?“

„Yes. I think I'll get back to it. See you.“

I went into the kitchen and had a long close look at myself in the mirror. A crack across it dropped one side of my face three inches below the other, but apart from that I couldn't see anything that added up to a psychosis. My eyes seemed steady, pulse was in the low seventies, no tics or clammy traumatic sweat. Everything around me seemed much too solid and authentic for a dream.

I waited for a minute and then went back to the lounge and sat down. Helen was watching the play.

I leant forward and turned the knob round. The picture dimmed and swayed off.

„Harry, I'm watching that! Don't switch it off.“

I went over to her. „Poppet,“ I said, holding my voice together. „Listen to me, please. Very carefully. It's important.“

She frowned, put her sewing down and took my hands.

„For some reason, I don't know why, we seem to be in a sort of circular time trap, just going round and round. You're not aware of it, and I can't find anyone else who is either.“

Helen stared at me in amazement. „Harry,“ she started, „what are you—“

„Helen!“ I insisted, gripping her shoulders. „Listen! For the last two hours a section of time about 15 minutes long has been repeating itself. The clocks are stuck between 9 and 9.15. That play you're watching has—“

„Harry, darling.“ She looked at me and smiled helplessly. „You are silly. Now turn it on again.“

I gave up.

* * * * *

As I switched the set on I ran through all the other channels just to see if anything had changed.

The panel stared at their pot, the fat woman won her sports car, the old farmer ranted. On Channel 1, the old BBC service which put out a couple of hours on alternate evenings, two newspaper men were interviewing a scientific pundit who appeared on popular educational programmes.

„What effect these dense eruptions of gas will have so far it's impossible to tell. However, there's certainly no cause for any alarm. These billows have mass, and I think we can expect a lot of strange optical effects as the light leaving the sun is deflected by them gravitationally.“

He started playing with a set of coloured celluloid balls running on concentric metal rings, and fiddled with a ripple tank mounted against a mirror on the table.

One of the newsmen asked: „What about the relationship between light and time? If I remember my relativity they're tied up together pretty closely. Are you sure we won't all need to add another hand to our clocks and watches?“

The pundit smiled. „I think we'll be able to get along without that. Time is extremely complicated, but I can assure you the clocks won't suddenly start running backwards or sideways.“

I listened to him until Helen began to remonstrate. I switched the play on for her and went off into the hall. The fool didn't know what he was talking about. What I couldn't understand was why I was the only person who realized what was going on. If I could get Tom over I might just be able to convince him.

I picked up the phone and glanced at my watch.

9.13.

By the time I got through to Tom the next changeover would be due. Somehow I didn't like the idea of being picked up and flung to the sofa, however painless it might be. I put the phone down and went into the lounge.

The jump-back was smoother than I expected. I wasn't conscious of anything, not even the slightest tremor. A phrase was stuck in my mind: Olden Times.

The newspaper was back on my lap, folded around the crossword. I looked through the clues.

17 down: Told by antique clocks? 5, 5.

I must have solved it subconsciously.

I remembered that I'd intended to phone Tom.

„Hullo, Tom?“ I asked when I got through. „Harry here.“

„Did you get those pickles I left in the safe?“

„Yes, thanks a lot. Tom, could you come round tonight? Sorry to ask you this late, but it's fairly urgent.“

„Yes, of course,“ he said. „What's the trouble?“

„I'll tell you when you get here. As soon as you can?“

„Sure. I'll leave right away. Is Helen all right?“

„Yes, she's fine. Thanks again.“

I went into the dining room and pulled a bottle of gin and a couple of tonics out of the sideboard. He'd need a drink when he heard what I had to say.

Then I realized he'd never make it. From Earls Court it would take him at least half an hour to reach us at Maida Vale and he'd probably get no further than Marble Arch.

I filled my glass out of the virtually bottomless bottle of scotch and tried to work out a plan of action.

The first step was to get hold of someone like myself who retained his awareness of the past switch-backs. Somewhere else there must be others trapped in their little 15-minute cages who were also wondering desperately how to get out. I could start by phoning everyone I knew and then going on at random through the phonebook. But what could we do if we did find each other? In fact there was nothing to do except sit tight and wait for it all to wear off. At least I knew I wasn't looping my loop. Once these billows or whatever they were had burnt themselves out we'd be able to get off the round-about.

