

THE TIME SHOP

By John Kendrick Bangs

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OF course it was an extraordinary thing for a clock to do, especially a parlor clock, which one would expect to be particularly dignified and well-behaved, but there was no denying the fact that the Clock did it. With his own eyes, Bobby saw it wink, and beckon to him with its hands. To be sure, he had never noticed before that the Clock had eyes, or that it had any fingers on its hands to beckon with, but the thing happened in spite of all that, and as a result Bobby became curious. He was stretched along the rug in front of the great open fireplace, where he had been drowsily gazing at the blazing log for a half hour or more, and looking curiously up at the Clock's now smiling face, he whispered to it.

"Are you beckoning to me?" he asked, rising up on his hands and knees.

"Of course I am," replied the Clock in a soft, silvery tone, just like a bell, in fact. "You didn't think I was beckoning to the piano, did you?"

"I didn't know," said Bobby.

"Not that I wouldn't like to have the piano come over and call upon me some day," the Clock went on, "which I most certainly would, considering him, as I do, the most polished four-footed creature I have ever seen, and all of his family have been either grand, square, or upright, and if properly handled, full of sweet music. Fact is, Bobby, I'd rather have a piano playing about me than a kitten or a puppy dog, as long as it didn't jump into my lap. It would be awkward to have a piano get frisky and jump into your lap, now, wouldn't it?"

Bobby had to confess that it would; "But what did you want with me?" he asked, now that the piano was disposed of.

"Well," replied the Clock, "I am beginning to feel a trifle run down, Bobby, and I thought I'd go over to the shop, and get in a little more time to keep me going. Christmas is coming along, and everybody is so impatient for its arrival that I don't want to slow down at this season of the year, and have all the children blame me because it is so long on the way."

"What shop are you going to?" asked Bobby, interested at once, for he was very fond of shops and shopping.

"Why, the Time Shop, of course," said the Clock. "It's a shop that my father keeps, and we clocks have to get our supply of time from him, you know, or we couldn't keep on going. If he didn't give it to us, why, we couldn't give it to you. It isn't right to give away what you haven't got."

“I don’t think I understand,” said Bobby, with a puzzled look on his face. “What is a Time Shop, and what do they sell there?”

“Oh, anything from a bunch of bananas or a barrel of sawdust up to an automobile,” returned the Clock. “Really, I couldn’t tell you what they don’t sell there if you were to ask me. I know of a fellow who went in there once to buy a great name for himself, and the floor-walker sent him up to the third floor, where they had fame, and prosperity, and greatness for sale, and ready to give anybody who was willing and able to pay for them, and he chose happiness instead, not because it was less expensive than the others, but because it was more worth having. What they’ve got in the Time Shop depends entirely upon what you want. If they haven’t got it in stock, they will take your order for it, and will send it to you, but always C.O.D., which means you must pay when you receive the goods. Sometimes you can buy fame on the instalment plan, but that is only in special cases. As a rule, there is no charging things in the Time Shop. You’ve got to pay for what you get, and it is up to you to see that the quality is good. Did you ever hear of a man named George Washington?”

“Hoh!” cried Bobby, with a scornful grin. “Did I ever hear of George Washington! What a question! Was there anybody ever who hasn’t heard of George Washington?”

“Well, yes,” said the Clock. “There was Julius Czsar. He was a pretty brainy sort of a chap, and he never heard of him. And old Father Adam never heard of him, and Mr. Methusaleh never heard of him, and I rather guess that Christopher Columbus, who was very much interested in American history, never heard of him.”

“All right, Clocky,” said Bobby, with a smile. “Go on. What about George Washington?”

“He got all that he ever won at the Time Shop; a regular customer, he was,” said the Clock; “and he paid for what he got with the best years of his life, man or boy. He rarely wasted a minute. Now I thought that having nothing to do for a little while but look at those flames trying to learn to dance, you might like to go over with me and visit the old shop. They’ll all be glad to see you and maybe you can spend a little time there whilst I am laying in a fresh supply to keep me on the move.”

