

*THE THIEF OF
TIME*

*LESLIE GORDON
BARNARD*

*DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE
OCT. 6, 1928*

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Title: The Thief of Time

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Leslie Gordon Barnard (1890-1961)

Date first posted: Dec. 17, 2023

Date last updated: Dec. 17, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20231233

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Thief of Time



By Leslie Gordon Barnard

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Detective Story Magazine

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“‘T HAT clock,” said the little watchmaker suavely, “is not for sale, sir.”
“You have it on display!”

“I beg pardon. It is hanging there waiting for the customer to claim it. Mr. Block is a connoisseur in clocks of all kinds, and is good enough to intrust me with any minor repairs.”

The man on the outside of the counter ran his fingers over the clock possessively. He wore large horn glasses, a fur-lined coat that came well up over his face, and a drooping mustache to which, one or twice, the little watchmaker raised keen eyes. Finally, the would-be buyer sighed.

“It is a very quaint piece.”

“Very.”

“With a history?”

“Undoubtedly. Mr. Block does not bother with any other kind!”

“It would be interesting to know the exact history of this little gilt creation. French, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“May I just examine it?”

“Well——”

But the customer had taken the little clock in his hands. His eyes behind the horn glasses were greedy. He did not tell the little watchmaker that this was not the first time he had handled the clock. The other time was in Mr. Block’s house. Block had several distinguished collectors in for a viewing of his treasures, and Cabal was among them.

“Sell that?” Block had laughed when questioned. “Not if I know it! That clock marked the last hours of the Comte de Soizy, in the French Revolution. He was fond of the clock, and a bit of a wag, and, with a little judicious bribery, he smuggled it in when he went to his final imprisonment. After that, it became a jest with the guards—a bright, brilliant jest—that the clock with its little trumpet note should so gayly mark the coming death of its owner. It is understood there was a scramble for it when the time came, and some jailer spirited it away—so it is preserved to this day. No, gentlemen, I would not part with that.”

The man, Cabal, outside the counter, thought of this now, and a faint smile moved under his mustache.

“Mr. Block must trust you implicitly to let you have this!”

The watchmaker bowed.

“I never let it out of my sight! I fetched it myself this morning, and will return it to-night when the store closes. It is not, certainly, a thing for a message boy!”

Cabal nodded.

Suddenly, he took from his pocket a very ordinary watch.

“Crystal’s broken,” he said. “Wish you’d renew it. How long will it take?”

“Not very long, sir, but——”

“I’ll come back,” agreed Cabal hastily. “What time do you close?”

“Seven sharp.”

“Well, I can make it, I think, by then. If not, to-morrow morning.”

“Very good, sir.”

The watchmaker took a ticket from a drawer, detached one portion to tie to the watch, and handed Cabal the other. Cabal took it, nodded, and started out. Behind him, a silver trumpet sounded thrice. Three o’clock!

Other clocks took up the message of the hour, but for Cabal they did not exist. He was shivering with the beauty and significance of the silver trumpet. It held almost a laughing note: “Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a!” Three times like that—a short note and a long one, and then silence, save for the other chiming clocks which did not matter.

Cabal was back in the days when aristocrats went to the guillotine and this jesting trumpet marked the fading hours for a waggish count. A moment later, he put his hand to his watch pocket as if to check off the time; a little sprinkle of glass threatened his finger; one sliver, piercing it, brought blood.

He stood for a second looking at it, wondering what devilish impulse, what prophetic insight, had made him suddenly break that crystal, and to find out the time the store closed, after which the little watchmaker would be taking back this treasure to the man who would not sell it at any price.

From three to seven is four hours, in which time a man may endure much temptation. Cabal, returning to his boarding place, fought with himself in the streets and then alone in his room. It was typical of him, when he traveled

from home, to choose some obscure but comfortable place like this, where he might preserve his incognito. As Cabal, the famous collector, to permit any publicity as to his movements was to court financial loss. As Cabal, he would have to pay five times the amount that an ordinary humble citizen might get a piece for.

