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"Repent Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman

by HARLAN ELLISON

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman... but the time for repentance was past

There are always those who ask, what is it all about? For those who need to ask, for those who need points sharply made, who need to know "where it's at", this:

"The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailors, constables, possee co-mitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others — as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders — serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God. A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it."

— Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"

That is the heart of it. Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning. The end will take care of itself.
Because it was the very world it was, the very world they had allowed it to become, for months his activities did not come to the alarmed attention of The Ones Who Kept the Machine Functioning Smoothly, the ones who poured the very best butter over the cams and mainsprings of the culture. Not until it had become obvious that somehow, someway, he had become a notoriety, a celebrity, perhaps even a hero for what Officialdom inescapably tagged "an emotionally disturbed segment of the populace," did they turn it over to the Ticktockman and his legal machinery. But by then, because it was the very world it was, and they had no way to predict he would happen — possibly a strain of disease long-defunct, now, suddenly reborn in a system where immunity had been forgotten, had lapsed — he had been allowed to become too real. Now he had form and substance.

He had become a personality, something they had filtered out of the system many decades ago. But there it was, and there he was, a very definitely imposing personality. In certain middle-class circles it was thought disgusting. Vulgar ostentation. Anarchistic. Shameful. In others, there was only sniggering, those strata where thought is subjugated to form and to ritual, niceties, proprieties. But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.

And at the top — where, like socially attuned Shipwreck Kil-lys, every tremor and vibration threatens to dislodge the wealthy, powerful and titled from their flagpoles — he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril. He was known down the line, to the very heart-meat core, but the important reactions were high above and far below. At the very top, at the very bottom.

So his file was turned over, along with his time-card and his cardioplate, to the office of the Ticktockman.

The Ticktockman: very much over six feet tall, often silent, a soft purring man when things went timewise.

Even in the cubicles of the hierarchy, where fear was generated, seldom suffered, he was called the Ticktockman. But no one called him that to his mask.

You don't call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days
and nights, the years of your life. He was called the Master Time-
keeper to his mask.

"This is what he is," said the Ticktockman with genuine soft-
ness, "but not who he is. This time-card I'm holding in my left
hand has a name on it, but it is
the name of what he is, not who
he is. This cardioplate here in
my right hand is also named, but
not whom named, merely what
named. Before I can exercise
proper revocation I have to know
who this what is."

To his staff, all the ferrets, all
the loggers, all the finks, all the
commex, even the mineez, he
said, "Who is this Harlequin?"

He was not purring smoothly.
Timewise, it was jangle.

However, it was the longest
single speech they had ever heard
him utter at one time — the staff,
the ferrets, the loggers, the finks,
the commex, but not the mineez,
who usually weren't around to
know, in any case. But even they
scurried to find out —

Who is the Harlequin?

Somewhere nearby, he could
hear the metronomic left-right-
left of the 2:47 P.M. shift, enter-
ing the Timkin roller-bearing
plant in their sneakers. A minute
later, precisely, he heard the soft-
er right-left-right of the 5:00
A.M. formation going home.

An elfish grin spread across his
tanned features, and his dimples
appeared for a moment. Then,
scratching at his thatch of auburn
hair, he shrugged within his
motley, as though girding him-
self for what came next, and threw
the joystick forward, and bent
into the wind as the air-boat
dropped. He skimmed over a
sidewalk, purposely dropping a
few feet to crease the tassels of
the ladies of fashion, and — in-
serting thumbs in large ears — he
stuck out his tongue, rolled his
eyes and went wugga-wugga-
wugga. One pedestrian skittered
and tumbled, sending parcels
everywhichway, another wet her-
self, a third keeled slantwise and
the walk was stopped automati-
cally by the servitors till she
could be resuscitated. It was a
minor diversion.

Then he swirled away on a
vagrant breeze and was gone. Hi-
ho.

As he rounded the cornice of
the Time-Motion Study Building,
he saw the shift, just boarding
the sidewalk. With practiced mo-
tion and an absolute conserva-
tion of movement, they sidestepped up onto the slowstrip and
(in a chorus line reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley film of the an-
tediluvian 1930's) advanced across the strips ostrich-walking
till they were lined up on the expresstrip.

Once more, in anticipation, the elfin grin spread, and there was
a tooth missing back there on the left side. He dipped, skimmed,
and swooped over them. And then, scrunching about on the
air-boat, he released the holding pins that fastened shut the ends
of the home-made pouring troughs that kept his cargo from
dumping prematurely. And as he
pulled the trough-pins, the air-
boat slid over the factory work-
ers and one hundred and fifty
thousand dollars worth of jelly
beans cascaded down on the expresstrip.

