
Walter and the Wonderful Watch
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John Morressy reports from his New England home that he is hard at work on several stories of a fantastic sort. His latest tale is a charming fantasy that brims with good advice—and surely it's just a coincidence that the story carries a sting in its tale that seems appropriate for an election year...

When Walter decided to go out into the world and seek his fortune, his parents were much relieved. "It's about time somebody in this family tried to make a living," they said.

Walter was their youngest son. He was a good lad, but the family were pressed for room. There were twenty-one children about the house, every one of them lazy, silly, and useless. A floating population of cousins, uncles, and aunts came for surprise visits and stayed on for months. Strangers showed up, lost themselves in the crowd, and hung about for weeks. Since Walter's family lived in a two-room hut, things were crowded.

"Do you have any advice for me, Papa?" Walter asked as he packed his few belongings.

"Yes. Find a nice place of your own, and stay there," his father said.

"And invite your brothers and sisters to stay with you," his mother added.

An uncle who was standing by the doorway said, "I have a piece of advice for you, young man: Don't ever talk to strangers."

"If I don't talk to strangers, how will I ask directions and find a job?" Walter asked.

"I have another piece of advice: Don't be a wiseguy," the uncle said, and stalked outside to take a nap.

"If you're going to seek your fortune, there's no sense wasting time gabbing. You'd better get started right away," Walter's father said, guiding him toward the door.

Walter's cousin George, a feckless, good-natured fellow with a dread of work, looked up from his comfortable seat by the fire and called out, "You can't send a lad like Walter out into the world without a penny in his pocket."

"Why not? That's how he came into it," his father said.

"He didn't even have a pocket," his mother added.

Ignoring them, George said, "I have a present for you, Walter. My father gave it to me when he still believed I might get a job."

He reached into an inside pocket and took out a large object in the shape of a watch. Its color was a deep dull black. "Could do with a bit of polishing," he said as he snapped the lid open. The hands were at nineteen minutes after one. It was now shortly after dawn. Walter took the watch and gently shook it. Nothing happened.

"Is it working?" he asked.

"It's accurate twice a day, without fail. That's more than you can say for most watches. Take good care of it, my boy."

Walter started to say his good-byes, but his parents took him by the elbows and guided him to the door. With a shout of gratitude to Cousin George, he set out for the royal city.

The day was sunny and warm, and after he had walked for several hours Walter stopped to rest. The sun was directly overhead, so he judged that it was twelve o'clock. He decided to set the watch and wind it, and see if it would keep correct time. When he was done, the watch began to tick away confidently.

"You sound like a good watch," Walter said. "I hope you're dependable."

"Of course I am. Just keep me wound," said the watch.

"I beg your pardon. Did you speak to me?"

"I responded to your conversational overture. It was the polite thing to do."

"I never knew watches could talk," said Walter.

"Have you never heard the saying, 'Time will tell'?"

"I didn't know that's what it meant."

"Well, now you do," said the watch. "You've learned a valuable lesson today, and it's barely past noon."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Walter asked.

"Oh, all sorts of things. To begin with, I can tell you that you've set me eleven minutes slow."

"I'll fix that right away," said Walter. And he did.

"That's much better. It makes one feel so good to be accurate," said the watch.

"Why is it that you're talking to me?" Walter asked. "I know, 'Time will tell,' but I never heard you talk when we were at the house. Other watches don't say anything. I've never heard of a watch talking to someone."

"It pains me to admit it, my boy, but the truth is that timepieces in general are rather dull. One would think they'd make timely remarks on every conceivable subject, but they do not. A sundial or an hourglass can bore you to tears, and most watches and clocks are content to chime, or ring bells, or have little figures parade in and out on the hour. The same thing, day after day after day. Limited resources and no imagination at all. Pitiful. But a few of us have cultivated the art of conversation and developed our social skills."