Seated now in his room, he slouched gloomily in a chair, his overcoat, with its shielding collar, still unremoved, his keen eyes clouded by the slightly smoked horn glasses that protected them. Finally he rose, removed the coat and glasses with something approaching impatience, stepped to the mirror, and, by a deft movement, added a final touch in the process which revealed his true identity.

In his hand now was the mustache that had altered his mouth; he stood revealed as a pale and almost insignificant-looking man of about forty, clean shaven, and redeemed from this insignificance only by certain eccentricities of feature that made him easily recognizable as Cabal, the collector.

Many a time he had removed this or similar disguises, rarely without a mellow humor. It was one of the adventurous side lights of his curious profession—a passion for disguises, based on a very sound business sense, and used with discretion now and then in the midst of sufficient public appearances as Cabal, undisguised.

In a notebook, guarded with great secrecy and caution, he kept meticulous record of his little triumphs of this kind. There was that time when, in the guise of a taxi driver, he had walked off from a crowded and famous London auction room with some treasure for a fraction of what it would have cost him as Cabal.

As he went out, he remembered hearing some one say: “It was rumored that Cabal would be here to bid. If he doesn’t want the thing, I reckon it isn’t worth going after much!”

He had chuckled, back in his rooms, in a smoky London side street, that day.

Afterward, he had chuckled still more when people asked: “How did you get that piece, Cabal?” And he had answered: “Bought it for a song for a taxi driver!”

But now, looking at the discarded parts of his present minor disguise, he pushed them a little from him with something approaching aversion. A dark flood was moving in him, whose nature and power he knew. He had struggled with it before, and he knew it as no mean adversary.

Part of his collecting was for speculative purposes—the purchasing of articles that later he could resell to rich but uninitiated gentlemen at a fat profit. Such things did not greatly tempt him, no matter how large the possible profit might be. Money did not allure him. It was the type of treasure that he wanted for himself, for its own sake—something to be added to his small but representative collection—that made every virtue a small thing in the balance.

“No!” said Cabal, now, swinging around as if upon a real adversary.

And then he stopped, listening tensely. As if in answer, from somewhere deep in the house came the echo of a striking clock.

Five already!

The noting of time was a secondary thing. Distance—or was it imagination?—lent to the tinny strike of a cheap boarding-house clock a note not unlike that of the gay trumpet call that had marked the passing of the waggish count. Cabal paled.

For moments he paced the room, as if fleeing from some overtaking enemy; then he flung himself in the chair again and brooded. The slow twilight of the evening crept over the city and into the room, throwing odd shadows upon the furniture and his face. Had there been any witnesses, they might have fancied that the shadow was the promise of evil, and the power of evil, and that gradually it grew upon him, until the face, like the room, had lost its brightness and was cast only in shadow.

Deep in the house rang the tinny notes of the boarding-house clock again, transmuted now more fully than ever into a jesting trumpet call:

“Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a!”

Cabal was sunk deep in a smoldering atmosphere of history! The old impertinent France that went down in blood; the gay, autocratic France that, harkening to no warning, heard at last the imperious call of another autocrat, whose last kiss was that of the guillotine. He stood in fancy where the place of execution whirled with its mad pageant.

He watched the human mass give way, willingly enough, for the tumbril that passed, in which Cabal could see a gay young aristocrat placing his fingers waggishly to his lips, saluting the coarsened women of the *sans-culotterie* who cried for his death and followed him with wishes for his speedy end. For Cabal, the scene was very real; he could see the movement of the tumbril, the regular fall of the guillotine, the counting of the heads, the

bravado of the count as he stepped to take his place—the final fall of the knife.

“Ha—h-a-a!”

One long-drawn note!

Cabal started up. The clock downstairs had spoken again with peculiar timeliness. For a moment, it was this odd coincidence—of its striking with his thinking—that appealed to him with grim humor; then he remembered.

