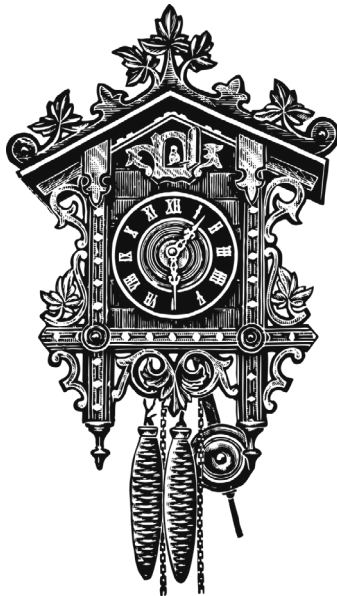


THE CLOCKWORK STUDY

PART I

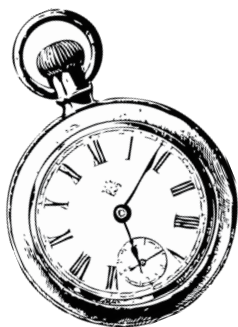


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No one liked Theodore Readfuss. If even one man in Whitstead found him the slightest bit amicable, he would be passed off for a drunk or a liar. Was it because Theodore Readfuss was a horrid wretch? Absolutely not. Did he go out of his way to offend others? Never.

He was simply peculiar.

Theodore Readfuss never left his land. He'd talk to himself in his hall of clocks or wander the fields while staring at the ground. The Readfuss Grange was a beautiful estate, but a grim, dark, eerie feeling floated through the rooms of the house and hung above the farm. No one dared to get too close, fearing they may never come home.

Alas, those were only rumours. Because of them, no one tried to extend a warm hand to find the truth. The Readfuss family grew ostracized from the rest of Whitstead.

This misconception made life difficult for Theodore's twin sons: Terrence and Thaddeus. A mischievous pair. With their mother disappearing (presumed dead) when they were toddlers and their father's oddities, the boys were left to their own devices—until their maid decided to raise them right.

Miss Willow was a beautiful woman despite the wrinkles beneath her eyes and the scars covering her flesh. She tended to Theodore Readfuss since he was a child and chose to do the same for his sons. She vowed not to let the same mistakes fall upon the Readfuss twins as it did to Theodore. Theodore Readfuss was a lost cause, but not his boys.

However, Theodore Readfuss did something that perplexed his family and all of Whitstead.

It was a brisk Christmas Eve morning in 1844, and the Readfuss family gathered around their long walnut table enjoying a bountiful breakfast. The twins sat across from each other, slurping up porridge and scarfing down eggs. Theodore poked at his meal with his knife, staring at the oil paintings hanging on the wall. His dark eyes were fixated as they scrutinized every little detail.

And he never blinked.

That quirk was the final straw that caused the villagers of Whitstead to

avoid him like the plague. While the Readfuss twins agree that their father's condition was unsettling, they never understood why it would cause such division between their family and the village. They thought nothing of it until their father traveled into the village to speak with Reverend Hollybrook about his wife's memorial service many Christmases ago. It only took one passerby to notice his oddities and the rumours grew like a weed.

The mindset of the village made Theodore bitter and angry. He holed himself up in the grim Readfuss Grange and ordered his sons to do the same. Only six times out of the year did the Readfusses leave their home and Christmastide was never one of them.

Theodore let out a deep breath, causing his sons to stop and look at their father. 'Terrence, Thaddeus, I have been pondering something,' Theodore began. His voice was deep and throaty. 'It's around this time your mother left many years ago. I know I have not been the best father during Christmastide, nor a joyful one at that, and I hope to make it up to you.' Laying his knife down, he coughed once then continued, 'While I don't prefer you boys leaving the house, I've decided to make a change this season.'

The boys' eyes sparkled. 'What change, father?' Terrence, the stockier of the twins, asked.

