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Three Minutes

Everyone in Harrowgate knew that the clocks were three minutes slow, and everyone had agreed, long before Nell was born, not to mention it.

The church clock was slow. The station clock was slow, and so the trains, which ran on time everywhere else in the county, arrived in Harrowgate three minutes early and waited, sighing, while the passengers hurried along the platform apologising. The clock above the baker's door was slow, and the little brass clock on the mantelpiece of every house in Tanner's Row, and the watch on the mayor's waistcoat, which he consulted forty times a day and believed to be the finest timepiece in England.

They were slow because Nell's father had made them, and Nell's father did not make mistakes.

She had asked him about it once, when she was six and still believed that every question had an answer. He had been bent over his bench with the loupe in his eye, the way she always pictured him, a tiny wheel held in the tweezers like a seed.

"Three minutes," he had said, without looking up, "is exactly enough."

"Enough for what?"

He had set the wheel in its place, closed the case, and wound the clock until it began to tick. Then he had looked at her for a long moment, as if deciding how much a six-year-old could carry.

"Enough to get away," he said.

She was twelve now. She had not stopped asking.