It was half past six.

At seven the little watchmaker would leave the store with the parcel under his arm.

Cabal resumed his mild disguise, and went out into the streets. It was about the time, he told himself, that, in the ordinary course, he would eat his evening meal. There were no facilities at the house, and he liked each day to choose his restaurants according to the whim and appetite of the moment. There was a rather good place two blocks down and one along; he would turn his steps that way, he decided, order an epicurean repast, and lose his momentary madness in the joys of a less dangerous appetite.

But when he had gone the two blocks, he made no turn; he went right on, with scarcely a moment of respectable hesitation. Three blocks straight down, and he would be within a few seconds' striking distance of the watchmaker's. Would it not be, after all, better to face up to his temptation in the fullest degree, and win out?

He would go down, watch the little man leave his shop with the treasure, and then, like an honest man, shrug his shoulders and go his way. Some day, if he didn't face up to his temptation for acquisition of rare bits, he might do something desperate. If he turned aside now, there would always linger in him a wonder what he would have done had he really followed the watchmaker with this souvenir of a waggish count!

So Cabal reflected on the surface of his mind; and beneath these obvious shallows ran the deep current of his passion.

There seemed to be a brooding mystery about the streets and a sense of sinister suggestion, as if the shadows that had crept upon the city, into the room, and across his face, still held a lurking evil. Cabal began to see in his fellow men a reflection of himself. The open honesty of the most kindly face that passed him, as he hurried on, became a mask for some distorting greed.

He had no doubt that even the watchmaker, with his ingenuous, simple countenance, had his dark places; that Block, the owner of the treasure, had his; that they were, therefore, all on a plane. Granted the same opportunity they would do—what?

The hurrying of his steps alarmed him now. The shallowness of his excuses was revealed. This was a mission quite different from a high desire to face and triumph over temptation. Even his footsteps seemed to have acquired a furtiveness; he had a fancy that passers-by—of whom there were fortunately few now at the hour of the evening meal—glanced at him half suspiciously. Somewhere, a clock in a tower tolled the hour of seven.

Cabal halted his steps a little. He was within a few yards of his objective. The lights in the watchmaker's store were still on; he slunk into the deep shadow of a doorway, and waited for what seemed to him an eternity. Something was delaying the watchmaker. Perhaps it was a providence to tire out Cabal and turn him from a sinister satisfaction in the darkness of this side street.

Half past seven struck. Still he waited. Then, suddenly, the lights in the store went out, leaving only a single glow in the rear, for police purposes. Against this faint light, Cabal could see the watchmaker taking a last look about; then the door opened, closed, and locked; a patch of radiance from the shop next door fell full on the figure of a diminutive man with a parcel under his arm. Then the intervening gloom swallowed him.

Cabal, his heart beating in an agony of excitement, let him get a few paces ahead, then stealthily crossed the street and trailed cautiously behind.

This cat-and-mouse progress did more than anything to restore sense in the collector. What wild desire had turned him into something devilishly like a footpad creeping up on a victim? The thing was preposterous. He had known of men in his line who did unlawful things to satisfy their acquisitive passion, but usually through hired tools or by devious and clever ways. This was ridiculous.

Only madmen or desperate bandits went about waylaying people in the open street! Why, already they were coming upon more crowded ways. And the lighting was better; it showed very clearly the little man with his parcel, just ahead. A mirror in the window of a lighted store revealed to Cabal—himself, a furtive figure with horn glasses and concealing mustache.

His blood turned to water, and then the water to some potent wine. If he really wanted that clock, he could have it, and with real safety! Nobody would be hurt, except the feelings of the watchmaker and of Block, and in

some way he'd find a method of reimbursing them—a roundabout way, so that there would be some honesty in his act. Shallow thinking again! A salve to a shaky conscience!

Conscience didn't matter much when you got as close as this and saw how utterly easy it was! That little fellow ahead was unsuspecting; the parcel nestled under his arm. There was a dark lane just beyond. And the people around would even help the case!