“I’d love to go,” said Bobby, starting up eagerly.

“Very well, then,” returned the Clock. “Close your eyes, count seventeen backward, then open your eyes again, and you’ll see what you will see.”

Bobby’s eyes shut; I was almost going to say with a snap. He counted from seventeen back to one with a rapidity that would have surprised even his school-teacher, opened his eyes again and looked around, and what he saw—well, that was more extraordinary than ever! Instead of standing on the parlor

rug before the fireplace, he found himself in the broad aisle of the ground floor of a huge department store, infinitely larger than any store he had ever seen in his life before, and oh, dear me, how dreadfully crowded it was! The crowd of Christmas shoppers that Bobby remembered to have seen last year when he had gone out to buy a lead-pencil to put into his father's stocking was as nothing to that which thronged this wonderful place. Ah me, how dreadfully hurried some of the poor shoppers appeared to be, and how wistfully some of them gazed at the fine bargains to be seen on the counters and shelves, which either because they had not saved it, or had wasted it, they had not time to buy!

"Well, young gentleman," said a kindly floor-walker, pausing in his majestic march up and down the aisle, as the Clock, bidding Bobby to use his time well, made off to the supply shop, "what can we do for you to-day?"

"Nothing that I know of, thank you, sir," said Bobby. "I have just come in to look around."

"Ahl" said the floor-walker with a look of disappointment on his face. "I'm afraid I shall have to take you to the Waste-Time Bureau, where they will find out what you want without undue loss of precious moments. I should think, however, that a nice-looking boy like you would be able to decide what he really wanted and go directly to the proper department and get it."

"Got any bicycles?" asked Bobby, seizing upon the first thing that entered his mind.

"Fine ones-best there are," smiled the pleasant floor-walker, very much relieved to find that Bobby did not need to be taken to the bureau. "Step this way, please. Mr. Promptness, will you be so good as to show this young gentleman our line of bicycles?"

Then turning to Bobby, he added: "You look like a rather nice young gentleman, my boy. Perhaps never having been here before, you do not know our ways, and have not provided yourself with anything to spend. To encourage business we see that new comers have a chance to avail themselves of the opportunities of the shop, so here are a few time-checks with which you can buy what you want."

The kindly floor-walker handed Bobby twenty round golden checks, twenty silver checks, and twenty copper ones. Each check was about the size of a five-cent piece, and all were as bright and fresh as if they had just been minted.

"What are these?" asked Bobby, as he jingled the coins in his hand.

"The golden checks, my boy, are days," said the floor-walker. "The silver ones are hours, and the coppers are minutes. I hope you will use them wisely, and find your visit to our shop so profitable that you will become a regular customer."

With this and with a pleasant bow the floor-walker moved along to direct a grayhaired old gentleman with a great store of years in his possession to the

place where he could make his last payment on a stock of wisdom which he had been buying, and Bobby was left with Mr. Wiggins, the salesman, who immediately showed him all the bicycles they had in stock.

“This is a pretty good wheel for a boy of your age,” said Mr. Promptness, pulling out a bright-looking little machine that was so splendidly under control that when he gave it a push it ran smoothly along the top of the mahogany counter, pirouetted a couple of times on its hind wheel, and then gracefully turning rolled back to Mr. Promptness again.

“How much is that?” asked Bobby, without much hope, however, of ever being able to buy it.

“Sixteen hours and forty-five minutes,” said Mr. Promptness, looking at the pricetag, and reading off the figures. “It used to be a twenty-five-hour wheel, but we have marked everything down this season. Everybody is so rushed these days that very few people have any spare time to spend, and we want to get rid of our stock.”

“What do you mean by sixteen hours and forty-five minutes?” asked Bobby. “How much is that in dollars?”

Mr. Promptness smiled more broadly than ever at the boy’s question.

