Once upon a time (when time ran by clockwork), a strange event took place in a little German town. Actually, it was a series of events, all fitting together like the parts of a clock, and although each person saw a different part, no-one saw the whole of it; but here it is, as well as I can tell it.

It began on a winter’s evening, when the townsfolk were gathering in the White Horse Tavern. The snow was blowing down from the mountains, and the wind was making the bells shift restlessly in the church tower. The windows were steamed up, the stove was blazing brightly, Putzi the old black cat was snoozing on the hearth; and the air was full of
the rich smells of sausage and sauerkraut, of tobacco and beer. Gretl, the little barmaid, the landlord’s daughter, was hurrying to and fro with foaming mugs and steaming plates.

The door opened, and fat white flakes of snow swirled in, to faint away into water as they met the heat of the parlour. The incomers, Herr Ringelmann the clockmaker and his apprentice Karl, stamped their boots and shook the snow off their greatcoats.

‘It’s Herr Ringelmann!’ said the Burgomaster. ‘Well, old friend, come and drink some beer with me! And a mug for young what’s his name, your apprentice.’

Karl the apprentice nodded his thanks and went to sit by himself in a corner. His expression was dark and gloomy.

‘What’s the matter with young thingamajig?’ said the Burgomaster. ‘He looks as if he’s swallowed a thundercloud.’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t worry,’ said the old clockmaker, sitting down at the table with his friends. ‘He’s anxious about tomorrow. His apprenticeship is coming to an end, you see.’

‘Ah, of course!’ said the Burgomaster. It was the
custom that when a clockmaker's apprentice finished his period of service, he made a new figure for the great clock of Glockenheim. 'So we're to have a new piece of clockwork in the tower! Well, I look forward to seeing it tomorrow.'

'I remember when my apprenticeship came to an end,' said Herr Ringelmann. 'I couldn't sleep for thinking about what would happen when my figure came out of the clock. Supposing I hadn't counted the cogs properly? Supposing the spring was too stiff? Supposing – oh, a thousand things go through your mind. It's a heavy responsibility.'

'Maybe so, but I've never seen the lad look so gloomy before,' said someone else. 'And he's not a cheerful fellow at the best of times.'

And it seemed to the other drinkers that Herr Ringelmann himself was a little down-hearted, but he raised his mug with the rest of them and changed the conversation to another topic.

'I hear young Fritz the novelist is going to read us his new story tonight,' he said.

'So I believe,' said the Burgomaster. 'I hope it's not as terrifying as the last one he read to us. D'you know, I woke three times that night and found my
hair on end, just thinking about it!'

'I don’t know if it’s more frightening hearing them here in the parlour, or reading them later on your own,' said someone else.

'It’s worse on your own, believe me,' said another. 'You can feel the ghostly fingers creeping up your spine, and even when you know what’s going to happen next you can’t help jumping when it does.'

Then they argued about whether it was more terrifying to hear a ghost story when you didn’t know what was going to happen (because it took you by surprise) or when you did (because there was the suspense of waiting for it). They all enjoyed ghost stories, and Fritz’s in particular, for he was a talented storyteller.

The subject of their conversation, Fritz the writer himself, was a cheerful-looking young man who had been eating his supper at the other end of the parlour. He joked with the landlord, he laughed with his neighbours, and when he’d finished, he called for another mug of beer, gathered up the untidy pile of manuscript beside his plate, and went to talk to Karl.

'Hello, old boy,' he said cheerfully. 'All set for
The great clock of Glockenheim was the most amazing piece of machinery in the whole of Germany. If you wanted to see all the figures you would have to watch it for a whole year, because the mechanism was so complex that it took twelve months to complete its movement. There were all the saints, each coming out on their own day; there was Death, with his scythe and hourglass; there were over a hundred figures altogether. Herr Ringelmann was in charge of it all. There never was a clock like it, I promise.
tomorrow? I’m looking forward to it! What are you going to show us?’

Karl scowled and turned away.

‘The artistic temperament,’ said the landlord wisely. ‘Drink up your beer, and have another on the house, in honour of tomorrow.’

‘Put poison in, and I’ll drink it then,’ muttered Karl.

‘What?’ said Fritz, who could hardly believe his ears. The two of them were sitting right at the end of the bar, and Fritz moved so as to turn his back on the rest of the company and speak to Karl in private. ‘What’s the matter, old fellow?’ he went on quietly. ‘You’ve been working at your masterpiece for months! Surely you’re not worried about it? It can’t fail!’

Karl looked at him with a face full of savage bitterness.

‘I haven’t made a figure,’ he muttered. ‘I couldn’t
do it. I’ve failed, Fritz. The clock will chime tomorrow, and everyone will be looking up to see what I’ve done, and nothing will come out, nothing...?” He groaned softly, and turned away. ‘I can’t face them!’ he went on. ‘I should go and throw myself off the tower now and have done with it!’

‘Oh, come on, don’t talk like that!’ said Fritz, who had never seen his friend so bitter. ‘You must have a word with old Herr Ringelmann – ask his advice – tell him you’ve hit a snag – he’s a decent old fellow, he’ll help you out!’

‘You don’t understand,’ said Karl passionately. ‘Everything’s so easy for you! You just sit at your desk and put pen to paper, and stories come pouring out! You don’t know what it is to sweat and strain for hours on end with no ideas at all, or to struggle with materials that break, and tools that go blunt, or to tear your hair out trying to find a new variation on the same old theme – I tell you, Fritz, it’s a wonder I haven’t blown my brains out long before this! Well, it won’t be long now. Tomorrow morning you can all laugh at me. Karl, the failure. Karl, the hopeless. Karl, the first apprentice to fail in hundreds of years of clockmaking. I don’t care. I shall be lying