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
at the bottom of the river, under the ice.’

Fritz had had to stop himself interrupting when Karl spoke about the difficulty of working. Stories are just as hard as clocks to put together, and they can go wrong just as easily – as we shall see with Fritz’s own story in a page or two. Still, Fritz was an optimist, and Karl was a pessimist, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Putzi the cat, wakening from his snooze on the hearth, came and rubbed his back against Karl’s legs. Karl kicked him savagely away.

‘Steady on,’ said Fritz.

But Karl only scowled. He drank deeply and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before banging the mug on the counter and calling for more. Gretl the young barmaid looked anxiously at Fritz, because she was only a child, and wasn’t sure whether she should be serving someone in Karl’s condition.

‘Give him some more,’ said Fritz. ‘He’s not drunk, poor fellow, he’s unhappy. I’ll keep an eye on him, don’t you worry.’

So Gretl poured some more beer for Karl, and the clockmaker’s apprentice scowled and turned away.
Fritz was worried about him, but he couldn’t stay there any longer, because the patrons were calling for him.

‘Come on, Fritz! Where’s that story?’

‘Sing for your supper! Come on! We’re all waiting!’

‘What’s it about this time, eh? Skeletons, or ghosts?’

‘I hope it’s a nice bloody murder!’

‘No, I hear he’s got something quite different for us this time. Something quite new.’

‘I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be more horrible than anything we could imagine,’ said old Johann the woodcutter.

While the drinkers ordered more mugs of beer to see them through the story, and filled their pipes and settled themselves comfortably, Fritz gathered up his manuscript and took up his place by the stove.

To tell the truth, Fritz was less comfortable himself than he had ever been before at one of these storytelling evenings, because of what Karl had just told him, and because of the theme of his story – of the start of it, anyway. But after all, it wasn’t about Karl. The subject was really quite different.

(There was another private reason for Fritz to be nervous. The fact was, he hadn’t actually finished
the story. He’d written the start all right, and it was terrific, but he hadn’t been able to think of an ending. He was just going to wind up the story, set it going, and make up the end when he got there. As I said just now, he was an optimist.)

‘We’re all ready and waiting,’ said the Burgomaster. ‘I’m looking forward to this story, even if it does make my hair stand on end. What’s it called?’

‘It’s called –’ said Fritz, with a nervous glance at Karl – ‘it’s called “Clockwork”’.

‘Ah! Very appropriate!’ cried old Herr Ringelmann. ‘Did you hear that, Karl? This is a story in your honour, my boy!’

Karl scowled and looked down at the floor.

‘No, no,’ said Fritz hastily, ‘this story isn’t about Karl, or the clock in our town, no, not at all. It’s quite different. It just happens to be called “Clockwork”.’

‘Well, set it going,’ said someone. ‘We’re all ready.’

So Fritz cleared his throat and arranged his papers and began to read:

FRITZ’S STORY

‘I wonder if any of you remember the extraordinary