“We don’t do business in dollars here, my lad,” said he. “This is a Time Shop, and what you buy you buy with time: days, hours, minutes, and seconds.”

“Got anything that costs as much as a year?” asked Bobby.

“We have things that cost a lifetime, my boy,” said the salesman; “but those things, our rarest and richest treasures; we keep up-stairs.”

“I should think that you would rather do business for money,” said Bobby.

“Nay, nay, my son,” said Mr. Promptness. “Time is a far better possession than money, and it often happens that it will buy things that money couldn’t possibly purchase.”

“Then I must be rich,” said Bobby.

The salesman looked at the little fellow gravely.

“Rich?” he said.

“Yes,” said Bobby, delightedly. “I’ve got no end of time. Seems to me sometimes that I’ve got all the time there is.”

“Well,” said Mr. Promptness, “you must remember that its value depends entirely upon how you use it. Time thrown away or wasted is of no value at all. Past time or future time are of little value compared to present time, so when you say that you are rich you may be misleading yourself. What do you do with yours?”

“Why—anything I happen to want to do,” said Bobby.

“And where do you get your clothes, your bread and butter, your playthings?” asked the salesman.

“Oh, my father gets all those things for me,” returned Bobby.

“Well, he has to pay for them,” said Mr. Promptness, “and he has to pay for them in time, too, while you use yours for what?”

Bobby hung his head.

“Do you spend it well?” asked the salesman.

“Sometimes,” said Bobby, “and sometimes I just waste it,” he went on. “You see, Mr. Promptness, I didn’t know there was a Time Shop where you could buy such beautiful things with it, but now that I do know you will find me here oftener spending what I have on things worth having.”

“I hope so,” said Mr. Promptness, patting Bobby affectionately on the shoulder. “How much have you got with you now?”

“Only these,” said Bobby, jingling his time-checks in his pocket. “Of course next week when my Christmas holiday begins I shall have a lot—three whole weeks—that’s twenty-one days, you know.”

“Well, you can only count on what you have in hand, but from the sounds in your pocket I fancy you can have the bicycle if you want it,” said Mr. Promptness.

“At the price I think I can,” said Bobby, “and several other things besides.”

“How would you like this set of books about wild animals?” asked Mr. Promptness.

“How much?” said Bobby.

“Two days and a half, or sixty hours,” said Mr. Promptness, inspecting the price-tag.

“Send them along with the rest,” said Bobby. “How much is that electric railroad over there?”

“That’s rather expensive,” Mr. Promptness replied. “It will cost you two weeks, three days, ten minutes, and thirty seconds.”

“Humph,” said Bobby. “I guess that’s a little too much for me. Got any marbles?”

“Yes,” laughed Mr. Promptness. “We have china alleys, two for a minute, or plain miggles at ten for a second.”

“Put me down for two hours’ worth of china alleys, and about a half an hour’s worth of miggles,” said Bobby.

“Very good, sir,” said Mr. Promptness, with a twinkling eye. “Now can you think of anything else?”

“Well, yes,” said Bobby, a sudden idea Bashing across his mind. “There is one thing I want very much, Mr. Promptness, and I guess maybe perhaps you can help me out. I’d like to buy a Christmas present for my mother, if I can get a nice one with the time I’ve got. I was afraid I couldn’t get her much of anything with what little money I had saved. But if I can pay for it in time, Mr. Promptness—why, what couldn’t I buy for her with those three whole weeks coming to me!”

“About how much would you like to spend on it?” asked Mr. Promptness, with a soft light in his eye.

“Oh, I’d *like* to spend four or five years on it,” said Bobby, “but, of course—”

“That’s very nice of you,” said the salesman, putting his hand gently on Bobby’s head, and stroking his hair.” But I wouldn’t be extravagant, and once in a while we have special bargains here for kiddies like you. Why, I have known boys to give their mothers presents bought at this shop that were worth years, and years, and years, but which haven’t cost them more than two or three hours because they have made up the difference in love. With love you can buy the best treasures of this shop with a very little expenditure in time. Now what do you think of this for your mother?”

