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Order . . . Serene and Complete

by Craig Gustafson

The room was filled with clocks of every shape and size. Considering the size of the mansion I was entering on that sunny April Friday, it was a bit of a shock to discover that the pudgy little man admitting me was not a butler, but the owner, Smedly Russell-Crawford.

"I suppose you're wondering why I answered the door myself," he said.

"Not at all."

"Of course you are. I don't keep servants. They get in the way. They upset, rather than enhance, the order of affairs. Order. Always remember that. Order."

"Yes, sir."

"Speaking of orders, I'd better let you carry out yours . . . you are Mr. Capplin, aren't you?"

"That's right, Ron Capplin. My editor heard about your clocks, and . . ."

"QUIET!!!" Russell-Crawford suddenly shoved me into an alcove and clapped a hand over my mouth. "Discretion, Mr. Capplin, discretion. There are clock thieves all over the place. They want my clocks. They shall not get them."

I knew it was going to be one of those days. I asked Mr. Russell-Crawford to give me a tour. After scanning me for weapons, he put me in a little elevator and pushed a button. We rose through a glass shaft that allowed the passenger to see the time on each floor, for each floor was filled to the brim with clocks. No paintings. Decorations. Furniture. Just clocks. As we rose, I began to notice that there was something strange about the clocks. Something in the ticking, maybe . . .

We got off on the fifth floor and Mr. Russell-Crawford showed me around.

"Clocks, Mr. Capplin," he said rapturously. "Chronometers. Ticky-tocks. A symbol of serenity, security and order that can be attained in this life."

It was really amazing. This man must have spent every penny he made on antique clocks. It took years, he said, to accumulate and renovate all these priceless beauties. But it was worth it, for everywhere he looked he found the reassuring regularity of time. No foolish television. No insipid books.

"I do, however, leave the radio on. I believe clocks to be like plants. Surround them with a pleasant atmosphere and the results will be so much more beneficial."

"What do they listen to?" I asked.

"WFMT," Russell-Crawford said. "I think Liszt is a tad more conducive to good breeding than the Go Go's don't you?"

"Oh, definitely."

"Although I let them listen to a jazz station in DuPage County occasionally. Gets their blood going."

I was ready to bolt before he could start describing their mating habits when suddenly I knew what was wrong with the clocks.

"They're all synchronized," I said.

Russell-Crawford smiled broadly. "Yes. That is my greatest achievement. Each hand moves at precisely the same speed. Each gear, each spring, balanced in exactly the same way."

"But that's impossible!" I said. "There must be ten thousand clocks in this place . . ."

"Fifteen thousand, four hundred and fifty-seven."

" . . . they can't all be synchronized — the inner workings of each clock have to be different, if only by size."

"Check them out," he calmly replied. "My life, Mr. Capplin, is dedicated to order. It has taken me twenty-eight years, twelve weeks, four days, eight hours, thirty-two minutes and forty-nine point eight seconds to finish my work, but my life is now complete. The clocks are now fully automated, winding themselves as when needed. They are not electric, but contains five backup power systems. The panels on the clocks are sealed shut, that no mischievous fool may disrupt the order

by moving the hands. The hands are all synchronized, so I never have to touch them. The only care they need is dusting and polishing, and that is how I spend my days, cleaning and whistling and gazing upon my perfectly regimented life."

"This is TERRIFIC, Mr. Russell-Crawford!" I shouted.

"I know."

"But what about thieves?" I asked.

He smiled. "Pick up the small Renay/Church on the mantel-piece."

I reached out for the little timepiece and was blasted halfway across the room. I looked up, clearing my head and checking for broken bones.

"Force field?"

"Force field."

"How do you get past it?"

"The force field," he said, "is attuned to my body pattern. I can't open the clocks, but I can clean them. I have finally, Mr. Capplin, achieved the goal for which I have worked all my life. Order — serene and complete. I hope that helps you."

"It certainly does," I said, and, after taking some pictures of Mr. Russell-Crawford and his thousands of clocks, I left to file my story. Incredible. The man had every base covered. It was a stupid thing to spend your life doing, of course, but no more stupid than writing feature articles for a suburban paper, I suppose. It kept him off the streets anyway. More power to him.

The next day I was driving downtown and listening to the news.

"This just in," announced the newsmen. "Billionaire Smedly Russell-Crawford was found dead today in his estate at 518 Lake Shore Drive. The fifty-three year old Russell-Crawford was shot in the head, an apparent suicide. No letter was found, and no reason suggested why the suicide took place. More on that story as details come in."

"And remember, Daylight Saving Time begins tonight. Don't forget to turn your clocks ahead one hour."

