

ST. NICHOLAS

ILLUSTRATED

1882

Part Two



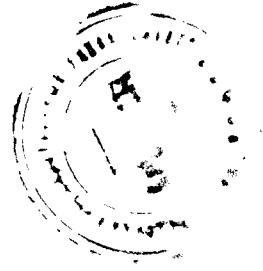
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VOLUME IX.

PART II.

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ST. NICHOLAS.

VOL. IX.

MAY, 1882.

No. 7.

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WHY THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE.

BY SOPHIE SWETT.

KETURAH was in the kitchen making a chicken-pie of the Plymouth Rock rooster, whose domineering disposition had become unendurable.

She had been making pop-overs, which would soon come out of the oven, in all the crispness, and flakiness, and general toothsome-ness which made Keturah's pop-overs famous; so the kitchen was not a bad place to be in, just now. But Keturah had her apron on her head, and that was a sign that she was in the doleful dumps, and small boys and girls had better keep out of the way. That apron of Keturah's cast a shadow over the whole house, especially when Aunt Kate and Uncle Rufe had gone to Boston, and Keturah had all the small fry under her thumb.

Sam put his nose in at the crack of the kitchen door, and sniffed. The pop-overs allured, but Keturah's apron waved a warning, and Sam, being a wise boy, retreated.

Polly was in the garden hanging out the clothes. Sam, looking out of the hall window, saw her, and wondered if a blackbird had nipped her nose, it was so red. But the next moment "a big tear dropped past it," and he saw that she was weeping, and there was her lover, Jake Pettibone, beating a hasty retreat, looking very sheepish. Keturah had "shooed" him off, just as she "shooed" the chickens. Keturah was Polly's aunt, and had been "more 'n a mother to her," as she was always reminding her.

Sam did wish that Polly had more spirit, and would n't allow her lover to be "shooed" away. Jake was such a good fellow, and owned such delightful boats.

Ike was down by the currant-bushes, now, dig-

ging worms for bait, preparatory to going fishing with Jake. Sam had been invited to go, but Keturah would n't let him, because it might rain, and he had had the croup when he was six months old. (This was the very worst attack of doleful dumps that Keturah had ever had.)

Kitty was in the garden, too, trying to put salt on a robin's tail; somebody had told her she could catch a robin so, and she believed it, because she was only a girl; and she did n't care if she could n't go fishing, for the same reason. It was almost as well to be a girl, as to be a boy, under Keturah's thumb; and Aunt Kate would be away for three weeks more, and there was no hope that Keturah would come out of the doleful dumps, and be her usual good-natured self—unless that provoking old clock should get over its mysterious habit of striking One, and unless she should find her saffron-colored silk stockings!

For Keturah was superstitious; she believed in signs and omens, and nobody could reason, nor laugh, nor coax her out of the belief. Nothing could induce her to begin any undertaking on Friday; she would not burn egg-shells, lest she should come to want; and, if she spilled salt, she was sure she should quarrel. If she saw the new moon over her left shoulder, or the first robin on a low bough, ill-luck was certain. If a mirror was broken, or a whip-poor-will sang on the roof, somebody in the house would die before the year was out. If a fork or a pin that was dropped stood up on the floor, or Casabianca, the cat, washed his face, she made preparations for company. She carried a horseshoe in her pocket to ward off

witches, and a potato to ward off rheumatism. She was always hearing mysterious noises, and was very scornful when anybody suggested rats. When she saw a "calico" horse, she wished, and she was sure that she would get her wish; and she always made a bow to the new moon, that it might bring her a present.

Uncle Rufe and Aunt Kate—who were like the best of parents to their little, orphaned nephews and nieces—were always telling them, privately, that Keturah's signs were all nonsense, and they must not listen to them; but so many signs "came true" that Ike and Kitty more than half believed Keturah was right. Did n't Ike have that fight with Neddy Forrester the very day that he spilled all his salt at breakfast? And did n't he get his velocipede, and Kitty her walking doll,—presents from Uncle Jack,—only two days after they bowed to the moon? Sam declared it to be his belief that they would have had the presents, even if they had failed to pay their respects to the moon, and, as for the salt, Neddy Forrester had been threatening to "whip" Ike for a long time.

Sam was almost ten, and Aunt Kate had told him that she depended upon him to teach the other children not to mind Keturah's nonsense.