Mr. Promptness reached up to a long shelf back of the counter and brought down a little card, framed in gold, and printed in beautiful colored letters, and illustrated with a lovely picture that seemed to Bobby to be the prettiest thing he had ever seen.

“This is a little thing that was written long ago,” said Mr. Promptness, “by a man who spent much time in this shop buying things that were worth while, and in the end getting from our frame department a wonderful name which was not only a splendid possession for himself, but for the people among whom he lived. Thousands and thousands of people have been made happier, and wiser, by the way he spent his hours, and he is still mentioned among the great men of time. He was a fine, greathearted fellow, and he put a tremendous lot of love into all that he did. His name was Thackeray. Can you read, Bobby?”

“A little,” said Bobby.

“Then read this and tell me what you think of it,” said Mr. Promptness.

He handed Bobby the beautiful card, and the little fellow, taking it in his hand, read the sentence: MOTHER IS THE NAME OF GOD IN THE LIPS AND HEARTS OF LITTLE CHILDREN.

“You see, my dear little boy,” said the kindly salesman, “that is worth—oh, I don’t know how many years, and your mother, I am sure, would rather know that that is what you think, and how you feel about her, than have you give her the finest jewels that we have to sell. And how much do you think we charge you for it?”

“Forty years!” gasped Bobby.

“No,” replied Mr. Promptness. “Five minutes. Shall we put it aside for you?”

“Yes, indeed,” cried Bobby, delighted to have so beautiful a Christmas gift for his mother.

So Mr. Promptness put the little card aside with the bicycle, and the wild animal books, and the marbles, putting down the price of each of the things Bobby had purchased on his sales slip.

They walked down the aisles of the great shop together, looking at the many things that time well expended would buy, and Bobby paused for a moment and spent two minutes on a glass of soda water, and purchased a quarter of an hour's worth of peanuts to give to Mr. Promptness. They came soon to a number of large rooms at one end of the shop, and in one of these Bobby saw quite a gathering of youngsters somewhat older than himself, who seemed to be very busy poring over huge books, and studying maps, and writing things down in little note-books, not one of them wasting even an instant.

"These boys are buying an education with their time," said Mr. Promptness, as they looked in at the door. "For the most part they haven't any fathers and mothers to help them, so they come here and spend what they have on the things that we have in our library. It is an interesting fact that what is bought in this room can never be stolen from you, and it happens more often than not that when they have spent hundreds of hours in here they win more time to spend on the other things that we have on sale. But there are others, I am sorry to say, who stop on their way here in the morning and fritter their loose change away in the Shop of Idleness across the way—a minute here, and a half hour there, sometimes perhaps a whole hour will be squandered over there, and when they arrive here they haven't got enough left to buy anything."

"What can you buy at the Shop of Idleness?" asked Bobby, going to the street door, and looking across the way at the shop in question, which seemed, indeed, to be doing a considerable business, if one could judge from the crowds within.

"Oh, a little fun," said Mr. Promptness. "But not the real, genuine kind, my boy. It is a sort of imitation fun that looks like the real thing, but it rings hollow when you test it, and on close inspection turns out to be nothing but frivolity."

"And what is that great gilded affair further up the street?" asked Bobby, pointing to a place with an arched entrance gilded all over and shining in the sunlight like a huge house of brass.

"That is a cake shop," said Mr. Promptness, "and it is run by an old witch named Folly. When you first look at her you think she is young and beautiful, but when you come to know her better you realize that she is old, and wrinkled, and selfish. She gives you things and tells you that you needn't pay until to-morrow and this goes on until some day to-morrow comes, and you find she has not only used up all the good time you had, but that you owe her even more, and when you can't pay she pursues you with all sorts of trouble. That's all anybody ever got at Folly's shop, Bobby —just trouble, trouble, trouble."