'I know the past years have been difficult for you,' their father sighed. 'I've been debating this for some time and my mind is made up.' His unblinking eyes met his sons'. 'This year, I shall allow you to attend the Whitstead Christmas gathering and,' he paused and clasped his hands together, 'we shall host our own event here at Readfuss Grange to celebrate the New Year.'

Stunned, the boys sat in silence. Even Willow the maid stood quietly in the doorway.

'Father, are you sick?' Thaddeus asked slowly. 'Did something happen to make you decide?'

A grin spread across Theodore's face. 'Of course not, son. This didn't happen overnight.' He slowly stood to his feet. 'You boys must enjoy your Christmas out of this house. While I won't go, I want you to have a pleasant time.' He walked around the table and clasped a hand on each son's shoulder. 'While you're out,' he whispered, 'you must select the perfect guests for our Readfuss Party, you hear?'

The boys nodded quickly. Theodore patted them on the backs and left the room, not even touching his breakfast.

The twins turned and looked at each other. ‘Terrence, do you think Father really had a change of heart?’ Thaddeus asked. While the two boys were twins, Thaddeus was slimmer, timid, and always desired Terrence to take the lead.

The other boy shook his head. ‘I’m not sure,’ Terrence confessed. ‘We know he’s been acting stranger than usual, spending time in the Clockwork Study again. Maybe he’s been doin’ some thinking.’

The Clockwork Study was a vast room hidden in the center of Readfuss Grange that housed their mother’s clock collection. Grandfathers’, pocket watches, wall clocks, cuckoos, and every type in between. Theodore would often sit and stare unblinking as he pondered life. The boys assumed it was a way he mourned their mother.

Thaddeus shrugged. ‘I hope so. This seems too good to be true.’

Willow stalked across the room with an empty platter in her wrinkled hands. ‘Too good or not, take advantage of this day!’ she put in cheerily. ‘I haven’t gotten to adorn the Grange for a party in a long while.’ She bent over and whispered into their ears. ‘Besides, I’ll keep an eye on your father.’

The boys grinned from ear to ear. ‘Thank you, Willow,’ Terrence said sincerely then turned to his brother. ‘Shall we enjoy the festivities early?’

Thaddeus nodded vigorously. ‘Yes! Let’s go!’

The two took a few last bites of their meals and ran for their coats and boots.

As Thaddeus threw on his red scarf, he heard a strange thump and a yelp from the Clockwork Study. He jumped up and ran to see what it was. He almost reached the door when his father stepped through and stopped him.

Theodore’s stare was cold. ‘No need to worry, Son. I have it under control,’ he whispered in a drone.

A shiver ran down Thaddeus’ spine. ‘S-sorry, Father,’ he stammered.

Without closing his eyes or blinking, Theodore shook his head and spoke again. This time his voice was lively. ‘Make sure some villagers join us for our event! It is going to be a grand one.’ Saying nothing else, he slipped through the door of the Clockwork Study and shut it tight.

Thaddeus shook off his uncomfortable feeling and scurried back to meet Terrence.

‘Everythin’ all right?’ Terrence asked as he tightened his own black scarf.

Thaddeus shrugged. ‘Father is acting strange again.’

Terrence scoffed. ‘I’ve heard that one before. Forget him for now, let’s go into the village!’ With a skip in their step, the boys ran out the door and headed towards the village of Whitstead.

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Theodore heard the slam of the front door and let out a long breath. He strode across the room and picked up the cuckoo clock that landed on his foot moments before. ‘A few more nights of this,’ he mumbled as he changed the time. ‘A few more, then I will fulfill my promise.’ He hung the clock back upon its nail. The wall was completely covered by clocks once again. ‘Soon, I will be free,’ he whispered with hope.

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The Readfuss twins marched through the snowy streets of Whitstead, looking around with wide (blinking) eyes. The villagers of Whitstead cheerily went to and fro, preparing for the glorious night.

‘We have several hours before the celebration at Whitmore Park begins,’ Terrence said as he crunched the snow beneath his boots. ‘Should we seek out Father’s guests?’