But he did quake, inwardly, whenever Keturah heard very strange noises, and prophesied dreadful things. However, he had n't quaked half so much since Keturah had twice called him to the door, in the evening, to see a ghost in the garden; and one ghost was the Bartlett pear-tree, all blossomed out white, and the other was a stray white cow that had taken a fancy to the cabbages! Then Sam had concluded that there was something as substantial and commonplace as a pear-tree or a cow at the bottom of all ghost stories, and he had felt sure that Keturah could n't scare him again—but it was queer that that clock should strike One!

The disappearance of Keturah's saffron-colored silk stockings—which had been given her by her first and only lover, a sailor, who was drowned on his second voyage—was not so unaccountable. Keturah had a great many bundles and budgets; she was, as she declared, "uncommon savin'," and hoarded all the scraps that would otherwise have found their way to the rag-bag. Sam suspected that in one of Keturah's budgets the saffron-colored silk stockings, which she felt sure had been spirited away as a warning of impending evil, were hiding themselves.

But what *could* make that clock strike One?

It was a tall old hall-clock, that had been in the family for generations; it had not been in working order for years, and was supposed to have outlived its usefulness. Some people admired it very much, but the children thought it very ugly,

with its great gilt griffin on the top, and its gilt claw feet, just like a beast. Keturah had always felt there was something queer about that clock.

And now it did seem as if there was something queer about the clock; for it had struck, on five or six occasions, just one loud, solemn stroke, which could be heard all over the house.

It struck the very first night after Uncle Rufe and Aunt Kate went away, between nine and ten o'clock at night. Sam and Ike were awakened, and got out of their beds to see what was the matter. Keturah was as white as a sheet, wringing her hands, and bewailing that something was going to happen, whereupon Ike got back into bed, and covered his head with the clothes.

Sam slipped into his pantaloons, so as to be ready for emergencies, and crept down two or three stairs. He peered over the balusters at the clock. A moonbeam fell exactly across the griffin's head. It did n't wink, but its eyes flashed like coals of fire.

I am sorry to say that Sam followed Ike.

Keturah said that something dreadful must have happened to Uncle Rufe or Aunt Kate. But the next day she received a telegram, saying that they were well, and had had a very pleasant journey.

And Sam thought that something might have jarred the clock, and made it strike, and he wished he had n't covered up his head with the bedclothes. If he'd only had time to think, he'd have marched boldly up to the clock, and found out what was the matter! He lay awake for more than an hour, mourning that he, the man of the family, should have let the others think he was afraid.

He was awakened by another stroke of the clock. There was a faint glimmer of dawn creeping in at the window—not enough to give the cheerful courage that comes with morning, but just enough to make the furniture take on ghostly shapes.

Instead of going boldly down-stairs, Sam sat up in bed, with his teeth chattering; and when the door-knob turned slowly, and the door opened softly, Ike or even Kitty could not have popped down under the clothes more quickly than he did!

It was only Keturah. Sam felt wonderfully re-assured when he heard her voice, and he emerged from his retirement, and assumed as easy and confident a manner as a boy *could* assume while his teeth were chattering.

"That clock wa' n't never struck with hands!" announced Keturah, solemnly.

"Of course it was n't the hands that made it strike," began Sam, but his feeble attempt at a joke was promptly frowned down by Keturah.

"I felt in my bones that something was a-goin' to happen, even before them saffron-colored silk stockin's was spirited away," said she, in a doleful voice, and with many shakings of the head. "And,

as if them stockin's wa' n't warnin' enough, there 's that old clock, that haint been wound up nobody knows when, and with its insides all gi'n out, anyhow, a-strikin' out loud and solemn enough to wake the seven sleepers of Christendom! I haint no expectation that we shall ever see your aunt and uncle ag'in!"

"I say, Keturah, if I were you, I 'd go down and take a look at that clock! You might find out what makes it strike," said Sam.

"I sha' n't meddle nor make with the works of darkness, and I 'd advise you not to, neither," said Keturah.

Sam scarcely needed that advice. He felt even less like investigating the matter than he had the night before. Even in the broad, cheerful daylight he gave that clock a wide berth.