As they walked along, the watch diverted Walter with anecdote, song, and story. It was a wise and witty watch and a pleasant companion. Walter felt that he was getting an

education. He began to entertain ideas of a future in which he became immensely successful while the watch saw to all the work.

They came at last to the royal city, where they found all the statues and public buildings draped in black and all the people looking downcast. Walter's spirits sank.

"It looks as though we arrived at a bad time," he said.

"Allow me to be the judge of that," said the watch. "First find out what's happening."

Walter stopped a man passing by and asked the cause of this gloom. "It's the king," the man said.

"Is he dead?" Walter asked.

"No," said the man with a sigh of regret. "He's bored. He's run out of amusements, and that makes him fretful. He's already raised taxes twice this month. He's liable to start a war any day now."

"A war!" Walter cried in alarm. "Who's the enemy?"

"He's still deciding," said the man.

The king, Walter quickly learned, was not a good king. He was spoiled and self-indulgent and cruel. He spent most of the royal treasury on toys, games, and trinkets for himself. As long as his playthings kept him amused, he ignored the people; but when he grew bored, he started meddling in public affairs. He threw people in dungeons, cut off heads, raised taxes, started wars, and generally made himself a nuisance until some new diversion caught his fancy.

That night, in his room in a squalid shed behind the inn, Walter said to the watch, "I think we've come to the wrong place."

"Nonsense, my boy," said the watch. "This is your great opportunity."

"To get my head cut off?"

"No, no, no. To make your fortune. We must see the king tomorrow."

"I'll never be admitted to the palace!"

"Trust me, Walter."

"But I don't know how to talk to a king. I just want a job."

"Leave everything to me and do as I say," said the watch. "Before we go, you'd better polish me up. And while you're at it, make yourself presentable."

The next morning, having washed his face and hands and shaken much of the dust from his clothes, Walter went to the palace and asked to be admitted. The guard at the gate barred his way.

"No beggars or peddlers allowed," said the guard.

"I'm not a beggar or a peddler. I bring a present for the king," Walter replied.

The guard looked down at him in scorn. "What is it, a lump of dirt?"

Walter repeated the words that the watch had taught him that very morning. "Time lies heavy on the king's hands. I bring a present that will make him very happy. And if the king is happy, he'll make you and me happy. So take me to him at once."

The guard thought that over for a minute, then said, "All right. But if your present doesn't make the king happy, then the king and I are going to make you very *unhappy*."

He let Walter enter. Another guard led him down a long series of corridors, all cluttered with broken toys and abandoned playthings, until they reached the throne room where the king sat sulking.

"Your Majesty, I bring a youth with a present for you," the guard announced.

The king looked at Walter and turned away with a scowl of disdain. "What could this grubby urchin possibly have that would interest us?" he asked.

"A watch, Your Majesty," said Walter.

"We are a king, you stupid boy. We have a thousand watches."

"My watch talks," said Walter.

The king's eyes lit up. His scowl vanished. "A talking watch?"

Walter drew the watch from his pocket and held it up. It gleamed most attractively. "Good morning, Your Majesty," it said. "How pleasant to see you looking well."

"It talks! It actually talks!" the king cried. "Give it to us at once."

Walter placed the watch in the king's eager hands. "Speak to us!" the king said.

"As Your Majesty wishes," said the watch. "Would you prefer amusing conversation? Song? A poetry recitation? Minute observations? Second thoughts? A patriotic oration? Jokes and stories?"

"All of them!" cried the king, bouncing up and down on his throne in glee. "Start with amusing conversation. We don't get much of it around here, we can tell you. Our courtiers are a pack of ninnies. We've had nothing but bad times here."

"Oh, Your Majesty, I sympathize profoundly. I know bad times, believe me, and there's nothing more annoying. Noon and Midnight are the absolute worst."

"Really? Why is that?" asked the king.