Until then I had an unlimited supply of whisky waiting for me in the half-empty bottle standing on the sink, though of course there was one snag: I'd never be able to get drunk.

I was musing round some of the other possibilities available and wondering how to get a permanent record of what was going on when an idea hit me.

I got out the phone-directory and looked up the number of KBC-TV, Channel 9.

A girl at reception answered the phone. After haggling with her for a couple of minutes I persuaded her to put me through to one of the producers.

„Hullo,“ I said. „Is the jackpot question in tonight's programme known to any members of the studio audience?“

„No, of course not.“

„I see. As a matter of interest, do you yourself know it?“

„No,“ he said. 'All the questions tonight are known only to our senior programme producer and M. Phillipe Soisson of Savoy Hotels Limited. They're a closely guarded secret.“

„Thanks,“ I said. „If you've got a piece of paper handy I'll give you the jackpot question. *List the complete menu at the Guildhall Coronation Banquet in July 1953.*“

There were muttered consultations, and a second voice came through.

„Who's that speaking?“

„Mr H.R. Bartley, 129b Sutton Court Road, N.W. —“

Before I could finish I found myself back in the lounge.

The jump-back had caught me. But instead of being stretched out on the sofa I was standing up, leaning on one elbow against the mantelpiece, looking down at the newspaper.

My eyes were focused clearly on the crossword puzzle, and before I pulled them away and started thinking over my call to the studio I noticed something that nearly dropped me into the grate.

17 down had been filled in.

I picked up the paper and showed it to Helen.

„Did you do this clue? 17 down?“

„No,“ she said. „I never even look at the crossword.“

The clock on the mantelpiece caught my eye, and I forgot about the studio and playing tricks with other people's time.

9.03.

The merry-go-round was closing in. I thought the jump-back had come sooner than I expected. At least two minutes earlier, somewhere around 9.13.

And not only was the repetition interval getting shorter, but as the arc edged inwards on itself it was uncovering the real time stream running below it, the stream in which the other I, unknown to myself here, had solved the clue, stood up, walked over to the mantelpiece and filled in 17 down.

I sat down on the sofa, watching the clock carefully.

For the first time that evening Helen was thumbing over the pages of a magazine. The work basket was tucked away on the bottom shelf of the bookcase.

„Do you want this on any longer?“ she asked me. „It’s not very good.“

I turned to the panel game. The three professors and the chorus girl were still playing around with their pot.

On Channel 1 the pundit was sitting at the table with his models.

„...alarm. The billows have mass, and I think we can expect a lot of strange optical effects as the light—“ I switched it off.

The next jump-back came at 9.11. Somewhere I’d left the mantelpiece, gone back to the sofa and lit a cigarette.

It was 9.04. Helen had opened the verandah windows and was looking out into the street.

The set was on again so I pulled the plug out at the main. I threw the cigarette into the fire; not having seen myself light it, made it taste like someone else’s.

„Harry, like to go out for a stroll?“ Helen suggested. „It’ll be rather nice in the park.“

Each successive jump-back gave us a new departure point. If now I bundled her outside and got her down to the end of the road, at the next jump we’d both be back in the lounge again, but probably have decided to drive to the pub instead.

„Harry?“

„What, sorry?“

„Are you asleep, angel? Like to go for a walk? It’ll wake you up.“

„All right,“ I said. „Go and get your coat.“

„Will you be warm enough like that?“

She went off into the bedroom.

I walked round the lounge and convinced myself that I was awake. The shadows, the solid feel of the chairs, the definition was much too fine for a dream.

It was 9.08. Normally Helen would take ten minutes to put on her coat.

The jump-back came almost immediately.

It was 9.06.

I was still on the sofa and Helen was bending down and picking up her work basket.

This time, at last, the set was off.

„Have you got any money on you?“ Helen asked.

I felt in my pocket automatically. „Yes. How much do you want?“

Helen looked at me. „Well, what do you usually pay for the drinks? We’ll only have a couple.“

„We’re going to the pub, are we?“

„Darling, are you all right?“ She came over to me. „You look all strangled. Is that shirt too tight?“

„Helen,“ I said, getting up. „I’ve got to try to explain something to you. I don’t know why it’s happening, it’s something to do with these billows of gas the sun’s releasing.“

Helen was watching me with her mouth open.

