throat of Karl the apprentice, who lay stark dead beside him.

Gretl nearly fainted, but she was a brave girl, and she had seen what lay in Karl’s hand. It was the heavy iron key of the clock tower. With her mind in a whirl, she was still able to guess part of what had happened, if not all of it, and she realized what Karl must have done with the prince. She took the key from his hand and ran out of the inn and across the square to the great dark tower.

She turned the key in the lock and began to climb for the second time that night, but these stairs were higher and steeper than those in Fritz’s lodging. And they were darker, too; and there were bats that flitted through the air; and the wind groaned across the mouths of the mighty bells, and made their ropes swing dismally.

But up and up she climbed, until she came to the lowest of the clock-chambers, where the oldest and simplest part of the mechanism was housed. In the darkness she felt her way around the huge iron cog-wheels, the thick ropes, the
stiff metal figures of St Wolfgang and the devil, but she didn’t find the prince; and so she climbed on. She ran her hands over the Archangel Michael, and in his armour he reminded her of Sir Ironsoul, and she took her hands away quickly. She felt up the side of a figure in a painted robe, and her fingers explored his face until she realized that it was the skull-face of Death, and she took her hands away from him, too.

The higher she climbed, the more noise the clock made: a ticking and a tocking, a clicking and a creaking, a whirring and a rumbling. She clambered over struts and levers and chains and cogwheels, and the further she went, the more she felt as if she, too, were becoming part of the clock; and all the time, she peered into the dark and felt around and listened with all her might.

Finally she clambered up through a trapdoor into the very topmost chamber, and found silver moonlight shining in on such a complexity of mechanical parts that she could make no sense of them at all. At the same moment, she heard a little
song. It was the prince calling to her.

Dazzled by the moonlight, Gretl blinked and rubbed her eyes. And there was Prince Florian, with the very last of his clockwork life, singing like a nightingale.

‘Oh! You poor cold thing! He’s fastened you so tightly I can’t undo the bolts – oh, that was wicked! He was going to leave you here and run away, I’m sure. What’s the matter with you, Prince Florian? I’m sure you’d tell me if you could. I think you’re ill, that’s what the trouble is. I think you need warming up. You’re too cold, but that’s hardly surprising, seeing what they’ve done with you. Never mind! If I can’t get you down, I’ll stay up here with you. I can wrap my cloak around us both, you’ll see. We’re better off up here in any case, if you ask me. The things that have been going on! You’d never believe it! I won’t tell you now, because you wouldn’t go to sleep. I’ll tell you in the morning, I promise. Are you comfortable, Prince Florian? You don’t have to speak if you don’t want to; you can just nod.’

Prince Florian nodded, and Gretl tucked her