Thaddeus shuddered, although he didn’t know why. ‘I suppose so,’ he said slowly.

Terrence ignored his brother’s discomfort and led him through the streets. The two fair-haired boys approached several villagers who seemed friendly.

However, once they heard the name ‘Readfuss’ they shook their heads, scoffed, or simply turned away.

The boys’ hopeful hearts started to sink with the setting sun. No one seemed interested in their father’s New Years celebration. No one cared that Theodore Readfuss seemingly desired to extend a warm hand. They still didn’t trust him.

For what reason? The boys didn’t know.

‘Don’t worry, Thaddeus,’ Terrence comforted. ‘There are several days left until the New Year.’

‘I suppose.’ Thaddeus pulled his jacket tighter. ‘Maybe their hearts will change tonight.’

Terrence nodded. ‘Now, let’s stop bothering folks. Time to have the fun!’

Whitmore Park was overrun with giddy villagers overflowing with Christmas spirit. There were the Roebucks, the Westons, the Cobbetts, and almost the rest of Whitstead. The Readfuss Twins were in awe at the joyful singing,

the delicious delicacies, and the happiness and love that floated through the air. Thaddeus and Terrence wanted to bottle up that feeling and unleash it in their grim home. They spent the evening laughing, playing, and intermingling with the other children.

They hid the name of Readfuss just for one night.

It was almost midnight and Thaddeus wrapped his cold fingers around his third cup of hot chocolate. The delicious aroma filled his nostrils. Its warmth and sweetness unlocked a memory of his mother that was tucked away for years:

‘Mama!’ Little Thaddens called as he waddled across the polished floors of Readfuss Grange. ‘Where go, Mama?’

Mother slipped through the door to the Clockwork Study.

Tears filled Little Thaddens’ eyes. ‘Mama,’ he whined. As he reached for the door, he fell on his knees. He didn’t cry. Not yet. He scooted along the ground and peered into the study.

Mother stood in the center of the hall, staring at the wall of clocks. She didn’t move.

Little Thaddens sniffled. ‘Mama?’

Mechanically, Mother took a small pocket watch off the wall, stuffed it in her overcoat, and turned to leave out the side door. Before going, she looked at Thaddeus who sat in the hallway.

Tears dripped down Mother’s unblinking eyes.

‘Thaddeus!’ Terrence called.

Thaddeus gasped as if he’d forgotten to breathe. The hot chocolate sloshed in the cup, dampening his mittens. He shook out his hands and apologized, ‘Sorry, brother. I remembered something.’

Terrence cocked his head to the side. ‘About what?’

Thaddeus swallowed the lump in his throat. ‘Mother,’ he whispered. ‘The day she disappeared.’

Terrence was silent. After a moment, he said, ‘Maybe God let you remember for a reason. Maybe we’re supposed to pray for her during the service tonight.’

Nodding, Thaddeus took a final sip of whatever was left of his hot chocolate. His mind didn’t think about the rich sweetness, but only about the cold sorrow of his mother leaving.

Terrence patted his twin on the back, and they departed for the midnight Christmas service.

~~~

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Theodore Readfuss sat in the middle of the row of chairs he aligned, facing his wall of clocks. His unblinking gaze watched the largest one in the center. He felt time was going too slowly. It reminded him of that Christmas Eve years ago.

The night his wife disappeared.

Theodore's heart ached. He knew it had to happen. That was the nature of the Readfuss family, but that was the issue.

It was supposed to be Theodore.

Cupping his forehead, Theodore let out a long shaky breath. His eyes burned, but he could do nothing to fix the discomfort. His mind was warped like a reflection in the lake. He knew why people didn't like him. Certain villagers of Whitstead knew what the Readfuss family was capable of. Theodore wanted nothing more than to dispute the lies. To dispute the rumours.

He was ready to end it.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Theodore sat up straight, watching the clock earnestly. Without averting his gaze, he raised the glass of wine in his right hand.

The clocks struck midnight.

As the different chimes, cuckoos, and tings filled the room, Theodore gulped down his red wine then proceeded to drink straight from the bottle.

*One more week, his groggy mind thought. One more week, darling. Then, our family will be free.*

~~~

Thaddeus and Terrence pulled their jackets tighter as they marched down the dark streets to return home. They were cold and sleepy, but there was still a long way to go. The brisk air nipped their skin and the full moon shone down upon them.