"There seem to be a good many people there now," said Bobby, looking up the highway at Folly's gorgeous place.

“Oh, yes,” sighed Mr. Promptness. “A great many—poor things! They don’t know any better, and what is worse they won’t listen to those who do.”

“Who is that pleasant-looking gentleman outside the Shop of Idleness?” asked Bobby, as a man appeared there and began distributing his card amongst the throng.

“He is the general manager of the Shop of Idleness,” said the salesman. “As you say, he is a pleasant-looking fellow, but you must beware of him, Bobby. He is not a good person to have around. He is a very active business man, and actually follows people to their homes, and forces his way in, and describes his stock to them as being the best in the world. And all the time he is doing so he is peering around in their closets, in their chests, everywhere, with the intention of robbing them. The fact that he is so pleasant to look at makes him very popular, and I only tell you the truth when I say to you that he is the only rival we have in business that we are really afraid of. We can compete with Folly but—”

Mr. Promptness’s words were interrupted by his rival across the way, who, observing Bobby standing in the doorway, cleverly tossed one of his cards across the street so that it fell at the little boy’s feet. Bobby stooped down and picked it up and read it. It went this way:

<p style="text-align:center">THE SHOP OF IDLENESS PROCRASTINATION, <i>General Manager</i> Put Off Everything And Visit Our Shop</p>

“So he’s Procrastination, is he?” said Bobby, looking at the man with much interest, for he had heard his father speak of him many a time, only his father called him “old Putoff.”

“Yes, and he is truly what they say he is,” said Mr. Promptness; “the thief of time.”

“He doesn’t look like a thief,” said Bobby.

Now it is a peculiarity of Procrastination that he has a very sharp pair of ears, and he can hear a great many things that you wouldn’t think could travel so far, and, as Bobby spoke, he turned suddenly and looked at him, waved his hand, and came running across the street, calling out to Bobby to wait. Mr. Promptness seized Bobby by the arm, and pulled him into the Time Shop, but not quickly enough, for he was unable to close the door before his rival was at their side.

“Glad to see you, my boy,” said Procrastination, handing him another card. “Come on over to my place. It’s much easier to find what you want there than

it is here, and we've got a lot of comfortable chairs to sit down and think things over in. You needn't buy anything to-day, but just look over the stock."

"Don't mind him, Bobby," said Mr. Promptness, anxiously whispering in the boy's ear. "Come along with me and see the things we keep on the upper floors—I am sure they will please you."

"Wait just a minute, Mr. Promptness," replied Bobby. "I want to see what Mr. Procrastination looks like close to."

"But, my dear child, you don't seem to realize that he will pick your pocket if you let him come close—" pleaded Mr. Promptness

But it was of no use, for the unwelcome visitor from across the way by this time had got his arm through Bobby's and was endeavoring to force the boy out through the door, although the elevator on which Bobby and Mr. Promptness were to go up-stairs was awaiting them.

"When did you come over?" said Procrastination, with his pleasantest smile, which made Bobby feel that perhaps Mr. Promptness, and his father, too, for that matter, had been very unjust to him.

"*Going up,*" cried the elevator boy. "Come, Bobby," said Mr. Promptness, in a beseeching tone. "The car is just starting."

"Nonsense. What's your hurry?" said Procrastination. "You can take the next car just as well."

"*All aboard!*" cried the elevator boy.

"I'll be there in two seconds," returned Bobby.

"Can't wait," cried the elevator boy, and he banged the iron door to, and the car shot up to the upper regions where the keepers of the Time Shop kept their most beautiful things.