He must hurry now, before the little fellow passed that lane. How he wished he wasn't so shaky in the limbs! He couldn't nerve himself! Yes, he could, by giving full thought to the clock; not to the man ahead—just to this amazing little treasure. Four paces! A rough shouldering of the little man! A cautious, fearful snatching! An outcry!

He had it!

Cabal had it, and was down the lane like a flash.

“Help! Thieves! Bandits!”

Cries like that reached him; the sound of people running; the shrilling of a whistle.

His hands, holding the little parcel, almost dropped it. It seemed a mad nightmare to think that he, Cabal, had done this thing. He had committed an act of outlawry. If they caught him, he was done for—with a long stretch in the penitentiary ahead of him. Cutting across that horror was a desperate sense of triumph. He had his clock! He'd taken unlawful means, but he'd try and repay if he could, in some roundabout way.

He thrust the clock into a capacious and concealing pocket in his loose-skirted coat.

It had taken only a second or two for these mental flashes, and this concealing act, when he heard a cry: “Down the lane there! He ran that way!” and another voice: “A man with glasses and a dark mustache!”

Cabal smiled. The thing had worked. Quick as a flash, he had off the disguising mustache; it was tossed over a fence; the glasses followed. The collar of his coat he turned down, thanking the fates that his coat was nondescript. It'd never give him away. The hue and cry was on now; people were running down the lane; Cabal, in the darkness of a gateway, watched them and presently became one of them!

He discovered that already his conscience had ceased largely to trouble him, now that the danger was past. He had done the thing, and got away with

it. In a few moments, they were out the other end of the lane and into a well-lighted street: a group of excited citizens, a second police officer—the first was still scouring the lane—and himself secure under the stares even of the frightened, stupefied little watchmaker and these others who still shouted his description.

“Which way did he go?” asked Cabal breathlessly.

Nobody knew.

“Dark man with mustache and glasses!” offered some one again. “I’d know him like a shot!”

“So should I!” said Cabal in quick, bold agreement. “He must be hiding up the lane somewhere.”

His eyes went to the little watchmaker, in whose face agony was working.

“My clock!” said the little fellow. “He’s got to be found, officer! It’s a priceless thing.”

Cabal’s breath came short. That priceless thing was his, lying in his pocket right now, in a coat whose voluminous skirts were a sure refuge.

“Description?” asked the officer bluntly, taking out a notebook. “Now just what was this clock like?”

The watchmaker gave it; Cabal approved the thoroughness of the description, and there was renewed in him the awful joy of acquisition. He could regard, almost without pity, the tragic face of this little fellow parading his agonizing loss.

“When it strikes, officer, it’s like a trumpet: one long and one short—a lovely thing like a trumpet it is, officer!”

The policeman licked his stubby pencil and wrote diligently. The crowd now showed signs of dispersing. Another episode in the life of a city had taken place, and was over. In a moment Cabal, quite casually, would drift off also.

The officer drew out a big watch and consulted it with a frown. “Two minutes to eight!” he said, and made a note of that.

“Just eight!” corrected somebody. “There goes the hour now.”

“Tower’s always a bit fast,” said the officer resentfully. “Two to eight, I make it.”

Cabal lifted his head. There was something wrong here, some hitch, and the intoxication of his adventure had left him stupid. Some obvious thing, but he couldn't get his finger on it! So he stood there until the last stroke of eight sounded from the tower. And then, suddenly, he stiffened. His legs itched to run, but he was paralyzed. In a second, it came:

“Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a!”

Like a silly fool, he stood clutching at his pocket as if to silence the telltale voice that had marked the passing of a gay, waggish count, and that marked now Cabal's ruin.

“Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a! Ha—h-a-a!”

Fool! Fool! Why didn't he run?

A mockery of trumpets that had marked, in bygone days, the vengeance of an outraged populace!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Thief of Time* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]