Through chattering teeth, Thaddeus asked, 'T-T-Terrence, may we stop somewhere f-f-for the n-n-night?'

Rubbing his shoulders, Terrence replied, 'Where would we stay? No one will take in a Readfuss on Christmas Eve. We must keep going.'

Thaddeus shivered and tried to regain feeling in his hands. His mittens that were wet from his spillage started to frost over. He felt his fingers going numb. 'Brother, p-p-please,' he begged. 'At least let us stop to w-w-warm up.'

Terrence let out a long sigh. They stopped in the middle of the High Road and looked around. To the right, he spotted a flame in the center of the snowy field. It was halfway to Readfuss Grange.

‘We can cut through and stop there,’ he suggested.

Thaddeus nodded and the boys ran through the snow. Their tired legs wanted to give up, but they refused. They wanted to get home.

The twins approached the homes of the less fortunate of Whitstead. Outside these modest structures were a few villagers gathered around a fire. Despite their poverty and the frigid weather, they seemed content.

An elderly man in rags saw the boys approaching and stood up. His grey bushy eyebrows furrowed, and he called, ‘Ay! What brings you boys out this way?’

‘We don’t mean to bother you,’ Terrence replied.

‘May we warm ourselves by your fire?’ Thaddeus pleaded as he rubbed his frozen fingers together.

The elderly man looked at the others who nodded. ‘Of course, lads. It’s Christmas Eve.’

Thanking him, the twins ran to the warmth. They held their hands so close the flames tickled their palms. The Readfuss boys were so cold, the fire didn’t hurt.

‘Where is your home?’ the elderly man asked. ‘It’s quite late.’

The two looked at each other, waiting for one to speak.

Terrence took the lead. ‘We live at Readfuss Grange.’

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the poor villagers. All eyes went to the boys.

‘Awfully brave of ya,’ the elderly man said. ‘The trek from the church to the Grange is quite far.’

The twins were surprised at his reply. He didn’t bash their father or apologize for their ancestry.

‘We didn’t mind,’ Thaddeus told him. ‘Our father wanted us to enjoy the Christmas festivities.’

‘He wants to bring joy back to the Grange,’ Terrence put in. ‘He even is hosting a celebration for the New Year for some villagers of Whitstead, but...’ he trailed off.

Thaddeus sighed and whispered, ‘No one wants to join us.’

The villagers around the fire mumbled to each other. Some were amazed

that a party was even a thought that crossed Theodore Readfuss' mind. Others did not blame those who turned down the boys' invitation.

Leaning forward, the elderly man met the gaze of the twins who blinked several times. He chuckled. 'No need to prove anythin' to me. So, your pa is a bit peculiar. Is that why no one will come?'

They nodded simultaneously. 'Our father is not a bad man,' Terrence explained. 'No one realises how he suffers from losing our mother.'

'Not to mention how the villagers treat us,' Thaddeus grumbled.

The elderly man sniffed and rose to his feet with a grunt. 'Well, boys, I'll tell you somethin'.' He limped over to them. His wrinkled face glowed in the firelight. 'Not everyone will understand your pain. Just like no one will understand ours,' he gestured to the others around him. 'But it's how you endure pain that will make people think differently.' He patted the boys on the back. 'Those who turned you away have hardened hearts. But keep searching. There are folks whose hearts are willing to give others a chance.' He grinned. 'You two are fine young boys. I'm sure some folks would want to spend a lovely evening with you both.'

Smiles formed on the twins' faces. Never had villagers of Whitstead felt for the Readfusses. Never had they seen such joy in suffering. Never had they wanted something so much.

The two desired the peace of the poor folk.

