

*Old Ed Turner was overjoyed to get that night watchman's job.  
But he did not know that one night he'd have to set . . . .*

# Twenty Clocks for Death

*By Cyril Plunkett*

ED said: "Listen, Elise, even if I am an old duffer, we're going to dance."

"But a whole dollar!" breathed his daughter.

"Haven't we been grubbing for weeks?" Ed asked sternly. "Wouldn't you rather dance than eat? Say, what are we arguing about? You and your dad are going to the Silver Slipper and dance!"

So they went to the Silver Slipper, and if Elise's dress wasn't new, her face was alive, her eyes sparkled. Ed thought: I've got to find a job. I've got to give her her chance. Clothes and dates and things. He didn't much care for himself. A fellow could put a crease in his pants and black up his shoes and pass. But girls . . . .

They met Charlie Garth.

In a place like the Silver Slipper it didn't matter whether people were introduced or not. Charlie Garth came up and said: "Hello, sister. You'll break my heart if you don't give me the next."

Elise looked at Ed, and Ed grinned and nodded. Charlie was young, well dressed, and constantly flashing a smile; he looked all right. A little before midnight he volunteered to drive them home. By that time he knew everything about them: that Ed's wife was dead, that they lived alone and practically everybody knew them in the neighborhood; that Ed had been a bank janitor until the bank swung a merger and closed its doors.

"Won't you come in?" Elise asked timidly. And Ed told him to come back

again, any time.

He came the next Sunday, early, and with a package. Steaks, bread, a half pound of butter, a whole pie.

"That's one way of inviting myself for supper."

"Do it like this and you can come three times a day," Ed grinned.

"We got to find you a job," Charlie went on. "I've been talking to my friends."

That dollar had been wisely spent, Ed told himself. Elise was flushed and happy, too. She admitted, after Charlie had gone, that she liked him. She had a date with him for Wednesday night to go to a show, and she said: "Ed, we've had so much bad luck, it's bound to be good now."

"He's smooth, all right," Ed agreed. "Pretty smooth . . . ."

A messenger came early Tuesday morning. Charlie Garth had sent him. Charlie had heard that the night watchman at the Morgan Company had just had an accident. If Ed got down there right away he might get the job. It was a hot tip, and Ed dressed like mad and ran every step to the car line.

"Some fool crowded him off the road," the man in the office swore. "Smashed the car and broke his leg. Job's only temporary, of course."

"I got very good recommendations, Mr. Swayne," Ed said eagerly.

Mr. Swayne phoned a few responsible people and learned Edward Turner was trustworthy and ambitious. Mr. Swayne cleared his throat, then: "Okay, Turner,

come in at five.”

So Ed had a job, and the dollar spent for pleasure was piling up enormous dividends. It was things like that that made life interesting, he told Elise. If they hadn’t danced they wouldn’t have met Charlie Garth, and if they hadn’t met Charlie— He observed that Elise flushed.

“You like him plenty, don’t you?” Ed finished softly.

“I—I think I’m beginning to,” Elise nodded.

That night Charlie and Elise drove past the Morgan Company building. They sounded the horn, and Ed came out and stood by the front door and talked a few minutes.

“Couldn’t we all go down to the corner for beer?” Charlie asked. “We ought to celebrate.”

“Thanks, but I can’t risk it,” Ed said. “They import silks, and this is a responsible job.”

“Then if I want to see you any more, Mohammed must come to the mountain,” Charlie grinned. “I’ll drop around and chin some evening.”

It was nice having Charlie drop in. Nights dragged at first, anyway, even though there were clocks to punch every hour. It took about thirty minutes to punch the clocks, and then there was thirty minutes to wait in between. Ed explained the clocks, twenty of them. They were something new, he guessed; hooked up with the precinct station, like a bank. In case one of them was missed, the cops were automatically signaled, and would come right around to investigate. With a few hundred thousand in silks involved, that was a pretty wise plan.

Yes, it was nice knowing Charlie, who brought hamburgers and hot dogs and coffee. Who took Elise around and assured one that life could be kind.

TWO weeks to the night he began work, Ed heard the horn later than usual. They had a signal, three short blasts, and then Charlie would park his car around the corner so Ed wouldn’t get in trouble, and come back on foot. He went down to the gate, unlocked it, and saw Charlie coming up the street. There were two big trucks lumbering toward them a block away.

Charlie slipped quickly through the open gate. “Turn around,” he snarled then, and his hand held something black and ugly. “Stick up your hands.”

Ed’s mind whirled. “Hey—” he cried.

“Shut up! Keep your hands high and swing the gates. If you let a peep out of you it’s six slugs in your belly.”

“But—Charlie, you—!”

“Charlie!” Garth sneered. “I’m not Charlie Garth, punk. Pull those gates, damn you!”

Ed pulled the gates, dazed. The trucks swerved and rolled through, motors soft. Their drivers steered them on around to the loading platform. Men leaped to the ground, closed the gates. And Ed marched, mentally paralyzed, to the office, the gun still in his ribs.

He saw it all presently, despairingly. Just gullible, Elise and he. Sure, Charlie had known the night watchman had been in an accident. It was obvious now that he or his men had caused that accident as part of their plan. And it had worked.

“Tie his hands in front of him,” Charlie snapped. “There’s twenty clocks to be punched in the next thirty minutes, and twenty more an hour later. This monkey’s going to punch them. I’ll see to that.

“You guys start loading. Don’t worry; we’re safe, plenty safe.”

He grinned at Ed. “It only needed brains, mug. We’ll start punching those clocks.”

“And what if I won’t?” Ed whispered.

“You know better.”

Yes, Ed thought grimly, he knew better—better than to think he’d get out of this with his life. He alone could identify thieves and cars. Once he punched those clocks, once the trucks were loaded with silks, *he would be murdered.*

The panic, the fear, the certainty of this, was exquisite torture. Twenty clocks to death—and not a chance to skip just one. Charlie was counting. Six on one floor—right. Seven on the next—right. Charlie knew, and Charlie was always behind him in the darkness, listening for the turn of the key, the click of connections.

The minutes raced now, infinitely precious, and Ed Turner’s heart quickened, too, crazily, terrifyingly. He didn’t dare die. He didn’t dare let Elise alone and poor and wretched. He didn’t dare let this rat trick him.

“Six more,” Charlie snarled. “Keep going, Turner.”

Five more. Then four. He prayed, stalled, stumbled. Three . . . .

A siren screamed. Rapidly it came nearer. There were pounding footsteps on the stairs, and a cry: “Boss, the cops!” Then a shot. A fusillade.

Ed whirled and dived. His wrists were tied, but he could use his fingers. He caught Charlie’s gun as it blazed, felt its breath scorch his face a second time. He heard Charlie Garth shrieking curses; and then they fell, rolling over and over, straining, fighting. The sirens were a mad delight; men were shouting, glass breaking . . . .

Ed grinned uncertainly up at Elise from his hospital bed. “You didn’t care too much for him, did you, kid?”

“Care!” she cried. “He was going to kill you!”

That was that, Ed thought comfortingly. The dollar was still well spent. He had a *steady* job now.

“Charlie didn’t have much chance,” he chuckled softly to Elise. “Halfway around, I stuck in the key, but I pulled the fire alarm right beside it! So the cops came because the clock hadn’t been turned, and the fire department had to come, too, and—what with the curious—I had about five hundred people there to protect me.”

He chuckled again. “He wasn’t such a smart fellow. He should have known a good night watchman always makes his rounds with a light.”