Jelly beans! Millions and bil-
lions of purples and yellows and
greens and licorice and grape and
raspberry and mint and round
and smooth and crunchy outside
and soft-mealy inside and sugary
and bouncing jouncing tumbling
cluttering clattering skittering fell
on the heads and shoulders and
hardhats and carapaces of the Timkin workers, tinkling on the
sidewalk and bouncing away and
rolling about underfoot and fill-
ing the sky on their way down
with all the colors of joy and
childhood and holidays, coming
down in a steady rain, a solid
wash, a torrent of color and
sweetness out of the sky from
above, and entering a universe
of sanity and metronomic order
with quite-mad coocoo newness.
Jelly beans!

The shift workers howled and
laughed and were pelted,
and broke ranks, and the jelly
beans managed to work their way
into the mechanism of the slide-
walks; after which there was a
hideous scraping as the sound of
a million fingernails rasped down
a quarter of a million black-
boards, followed by a coughing
and a sputtering. And then the
sidewalks all stopped and every-
one was dumped thisaway-and-
thataway in a jackstraw tumble,
and still laughing and popping
little jelly-bean eggs of childish
color into their mouths. It was
a holiday, and a jollity, an abso-
late insanity, a giggle. But...

The shift was delayed seven
minutes.

They did not get home for
seven minutes.

The master schedule was
thrown off by seven minutes.

Quotas were delayed by inop-
erative sidewalks for seven min-
utes.

He had tapped the first domino
in the line, and one after anoth-
er, the others had fallen.
The System had been seven minutes' worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, hardly worthy of note. But in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance.

So he was ordered to appear before the Ticktockman.

It was broadcast across every channel of the communications web. He was ordered to be there at 7:00 dammit on time. And they waited, and they waited. But he didn't show up till almost ten-thirty, at which time he merely sang a little song about moonlight in a place no one had ever heard of, called Vermont, and vanished again. But they had all been waiting since seven, and it wrecked hell with their schedules. So the question remained: Who is the Harlequin?

But the unasked question (more important of the two) was: how did we get into this position, where a laughing, irresponsible japer of jabberwocky and jive could disrupt our entire economic and cultural life with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans?

Jelly for God's sake beans! This is madness! Where did he get the money to buy a hundred

and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans? (They knew it would have cost that much, because they had a team of Situation Analysts pulled off another assignment, and rushed to the sidewalk scene to sweep up and count the candies, and produce findings, which disrupted their schedules and threw their entire branch at least a day behind.) Jelly beans! Jelly... beans? Now wait a second—a second accounted for—no one has manufactured jelly beans for over a hundred years.

That's another good question. More than likely it will never be answered to your complete satisfaction. But then, how many questions ever are?

The middle you know. Here is the beginning. How it starts:

A desk pad. Day for day, and turn each day. 9:00—open the mail. 9:45—appointment with planning commission board. 10:30—discuss installation progress charts with J. L. 11:15—pray for rain. 12:00—lunch. And so it goes.

"I'm sorry, Miss Grant, but the time for interviews was set at 2:30, and it's almost five now. I'm sorry you're late, but those are the rules. You'll have to wait till next year to submit application for this college again." And so it goes.
"I couldn't wait, Fred. I had to be at Pierre Cartain's by 3:00, and you said you'd meet me under the clock in the terminal at 2:45, and you weren't there, so I had to go on. You're always late, Fred. If you'd been there, we could have sewed it up together, but as it was, well, I took the order alone . . ." And so it goes.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Atterley: in reference to your son Gerold's constant tardiness, I am afraid we will have to suspend him from school unless some more reliable method can be instituted guaranteeing he will arrive at his classes on time. Granted he is an exemplary student, and his marks are high, his constant flouting of the schedules of this school make it impractical to maintain him in a system where the other children seem capable of getting where they are supposed to be on time and so it goes.

YOU CANNOT VOTE UNLESS YOU APPEAR AT 8:45 A.M.

"I don't care if the script is good, I need it Thursday!"

CHECK-OUT TIME IS 2:00 P.M.

"You got here late. The job's taken. Sorry."

YOUR SALARY HAS BEEN DOCKED FOR TWENTY MINUTES TIME LOST.

"God, what time is it, I've gotta run!"

And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tock tock tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing, bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

Until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime.

EFFECTIVE 15 JULY 2389, 12:00:00 midnight, the office of the Master Timekeeper will require that all citizens to submit their time-cards and cardioplates for processing. In accordance with Statute 555-7-SGH-999 governing the revocation of time per capita, all cardioplates will be keyed to the individual holder and —

What they had done was devise a method of curtailing the amount of life a person could have. If he was ten minutes late, he lost ten minutes of his life. An hour was proportionately worth more revocation. If someone was consistently tardy, he might find himself, on a Sunday night, receiving a communiqué from the Master Timekeeper that his time had run out, and he would be "turned off" at high noon on Monday, please straighten your affairs, sir.
And so, by this simple scientific expedient (utilizing a scientific process held dearly secret by the Ticktockman’s office) the system was maintained. It was the only expedient thing to do. It was, after all, patriotic. The schedules had to be met. After all, there was a war on!