'Thank you, sir,' Thaddeus said genuinely.

Terrence nodded. 'You've shown us kindness even though we are Readfusses.' He looked at the others gathered around. 'Would you like to join us for a bountiful feast to celebrate the New Year?'

The poor folk looked at each other in surprise. Delicious food and warm comfort sounded too good to be true.

'We mean it!' Thaddeus exclaimed. 'You've been very kind to us. Let us be kind to you.'

The elderly man grinned. 'We thank you for your invitation.' He looked around for approval. 'And we accept.'

~~~

Theodore Readfuss awoke the next morning with a foggy mind. He was laying across the floor of the Clockwork Study. Two empty wine bottles stood beside his head. With a groan, he shakily stood to his feet.

'Theodore!' Willow the maid called. She rapped on the door but let herself

in before receiving permission. She saw Theodore sprawled across the wood floor but did not falter. She was used to the sight, unfortunately. 'It is Christmas Day,' she whispered. 'I've made a bountiful breakfast for you and the boys. Are ya hungry?'

Belching, Theodore leaned against a chair for support. 'I suppose, Willow,' he slurred. He staggered out of his study and to the kitchen.

Terrence and Thaddeus were seated at the table already enjoying their delicious meal. Theodore plopped into his seat and waited for Willow to pour him a glass of water.

Terrence swallowed his bread. 'Merry Christmas, Father,' he said slowly as if he was afraid to offend him.

Theodore managed a smile. 'Merry Christmas, my boys.' He ruffled his hair and wiped his dry eyes. 'How were the festivities last night?'

The twins' faces lit up as they explained their joyful adventure.

Theodore did his best to show enthusiasm, but he was still groggy and his mind was tangled. That would be fixed soon. 'I'm pleased to hear that,' he said as they finished. 'And were you able to find guests for our party?'

The two nodded. 'We made new friends,' Thaddeus explained. 'They let us warm ourselves by their fire last night.'

'They are a little different, just like us,' Terrence put in.

Theodore managed a smile. 'Different is perfect.' He sipped his warm coffee, thinking about the celebration and the New Year.

Thinking how he would be free at the start of 1845.

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It was the eve of the New Year. For the first time in years, a celebration at Readfuss Grange was about to begin.

Terrence and Thaddeus were overjoyed as they dressed their best and combed their unruly hair.

Willow rushed about the kitchen, preparing delicious dishes for their guests.

Theodore stood in the study, adjusting gears on another clock. Once it was set, he placed it back upon the wall.

Everything was ready.

A loud knocking on the door echoed through Readfuss Grange. The twins flew down the stairs to answer it.

Standing behind was the elderly man from the poor houses and a few other

kind faces. They wore the nicest clothing their humble earnings could buy.

‘Welcome to Readfuss Grange!’ the boys exclaimed in unison.

The guests exchanged greetings with the twins as they wandered into the house. Their eyes were wide with curiosity and bewilderment at the beautiful interior. For the first time, warmth and love battled the grim atmosphere.

Theodore stepped out of his study and into the foyer to greet the guests. A few stopped chattering and stared as if they waited for him to do something.

They waited for him to blink.

Even though he didn’t, he left no time for them to worry about his quirk. ‘Welcome, friends!’ he exclaimed with open arms. ‘My name is Theodore Readfuss, if you did not know. I tasked my boys with finding lovely guests to celebrate with us and I say, he chose well.’ A smile painted Theodore’s face and he radiated friendliness.

The guests forgot all about how everyone in Whitstead disliked Theodore and thanked him for the invitation and his hospitality. Theodore nodded and led them through to where Willow had prepared a lovely meal. Meats, cheeses, breads, potatoes, vegetables, and more covered the long dinner table.

The guests drooled over the food before them. While the village was generous to the less fortunate on Christmas, the poor folk never expected to be fed by generosity twice in a month. Theodore led them in a blessing, then they began.

The guests did their best to eat slowly and politely, but they could not help themselves. Willow was an excellent cook and their portions were generous. They swallowed every last bite. Throughout the meal, Theodore was friendly with the guests and started pleasant conversations. Never once did anyone point out his oddities or treat him as an outcast.