"Too bad!" said Mr. Promptness, shaking his head, sadly. "Too bad! Now, Mr. Procrastination," he added fiercely, "I must ask you to leave this shop, or I shall summon the police. You can't deceive us. Your record is known here, and—"

"Tutt-tutt-tutt, my dear Mr. Promptness!" retorted Procrastination, still looking dangerously pleasant, and smiling as if it must all be a joke. "This shop of yours is a public place, sir, and I have just as much right to spend my time here as anybody else."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Promptness, shortly. "Have your own way if you prefer, but you will please remember that I warned you to go."

Mr. Promptness turned as he spoke and touched an electric button at the back of the counter, and immediately from all sides there came a terrific and deafening clanging of bells; and from up-stairs and down came rushing all the forces of time to the rescue of Bobby, and to put Procrastination out. They fell upon him like an army, and shouting, and struggling, but still smiling as if he

thought it the greatest joke in the world, the unwelcome visitor was at last thrust into the street, and the doors were barred and bolted against his return.

“Mercy me!” cried Bobby’s friend the Clock, rushing up just as the door was slammed to. “What’s the meaning of all this uproar?”

“Nothing,” said Mr. Promptness, “Only that wicked old Procrastination again. He caught sight of Bobby here—”

“He hasn’t hurt him?” cried the Clock.

“Not much, if any,” said Mr. Promptness.

“You didn’t have anything to do with him, did you, Bobby?” asked the Clock, a trifle severely.

“Why, I only stopped a minute to say how do you do to him,” began Bobby, sheepishly.

“Well, I’m sorry that you should have made his acquaintance,” said the Clock; “but come along. It’s getting late and we’re due back home. Paid your bill?”

“No,” said Mr. Promptness, sadly. “He hasn’t had it yet, but there it is, Bobby. I think you will find it correct.”

He handed the little visitor a memorandum of all the charges against him. Bobby ran over the items and saw that the total called for a payment of eight days, and fifteen hours, and twenty-three minutes, and nine seconds, well within the value of the time-checks the good floorwalker had given him, but alas! when he put his hand in his pocket to get them they were gone. Not even a minute was left!

Procrastination had succeeded only too well!

“Very sorry, Bobby,” said Mr. Promptness, “but we cannot let the goods go out of the shop until they are paid for. However,” he added, “although I warned you against that fellow, I feel sorry enough for you to feel inclined to help you a little, particularly when I realize how much you have missed in not seeing our treasures on the higher floors. I’ll give you five minutes, my boy, to pay for the little card for your mother’s Christmas present.”

He placed the card in the little boy’s hand, and turned away with a tear in his eye, and Bobby started to express his sorrow at the way things had turned out, and his thanks for Mr. Promptness’s generosity, but there was no chance for this. There was a whirr as of many wheels, and a flapping as of many wings. Bobby felt himself being whirled around, and around, and around, and then there came a bump. Somewhat terrified he closed his eyes for an instant, and when he opened them again he found himself back on the parlor rug, lying in front of the fire, while his daddy was rolling him over and over. The lad glanced up at the mantel-piece to see what had become of the Clock, but the grouchy old ticker stared solemnly ahead of him, with his hands pointed sternly at eight o’clock, which meant that Bobby had to go to bed at once.

“Oh, let me stay up ten minutes longer,” pleaded Bobby.

“No, sir,” replied his father. “No more Procrastination, my son—trot along.”

And it seemed to Bobby as he walked out of the room, after kissing his father and mother good-night, that that saucy old Clock grinned.

INCIDENTALLY let me say that in the whirl of his return Bobby lost the card that the good Mr. Promptness had given him for his mother, but the little fellow remembered the words that were printed on it, and when Christmas morning came his mother found them painted in watercolors on a piece of cardboard by the boy’s own hand; and when she read them a tear of happiness came into her eyes, and she hugged the little chap and thanked him, and said it was the most beautiful Christmas present she had received.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Bobby. “It isn’t so very valuable though, Mother. It only cost me two hours and a half, and I know where you can get better looking ones for five minutes.”

Which extraordinary remark led Bobby’s mother to ask him if he were not feeling well!