But wasn’t there always?

“Now that is really disgusting,” the Harlequin said, when pretty Alice showed him the wanted poster. “Disgusting and highly improbable. After all, this isn’t the days of desperadoes. A wanted poster!”

“You know,” Alice noted, “you speak with a great deal of inflection.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Harlequin humbly.

“No need to be sorry. You’re always saying ‘I’m sorry’. You have such massive guilt, Everett, it’s really very sad.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, then pursed his lips so the dimples appeared momentarily. He hadn’t wanted to say that at all. “I have to go out again. I have to do something.”

Alice slammed her coffee-bulb down on the counter. “Oh for God’s sake, Everett, can’t you stay home just one night! Must you always be out in that ghastly clown suit, running around annoying people?”

“I’m —” he stopped, and clapped the jester’s hat onto his auburn thatch with a tiny tingling of bells. He rose, rinsed out his coffee-bulb at the tap, and put it into the drier for a moment. “I have to go.”

She didn’t answer. The faxbox was purring, and she pulled a sheet out, read it, threw it toward him on the counter. “It’s about you. Of course. You’re ridiculous.”

He read it quickly. It said the Ticktockman was trying to locate him. He didn’t care, he was going out to be late again. At the door, dredging for an exit line, he hurled back petulantly, “Well, you speak with inflection, too!”

Alice rolled her pretty eyes heavenward. “You’re ridiculous.” The Harlequin stalked out, slamming the door, which sighed shut softly, and locked itself.

There was a gentle knock, and Alice got up with an exhalation of exasperated breath, and opened the door. He stood there. “I’ll be back about ten-thirty, okay?”

She pulled a rueful face. “Why do you tell me that? Why? You know you’ll be late! You know it! You’re always late, so why do you tell me these dumb things?” She closed the door.

On the other side, the Harlequin nodded to himself. She’s right. She’s always right. I’ll be late. I’m always late.

"REPENT, HARLEQUIN!" SAID THE TICKTOCKMAN 141
He shrugged again, and went off to be late once more.

He had fired off the firecracker rockets that said: I will attend the 115th annual International Medical Association Invocation at 8:00 P.M. precisely. I do hope you will join me.

The words had burned in the sky, and of course the authorities were there, lying in wait for him. They assumed, naturally, that he would be late. He arrived twenty minutes early, while they were setting up the spiderwebs to trap and hold him, and blowing a large bullhorn, he frightened and unnerved them so that their own moisturized encirclement webs sucked closed, and they were hauled up, kicking and shrieking, high above the amphitheater's floor. The Harlequin laughed and laughed, and apologized profusely. The physicians, gathered in solemn conclave, roared with laughter, and accepted the Harlequin's apologies with exaggerated bowing and posturing, and a merry time was had by all, who thought the Harlequin was a regular foofaraw in fancy pants; all, that is, but the authorities, who had been sent out by the office of the Ticktockman, who hung there like so much dockside cargo, hauled up above the floor unseemly fashion.

(In another part of the same city where the Harlequin carried on his "activities", totally unrelated in every way to what concerns here, save that it illustrates the Ticktockman's power and import, a man named Marshall Delahanty received his turn-off notice from the Ticktockman's office. His wife received the notification from the gray-suited minee who delivered it, with the traditional "look of sorrow" plastered hideously across his face. She knew what it was, even without unsealing it. It was a billet-doux of immediate recognition to everyone these days. She gasped, and held it as though it were a glass slide tingled with botulism, and prayed it was not for her. Let it be for Marsh, she thought, brutally, realistically, or one of the kids, but not for me, please dear God, not for me. And then she opened it, and it was for Marsh, and she was at one and the same time horrified and relieved. The next trooper in the line had caught the bullet. "Marshall," she screamed, "Marshall! Termination, Marshall! OhmiGod, Marshall, whattl we do, whattl we do, Marshall, omigodmarshall ..." and in their home that night was the sound of tearing paper and fear, and the stink of madness went up the flue and there was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do.

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But Marshall Delahanty tried to run. And early the next day, when turn-off time came, he was deep in the forest two hundred miles away, and the offices of the Ticktockman blanked his cardioplate, and Marshall Delahanty keeled over, running, and his heart stopped, and the blood dried up on its way to his brain, and he was dead that’s all. One light went out on his sector map in the office of the Master Timekeeper, while notification was entered for fax reproduction, and Georgette Delahanty’s name was entered on the dole roles till she could re-marry. Which is the end of the footnote, and all the point that need be made, except don’t laugh, because that is what would happen to the Harlequin if ever the Ticktockman found out his real name. It isn’t funny.)