For the first time in a while, the Readfusses were simply human.

The twins were overwhelmed with joy.

After everyone had their fill of dinner and dessert, Theodore stood and addressed his guests: ‘My dear villagers of Whitstead. I thank you for joining us this evening to celebrate not only the lingering joy of Christmas but also the start of a New Year. I could not be more grateful that you gave our family a second chance despite the hurtful rumors spread. I thank you for that. Henceforth, I promise to keep an open home to kind folk like you.’

Acclaims filled the dining hall as Theodore finished.

‘Now, I would like to show you one more thing before our celebration

ends,' he added, stepping out from behind the table. 'If you are finished, come with me. As a new start, I would like to give you something as we go into the New Year.'

All the guests rose and followed him out of the hall.

He led them to the Clockwork Study.

Theodore stood outside the door as the guests filed in. The twins were about to follow when their father stood in the way. 'Not yet, boys,' he whispered. 'Wait here until after I present them my collection. When the clocks chime midnight, then you may come in.'

The boys were about to protest, but Theodore shot them a look. His unblinking gaze was cold and serious. The twins nodded and backed away as their father shut the door behind him.

Terrence and Thaddeus sat on the floor. Patiently, they listened to the mumblings of their father speaking. The two wondered what he was talking about, but assumed he was describing each clock in detail. He often did that in a monotonous drone that would put anyone to sleep.

Time passed and it was a few moments before midnight.

'It's almost the New Year, Thaddeus,' Terrence whispered as he lay on the hardwood floor.

'Another year without Mother,' Thaddeus mumbled.

Terrence sighed. 'It is true, but at least Father is promising to be better.'

'But don't you find any of this strange?' Thaddeus cried. 'I know he's odd, but he's been even more so since Christmas Eve Day.'

Terrence shrugged. 'Christmas Eve has always been hard on him, but perhaps he's trying to get better. Let him prove himself. He may be giving another apology speech. Although I don't know why he needs to,' he added under his breath.

Thaddeus chewed on Terrence's quiet comment. 'You're right, though,' he whispered. 'The Readfuss Family has never done anything wrong. Father may be odd, but he never hurt anyone.' His mind flashed back to his memory of Mother. The tears streaming down her unblinking eyes, the pocket watch in her grip. He shook off the thought. *Mother leaving was never Father's fault*, he told himself.

Even though he never knew the truth.

Chimes, cuckoos, and tings resounded from the clockwork study. It was midnight.

The start to a New Year.

The Readfuss boys rose to their feet. They were about to approach the door when it slowly opened on its own.

Theodore slipped out into the hallway, barely closing the door behind him. His face radiated with joy and he let out a low chuckle. 'It's the New Year,' he whispered. His gaze met his sons' and they stared for a while.

Then, Theodore blinked.

Startled, the boys jumped back. Theodore laughed and said softly, 'My boys, it's okay.' He extended his arms. 'I am better now. Things are going to change.' Tears of joy streamed down his face. 'I promise to never withhold you from anything again.'

The twins were amazed. They did not know what happened, but they didn't care. They embraced their father who blinked repeatedly to get the tears out of his burning eyes.

Terrence clutched his father tightly. 'I wish Mother was here,' he choked.

Theodore rubbed his sons' heads. 'Me too, boys. Me too.'

Thaddeus quietly rested in his father's embrace. He turned his head to peer into the Clockwork Study.

To his shock, the wall that was covered in clocks was now barren. Out of all the guests that entered, only the elderly man remained.

He stood in the center of the room. In his frail hands, he clutched a small clock with an *O* and *X* painted on its face. His expression was blank. 'Do not harden your heart; be joyful,' he whispered in a monotonous tone. 'We will be fine. You are free. All will be well.' The corner of the old man's mouth twitched upward.

But he never blinked.

THE CLOCKWORK STUDY
PART II
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