At the same time as she was feeling her way down the dark stairs in Fritz’s lodging-house, Karl was going back into the inn. He had taken little Florian up to the clock tower and fastened him to the frame, ignoring the prince’s helpless struggles and his musical requests for mercy. When morning came, there he would be, Karl’s masterpiece, on show as everyone expected. And Karl would receive everyone’s congratulations, and his certificate of competence from Herr Ringelmann, and he’d be entered in the roll of master clockwork-makers; and then he could leave the town and make his way with Sir Ironsoul into the wide world, where power and fortune awaited him!

But when he opened the door of the inn to collect the little knight and hide him in his lodgings, he felt a shiver of fear. He stood on the threshold, afraid and unwilling to enter. And once again he took no notice of Putzi the cat, who jumped down from the windowsill when he saw the door open. There’s no need to be superstitious about cats, but they are our fellow creatures, and we shouldn’t ignore them. It would have been polite of Karl to
offer his knuckles for the old cat to rub his head against, but Karl was wound up too tightly for politeness. So he didn’t see the cat stalking in past his legs.

Finally Karl gathered his courage and went in. How still the room was! And how sinister that little figure under the canvas! And that sword-point: how wickedly sharp! Sharp enough to have pierced the canvas already, and be glinting in the lamplight...

Some coals settled in the stove, sending a little flare of red out on the floor, and making Karl jump nervously. The glow made him think of the fires of hell, and he sweated and mopped his brow.

Then the long-case clock in the corner began to whirr and wheeze, preparing to strike. Karl leapt as if he’d been discovered in the act of murder, and then leant weakly against the table, his heart beating like thunder.

‘Oh, I can’t bear this!’ he said. ‘I’ve done nothing wrong, have I? Then why am I so nervous? What is
there to be frightened of?"

Hearing his words, old Putzi decided that here was someone who might give him a little milk, if he asked nicely; so the cat jumped up on the table beside him, and rubbed himself on Karl’s arm.

Feeling this, Karl turned in shock to see a black cat who had appeared, as it seemed, out of nowhere. Naturally, this was too much for Karl. He leapt away from the table with an exclamation of horror.

‘Oh! What the devil—?’

And then he clapped his hands to his mouth, as if trying to cram the word back inside. But it was too late. In the corner of the room, the metal figure had begun to move. The canvas fell to the floor, and Sir Ironsoul raised his sword even higher, and turned his helmet this way and that until he saw where Karl was cowering.

‘No! No! Stop – wait – the tune – let me whistle the tune—’

But his lips were too dry. Frantic, he licked them with a dry tongue. No use! He couldn’t produce a sound. Nearer and nearer came the little knight
with the sharp sword, and Karl stumbled away, trying to hum, to sing, to whistle, and all he could do was cry and stammer and sob, and the knight came closer and closer.

When Gretl got back to the inn she heard Putzi miaowing inside, and said as she opened the door, ‘How did you get in, you silly cat?’

Putzi shot out into the square as Gretl came in, and wouldn’t stop to be petted. She shut the door and looked around for the prince, but she didn’t see him anywhere. Instead, a horrid sight met her eyes, and made her shiver and clutch her breast. There in the middle of the room stood Sir Ironsoul, with his helmet shining blankly and his sword slanting down. He was holding it like that because the point was in the
Time is running out, like sand in the hourglass, which is another kind of clock, after all. Will Gretl get to the prince in time? She's in time now: she's right inside the clock, at the very heart of time. She'll get there.
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