„Harry,“ she started to say nervously. „What’s the matter?“

„I’m quite all right,“ I assured her. „It’s just that everything is happening very rapidly and I don’t think there’s much time left.“

I kept on glancing at the clock and Helen followed my eyes to it and went over to the mantelpiece. Watching me she moved it round and I heard the pendulum jangle.—„No, no,“ I shouted. I grabbed it and pushed it back against the wall.

We jumped back to 9.07.

Helen was in the bedroom. I had exactly a minute left.

„Harry,“ she called. „Darling, do you want to, or don’t you?“

I was by the lounge window, muttering something.

I was out of touch with what my real self was doing in the normal time channel. The Helen talking to me now was a phantom.

It was I, not Helen and everybody else, who was riding the merry-go-round.

Jump.

9.07-15.

Helen was standing in the doorway.

„...down to the... the...“ I was saying.

Helen watched me, frozen. A fraction of a minute left.

I started to walk over to her. to walk over to her ver to her er I came out of it like a man catapulted from a revolving door. I was stretched out flat on the sofa, a hard aching pain running from the top of my head down past my right ear into my neck.

I looked at the time .9.45. I could hear Helen moving around in the dining room. I lay there, steadying the room round me, and in a few minutes she came in carrying a tray and a couple of glasses.

„How do you feel?“ she asked, making up an alka-seltzer.

I let it fizzle down and drank it.

„What happened?“ I asked. „Did I collapse?“

„Not exactly. You were watching the play. I thought you looked rather seedy so I suggested we go out for a drink. You went into a sort of convulsion.“

I stood up slowly and rubbed my neck. „God, I didn’t dream all that! I couldn’t have done.“

„What was it about?“

„A sort of crazy merry-go-round—“ The pain grabbed at my neck when I spoke. I went over to the set and switched it on. „Hard to explain coherently. Time was—“ I flinched as the pain bit in again.

„Sit down and rest,“ Helen said. „I’ll come and join you. Like a drink?“

„Thanks. A big scotch.“

I looked at the set. On Channel 1 there was a breakdown sign, a cabaret on 2, a flood-lit stadium on 5, and a variety show on 9. No sign anywhere of either Diller’s play or the panel game.

Helen brought the drink in and sat down on the sofa with me.

„It started off when we were watching the play,“ I explained, massaging my neck.

„Sh, don't bother now. Just relax.“

I put my head on Helen's shoulder and looked up at the ceiling, listening to the sound coming from the variety show. I thought back through each turn of the round-about, wondering whether I could have dreamt it all.

Ten minutes later Helen said, „Well, I didn't think much of that. And they're doing an encore. Good heavens.“

„Who are?“ I asked. I watched the light from the screen flicker across her face.

„That team of acrobats. The something Brothers. One of them even slipped. How do you feel?“

„Fine.“ I turned my head round and looked at the screen.

Three or four acrobats with huge v-torsos and skin briefs were doing simple handstands on to each other's arms. They finished the act and went into a more involved routine, throwing around a girl in leopard skin panties. The applause was deafening. I thought they were moderately good.

Two of them began to give what seemed to be a demonstration of dynamic tension, straining against each other like a pair of catatonic bulls, their necks and legs locked, until one of them was levered slowly off the ground.

„Why do they keep on doing that?“ Helen said. „They've done it twice already.“

„I don't think they have,“ I said. „This is a slightly different act.“

The pivot man tremored, one of his huge banks of muscles collapsed, and the whole act toppled and then sprung apart.

„They slipped there the last time,“ Helen said.

„No, no,“ I pointed out quickly. „That one was a headstand. Here they were stretched out horizontally.“

„You weren't watching,“ Helen told me. She leant forward. „Well, what are they playing at? They're repeating the whole thing for the third time.“

It was an entirely new act to me, but I didn't try to argue.

I sat up and looked at the clock.

10.05.

„Darling,“ I said, putting my arm round her. „Hold tight.“

„What do you mean?“

„This is the merry-go-round. And you're driving.“