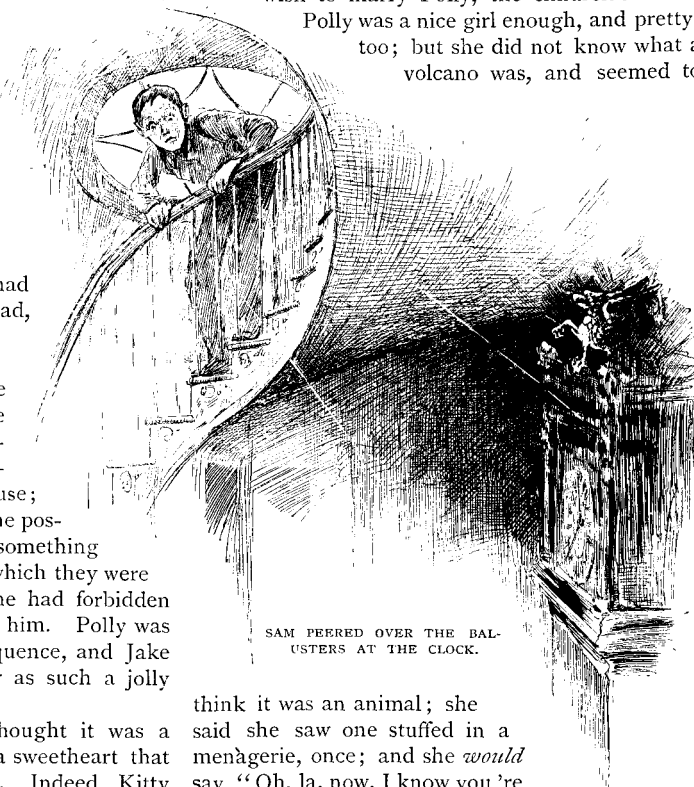
After that, the clock struck, once or twice, every night; and three times it had struck in the daytime,—each time when Jake Pettibone, Polly's lover, was in the house; and from this, Keturah had become possessed of the idea that Jake had something to do with the impending evil of which they were warned by the clock. And so she had forbidden Polly to have anything to say to him. Polly was almost broken-hearted, in consequence, and Jake was as much under the weather as such a jolly sailor could be.

Sam and Ike and Kitty all thought it was a great shame. If there ever was a sweetheart that was worth having, Jake was one. Indeed, Kitty had resolved to marry him, herself, when she should grow up, if Polly did n't—unless Ike and she should keep a candy store, for which enterprise she was willing to forego matrimony. Jake had been "'round the world and home again," when he was only a boy. He had seen coconuts, and bananas, and dates, growing; he had been down in the ocean, and brought up great branches of coral, and shells that looked as if they were made of pure gold; he had been on intimate terms with monkeys, and wild men, and alligators, and earthquakes, and volcanoes; he had been half cooked by cannibals, scalped—in a mild way—by Indians, and had had a piece of his arm bitten out by a shark; he had been on a fishing expedition to "the Banks"; had killed, with his own hands, a shark as big as—well, I am obliged to confess that the size of that shark varied with each time that Jake told the story; but it was never smaller than

a whale, and it was once as large as the fabulous sea-serpent; he had caught a cod-fish so heavy that it nearly sank the vessel; had got wrecked, and escaped drowning only by a hair's breadth.

After all those good times, he had settled quietly down in Northport, and, wonderful man as he was, had become so condescending as to wish to marry Polly, the children's nurse.

Polly was a nice girl enough, and pretty, too; but she did not know what a volcano was, and seemed to



SAM PEERED OVER THE BAL-
USTERS AT THE CLOCK.

think it was an animal; she said she saw one stuffed in a menagerie, once; and she *would* say, "Oh, la, now, I know you 're jokin'!" while Jake was relating his most thrilling adventures, which was very disagreeable.

To say nothing of his past greatness, Jake was now the proprietor of three boats; in one, he went fishing; the other two he kept to let. If there could be a happier or prouder position in life than Jake's, Sam and Ike would like to know what it was.

The fishing vessel was "as tidy a craft as you often run afoul of," as its owner often remarked, and the children were very fond of going fishing in it, although, to tell the truth, there was a fishy smell about it, which grew very strong just about the time the water began to break up into hills, and the boat began to make dancing-school bows, and you began to wish you had n't come. The little pleasure-yacht, the "Harnsome Polly," was "desarvin' of her name, and more 'n that you could n't say." That was Jake's opinion. The children thought Polly ought

to be very proud and grateful for the honor of having such a beautiful boat named for her. Jake's third boat was only a row-boat, named the "Racer," which he had made for himself; but it was everything that a row-boat ought to be, and he often lent it to Sam and Ike to row in, by themselves.

It will readily be seen that Jake was a valuable as well as a distinguished friend, and his marriage to Polly was an event greatly to be desired, especially as Jake threatened, if Aunt Keturah persisted in "cutting up rough," and preventing him from seeing Polly, to go off to the Cannibal Islands, and get himself wholly cooked, this time, and eaten; a harrowing possibility, the thought of which caused Kitty to dissolve into tears, and made Sam and Ike lose their zest for fishing, even, for a whole day.