The shopping level of the city was thronged with the Thursday-colors of the buyers. Women in canary yellow chitons and men in pseudo-Tyrolean outfits that were jade and leather and fit very tightly, save for the balloon pants.

When the Harlequin appeared on the still-being-constructed shell of the new Efficiency Shopping Center, his bullhorn to his elfishly laughing lips, everyone pointed and stared. He berated them.

"Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don’t be slaves of time, it’s a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees. Down with the Ticktockman!"

Who’s the nut? most of the shoppers wanted to know. Who’s the nut oh wow I’m gonna be late I gotta run . . .

And the construction gang on the Shopping Center received an urgent order from the office of the Master Timekeeper that the dangerous criminal known as the Harlequin was atop their spire, and their aid was urgently needed in apprehending him. The work crew said no, they would lose time on their construction schedule, but the Ticktockman managed to pull the proper threads of governmental webbing, and they were told to cease work and catch that nitwit up there on the spire with the bullhorn. So a dozen and more burly workers began climbing into their construction platforms, releasing the a-grav plates, and rising toward the Harlequin.

After the debacle (in which, through the Harlequin’s attention to personal safety, no one was seriously injured), the workers tried to re-assemble and assault
him again. But it was too late. He had vanished. It had attracted quite a crowd, however, and the shopping cycle was thrown off by simply hours. The purchasing needs of the system were therefore falling behind, and so measures were taken to accelerate the cycle for the rest of the day, but it got bogged down and speeded up and they sold too many floatvalves and not nearly enough weggles, which meant that the popli ratio was off, which made it necessary to rush cases and cases of spoiling Smash-O to stores that usually needed a case only every three or four hours. The shipments were bollixed, the trans-shipments were mis-routed, and in the end, even the swizzlekid industries felt it.

"Don't come back till you have him!" the Ticktockman said, very quietly, very sincerely, extremely dangerously.

They used dogs. They used probes. They used cardioplate crossoffs. They used teepers. They used bribery. They used stiktytes. They used intimidation. They used torment. They used torture. They used finks. They used cops. They used search & seizure. They used fallaron. They used betterment incentive. They used fingerprints. They used Bertillon. They used cunning. They used guils. They used treachery. They used Raoul Mitgong, but he didn't help much. They used applied physics. They used techniques of criminology.

And what the hell: they caught him.

After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time.

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed!" the Harlequin replied, sneering.

"You've been late a total of sixty-three years, five months, three weeks, two days, twelve hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine seconds, point oh three six one one one microseconds. You've used up everything you can, and more. I'm going to turn you off."

"Scare someone else. I'd rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogey man like you."

"It's my job."

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

"You can't adjust. You can't fit in."

"Unstrap me and I'll fit my fist into your mouth."

"You're a non-conformist."

"That didn't used to be a felony."
“It is now. Live in the world around you.”
“I hate it. It’s a terrible world.”
“Not everyone thinks so. Most people enjoy order.”
“I don’t, and most of the people I know don’t.”
“That’s not true. How do you think we caught you?”
“I’m not interested,” said the Harlequin.
“A girl named pretty Alice told us who you were.”
“That’s a lie.”
“It’s true. You unnerve her. She wants to belong, she wants to conform, I’m going to turn you off.”
“Then do it already, and stop arguing with me.”
“I’m not going to turn you off.”
“You’re an idiot!”
“Repent, Harlequin,” said the Ticktockman.
“Get stuffed.”
So they sent him to Coventry. And in Coventry they worked him over. It was just like what they did to Winston Smith in 1984, which was a book none of them knew about. But the techniques are really quite ancient, and so they did it to Everett C. Marm, and one day quite a long time later, the Harlequin appeared on the communications web, appearing elfish and dimpled and bright-eyed, and not at all brain-washed, and he said he had been wrong, that it was a good, a very good thing indeed, to belong, and be right on time hip-ho and away we go, and everyone stared up at him on the public screens that covered an entire city block, and they said to themselves, well, you see, he was just a nut after all, and if that’s the way the system is run, then let’s do it that way, because it doesn’t pay to fight city hall, or in this case, the Ticktockman. So Everett C. Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and in every revolution, a few die who shouldn’t, but they have to, because that’s the way it happens, and if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile. Or, to make the point lucidly:

“Uh, excuse me, sir, I, uh, don’t know how to uh, to tell you this, but you were three minutes late. The schedule is a little, uh, bit off.”
He grinned sheepishly.
“That’s ridiculous!” murmured the Ticktockman behind his mask. “Check your watch.” And then he went into his office, going mrmee, mrmee, mrmee, mrmee.

—HARLAN ELLISON