"They think they're so special. 'High Noon' and 'The Witching Hour' and all that, you know. And the rest are almost as bad. Seven has convinced himself that he's a magic number, and insists on being called 'Lucky.' And Six is nearly as bad, with his constant insistence that he should be the basis of our numerical system. He has terrible rows with Ten. Nine and Five keep calling themselves the working man's friends, and they're not on speaking terms with Eight and Four, who claim the same distinction. It's very trying, believe me."

"Aren't there any good times?" the king asked.

"The only times I really like are Two and Three. They don't fuss and complain and demand attention, they just get on with the job."

"What about Ten and Eleven?" the king asked.

"Ten is something of a snob. 'Banker's Hour,' you know. Eleven's a good sort, though. Very friendly. Always ready for a snack and a few minutes chat. Not at all like One."

"What's the problem with One?"

"He's a loner. Very unsociable."

"This is delightful! Fascinating!" said the king. "We haven't enjoyed such amusing conversation for years."

"Oh, this is nothing. Why, I know a chronometer who can spin tales of the sea for days on end without repeating himself once. It's a pity Your Majesty can't slip away from the palace for a few days."

"We are the king, and we can do whatever we want. Where would you take us? Someplace amusing, we trust."

"Your Majesty would have the time of his life," said the watch.

"Then let us depart at once. We will summon the royal carriage."

"No need, Your Majesty. I have a winged chariot. It's much faster and the view is marvelous. You'll find it most diverting."

At the very instant the watch spoke, a massive winged chariot appeared in the upper reaches of the throneroom and slowly circled down, to alight silently at the foot of the throne. The king stamped his feet in excitement and cried, "Oh, this is wonderful! Wonderful!"

"Before we depart, I must bid farewell to my former master," said the watch.

"That wretched boy? Be quick about it," said the king.

Once back in Walter's hand, the watch whispered, "The king and I will be taking a long journey. Seize your opportunity, my friend."

"What opportunity?"

"Once we leave, the throne will be vacant. Permanently. Seat yourself firmly upon it and declare yourself the new ruler. Command the guards to swear their allegiance to you. Hold your coronation this very afternoon. Release all prisoners and announce that the dungeons are closed until further notice and there will be no more squandering of the treasury on playthings, no new taxes, and no more wars. The people will love you, and your family will be very happy in the palace. It has eleven hundred rooms."

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

"My boy, I am no ordinary watch. I'm not really a watch at all. I'm a special agent of Father Time."

"Your disguise is brilliant!" Walter said.

"Thank you. I've been on this king's track for many years. If your cousin George hadn't let me run down, I would have brought him in long ago."

"In where? Where are you going?"

"To the Hall of Chronological Justice. The king is a wanted man. He has not only abused and wasted time, he has actually killed it, and then boasted of the murder. He has much to answer for."

"Won't you ever bring him back?"

"Time flies, my boy. But only in one direction. Goodbye, and good luck in your new job."

"But I don't know how to be a king!" Walter said in growing panic.

"Have no fear. Time is on your side."

"You are keeping us waiting!" the king cried.

Walter ran to him and held out the watch. The king snatched it. Clutching it in both hands, he sprang into the chariot, which at once took wing and soared up and out one of the high windows. As the guards stood gaping, Walter ran to the empty throne, took up the abandoned scepter, and declared himself King Walter the First. The guards hesitated for a moment, exchanged a glance, then a nod, and then dropped to one knee and swore their allegiance. With a guard on each side, Walter went to the grand balcony and proclaimed his accession. The people cheered. He declared his policies, and they became ecstatic. His coronation, that very afternoon, was the happiest event within the memory of anyone living in the royal city.

He installed his brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, and visitors in the palace and bestowed titles on each one. They were as lazy, silly, and useless as ever, but since they were now noblemen and noblewomen, the people found their ways fascinating, and followed their escapades with great delight.

Walter turned out to be a very decent king. He kept his promises, declared plenty of holidays, and made certain that all the clocks in the kingdom were kept in good repair. To the very end of his days, he was a model of punctuality.

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