And that queer, ridiculous old clock was at the bottom of all this trouble!

As Sam, looking out of the hall window, saw Jake being "shooed" away from Polly, he beckoned to him, slyly. He wanted to see whether that clock would strike as soon as he set foot in the house, as on former occasions, and he also wished to cheer Jake a little, lest he should, in desperation, set sail at once for the Cannibal Islands.

Poor Jake's round, rosy face was elongated until it looked like the reflection of a face in a spoon, and its jollity had given place to a woe-begoneness that was enough to make your heart ache.

He came cautiously around to the door, anxious lest Polly's vigilant aunt should espy him; but Keturah had returned to her chicken-pie, without having the faintest idea that Jake would be so audacious as to enter the house by the front door.

Jake stood still, just inside the door, and surveyed the clock. He was superstitious, as sailors usually are, and he seemed to prefer to keep at a respectful distance from that clock.

"She's an onaccountable cre'tur', now, aint she?"

Sam understood that he meant the clock, for Jake had a way of considering clocks, as well as vessels, as of the female sex.

"But it did n't strike, Jake! It did n't strike One when you came in!" exclaimed Sam.

"She did n't, that 's a fact!" said Jake, brightening a little. "Mebbe she 's gi'n over her pesky tricks. I don't see what nobody 's got ag'in' me to go to bewitchin' on her like that, anyhow!"

"I don't think it has anything to do with you, Jake. It strikes every night, and you are not here then," said Sam.

"But it 's kinder cur'us that she don't never set up to strike in the day-time, unless I be here. But there is folks, Sammy, that says none o' them things don't happen without nateral causes, and if there is a nateral cause for that there clock's per-

formances, I 'd gin somethin' harnsome to find it out! For there haint nothin' but jest clearin' up this here mystery that 'll ever fetch the old woman 'round"—with a nod toward the kitchen. "As for them saffron-colored silk stockin's,—she says, mebbe I haint got nothin' to do with their bein' sperited away, but that pesky clock's strikin' is a warnin' ag'in' me. Well, if Polly 'n' me has got to part, there 's the Cannibal Islands for me, and the sooner I 'm off the better!"

"Oh, Jake, don't go!" cried Sam, in distress. "Perhaps we shall find out what makes it strike. I 'm going to try!"

"Sammy, if you will find out, and fetch Keturah 'round, I 'll—I 'll take you mackerelin' clear'n outside the shoals, and I 'll—Sammy, I 'll make you a row-boat that 'll beat the 'Racer' all holler, and as pretty as new paint can make her!"

This was a dazzling offer, indeed! Sam felt ready to brave all the ghosts he had ever heard of, for such a prize. And to keep Jake away from the Cannibal Islands!—though he must be a great goose to let cannibals eat him, just for Polly.

"Of course, it is nothing but what can be accounted for, and I 'll find out for you, for nothing, Jake," said he, grandly. Just at that moment a sudden breeze, blowing through the open window, slammed the hall door.

A moment afterward the clock struck One!

Jake's ruddy face actually changed color, and he gazed at Sam in awe-stricken silence. Sam did n't feel so brave as he had felt a few moments before, but he marched up to the clock, and had his hand on the door when he heard Keturah's voice. He turned to look for Jake, but he had vanished.

"It 's jest because that Jake Pettibone was hangin' 'round here, though he did n't set his foot in the house. I did n't send him off none too soon, for it 's as true as preachin' that that warnin' has got somethin' to do with him! Sakes alive, child, you aint a-touchin' of it! Come right away, this minute; it 's a-flyin' in the face o' Providence to meddle with such things!"

Sam was not at all sure that he would have opened the clock door if Keturah had not appeared, for he felt very queer and "shaky."

His heart sank. He had a "presentiment," like Keturah. He felt sure that he should never have a boat that could beat the "Racer," that Polly would die of a broken heart, and the cannibals would dine off roasted Jake.

"Hickory, dickory, dock, A mouse ran up the clock;

The clock struck one, and down he ran, Hickory, dickory, dock!"

Sam awoke in the dead of the night, with this poem of Mother Goose running in his head. It

had, in some way, mingled itself with his dreams. It was no wonder, for Kitty was continually repeating Mother Goose's poetry, and the clock, which was in everybody's mouth, figuratively speaking, had probably put that verse into her head. Indeed,

the tiresome old lady, whose poetry was of very little account—by which it will be seen that Sam's literary taste was poor. But now it occurred to him that a mouse *might* make a clock strike One, if it got in and frisked about among the works.



THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

Sam remembered, now, that he had heard her singing it over and over the day before. It had not suggested any idea to him then; he only wished that he need not hear quite so much about clocks, and he thought that Mother Goose was a

A mouse might be the "natural cause" that Jake would give so much to find. Sam might possibly make a discovery that would bring Keturah out of the doleful dumps, keep Jake from the cannibals, dry Polly's tears, take them all mack-

ereling out beyond the shoals, and last, but not least, give him a row-boat of his own that could beat the "Racer" all hollow.

He must be a queer boy who would not dare something with a chance of gaining all that.

He might wait until morning to investigate, but Keturah seemed to know, by instinct, when anybody went near that clock, and she would be sure to interfere, and, besides, he could n't wait.

He slipped out of bed and lighted his candle (Keturah did not allow him to have a lamp, lest he should break it and set the house on fire), and he stole softly down-stairs. The one small candle had very little effect upon the darkness of the great hall. There seemed to be shadowy shapes in every corner, and the stillness was awful. It required all the courage that Sam could muster to force himself to go forward.

But at last he did stand before the clock, with his heart in his mouth, and his hand trembling so that he could scarcely hold the candle. You may think it strange that he was afraid, but you have n't heard Keturah talk about ghosts and witches until your blood ran cold. Sam knew there were no such things, just as well as you do, but he felt very "shivery."

It was not too late to turn back; but that was not the kind of boy that Sam was.

He thought of the boy that stood on the burning deck, of Daniel in the lions' den, and, queerly enough, of the Plymouth Rock rooster that *would* fly around after its head was cut off. People do think of queer things at great crises, you know.

Then, with a bold little jerk, he opened the clock door.

The clock struck One!

The stroke came in the midst of a rushing and scrambling noise, and Sam saw a mouse's tail whisking out of sight!

Sam put his head inside the clock, and there, down in one corner, was a nest, full of tiny mice, scarcely as large as your little finger! And what do you suppose the nest was made of? A great quantity of bits of paper came first, but sticking out at the side was a strange something that caught Sam's eye. He pulled, and out came—just as true as you live—Keturah's saffron-colored silk stockings!

Sam was a brave boy, then, you may be sure! You could n't have made him believe that he ever had been otherwise; and happy?—if he had had anything to set the candle on, he would have

turned a somersault, then and there. As it was, he had to content himself with uttering a shout; it was what Ike and he called a Camanche war-whoop, and it raised the whole household.

Keturah came first, with her night-cap strings flying, a Bible under one arm, and a horseshoe under the other. Ike came next, in his night-gown, with his hair standing upright, from terror, but tugging his velocipede along, because, as he afterward explained, "if everything was going to smash, he was going to save that, anyhow." Then came Kitty, half awake and sobbing; and Polly brought up the rear, her face as white as her curl-papers.

Keturah sat down flat on the hall-floor, when she heard Sam's report, and saw her saffron-colored silk stockings, soiled and tattered, but still her precious treasures.

"Seein' that wa' n't a warnin', I'll never believe in warnin's no more!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, don't! please don't, Keturah!" cried Sam. "Nor hear raps nor have doleful dumps—"

"Nor turn ag'in' poor Jake!" interrupted Polly.

"It was just because he is big, and stepped heavily, and jarred the clock, and scared the mouse, that the clock struck One when he came here! Don't you see?" cried Sam.

"I'm a foolish old woman, and I'm free to confess I'd ought to put more trust in Providence, seein' things mostly turns out to be jest what you might have known, and as nateral as life!"

With this not very clear confession, Keturah retired. She dropped her horseshoe on the way, and did n't stop to pick it up!

Keturah wanted to let Casabianca have those wee mice, but Sam begged them off; he thought it was mean to take the advantage of such little bits of things, and he declared they should have a fair chance for their lives. But the next time that they went to look at them,—lo and behold! their mother had carried them all off! She evidently thought a quieter tenement was better suited to a growing family.

And so the clock never struck again.

That new boat is a beauty. Sam and Ike agree that the "Racer" "is n't anywhere" beside it.

The Cannibal Islanders will have to go hungry for a long time, before they make a meal off Jake.

If you'll believe it, Keturah washed, darned, and patched those saffron-colored silk stockings, and danced in them at Jake and Polly's wedding!