

THE HOURGLASS

'Hello, granddad. It's me,' Oswyn called loudly.

The dim hall grew darker when the ten-year-old closed the heavy front door gently behind him. He listened to the deadness of the house which seemed loud after the traffic noise outside. The heavy weight of anxiety still constricted his chest and suppressed the excitement he should have felt.

A deep, gravelly voice suddenly responded brightly from the front room. 'Come in, come in. I've just poured some lemonade.'

Oswyn shrugged off his school jacket and hung it on a spare hook while looking about him, awed as usual by how ancient the house seemed. The front door was a gate into another era. His eyes took in the heavily-patterned wallpaper, highly-polished and dark mahogany furniture, and the big clock which ticked noisily but never tocked. He sniffed, drawing the familiar smells of pipe tobacco, lavender, polish, mothballs and age deeply into his lungs. Strange aromas, both unique and comforting, that he would always associate with his grandparent's house.

Every familiar item was here, or was it? Something was missing. He waved the nagging thought from his mind. The dark corners of the hall seemed to press closer, hiding the vicious Men of the Night from his imaginative mind. They usually waited for him on the top landing and only woke when he flushed the toilet. He always raced them down the stairs and they hadn't caught him yet. During the last year only one emergency had forced him upstairs to their shadowy domain.

His parents laughed at his fantasy, but he knew these ghouls waited in the darkness for him. Realising he could delay no longer, he quickly entered the antiquated lounge, today dimmed by the partly-drawn brocade curtains.

'Sit down and make yourself comfortable,' his grandfather told him, looking more serious or, more precisely, businesslike than usual.

Oswyn sat on the cushion's front edge and took the offered refreshment from the wrinkled and freckled hand. He drank deeply then belched self-consciously before placing the glass on the grate tiles. The old man's eyes never left him and Oswyn put this down to eagerness, recalling how he always felt at such times.

'Happy birthday, granddad,' he beamed, fidgeting awkwardly while his groping fingers fought to free the small package from his trouser pocket. He shuffled back, allowing the armchair to enfold him in its musty bosom. 'Dad said I had to come alone this year,' he mumbled, rubbing his sweaty palms on the chair's arms.

'Thank you. I shall open your gift later. But first, your father was quite right,' confirmed the grey-haired man. 'For this year I grant you a legacy. A gift in return,' he added, seeing the unasked question.

The boy's wide eyes followed where the extended finger pointed and his smile rapidly faded. Is that all? he thought. An old, giant egg-timer!

He frowned, not recalling ever having seen it before. An itch at the back of his mind told him this was the item missing from the hall. He wriggled off the cushion for a closer look.

The Hourglass

The hourglass was heavy. So heavy that moving it was impossible for his small body.

His grandfather's chuckle came from deep in his throat. 'It has one base of lead and one of gold. The four supports at the corners are copper overlaid with silver decoration, and the feet, both top and bottom, are from a rock called agate.

Oswyn peered at the ornately-carved silver. 'Are they diagrams?'

'Runes. They tell a story, like a book.'

'It's big. I bet it runs for hours.' He grinned, examining the mound of white sand in the bottom bulb.

'Three minutes. Look. But don't just look. Think of our meeting today in the way I taught you when we played our mind games.' He easily turned the fifty-centimetre high contraption over so the gold base was uppermost.

Oswyn glanced at his watch, six minutes to four, then watched and projected his memories as the glittering sand sighed softly through the narrow channel before running down the growing mound with a subtle, subdued shushing sound. The sand in the top bulb, which had started level, slowly formed a depression in the centre, the rim becoming wider until it reached the side of the glass. Then the indentation became a crater down which the sand slid as though sucked into a greedy mouth, before falling through the neck.

'Grandfathers have passed this hourglass to grandsons for many generations. When you have a son and I die, you will hold this until your grandson takes over the responsibility.'

'Three minutes exactly,' he cried delightedly when the last grain fell, his grandfather's words passing through him.

Hundreds of years would pass before he had a grandson. If then. Girls were just too yucky.

'The game I taught you was for a purpose, Oswyn. Its secrecy was for us alone because only we have like minds.'

Oswyn looked at his shoe as he rubbed it along the dark lines in the patterned carpet. Taking a deep breath, he decided to argue. 'But I've seen those cards with the wavy lines, triangles and squares on television. Other people play the game. So why must we keep this secret?'

His grandfather chuckled. 'Do they get them all correct?'

'Well, I suppose not.'

'Then we must be special. And if other people know that, they'll want to keep us in a laboratory and examine us. Do you want that to happen?'

He pouted and looked back at his shoe, noticing the dust and scuff marks. Being famous would be fun, but he recalled the films he had seen where people, and the army, subjected those like him to close examination and ridicule. 'No.' His eyes rose to return his grandfather's intense gaze. Something seemed to pass between them but, whatever it was, slipped from his memory.

'Good. So what did you feel when you watched the sand?'

Oswyn placed a finger to his lips and frowned while trying to remember exactly what he had felt. 'The back of my head tickled, and something tugged inside.'

'The tugging will go when you learn to flow with the sand. Now, sit and watch closely.'

Making himself comfortable again, he waited while his grandfather placed a small table between them.

The Hourglass

Surely he's not going to put the egg-timer on that? thought Oswyn. It'll collapse under that enormous weight.

His grandfather placed the hourglass in the centre of the table without mishap. Not even a creak. For an old man, he seemed to move it with ease, and Oswyn wondered how long he would have to wait before he grew strong enough to lift it.

'Watch the sand closely, Oswyn.' The freckled hand turned the hourglass again so the lead base was uppermost. 'Watch,' he intoned, drawing out the word. 'Watch and see, just as I taught you.'

Oswyn stared at the dull grains as they fell slowly, passing through the neck one at a time.

'Watch, and know,' intoned his grandfather again.

He ignored the small mound and concentrated on the neck. Slowly, he began to see colours in each grain as they turned and reflected the shaft of sunlight which filtered between the curtains.

Pictures appeared in the grains, and he could see them clearly in his mind as though his eyes were closed. He saw himself sitting in the armchair watching the sand fall, felt again the excitement of exchanging gifts after the horror of the Men of the Night, arriving at the house and smelling again its unique aroma. Then he was at last months school concert performing his magic act. The pictures showed his grandfather growing younger while going about his lonely life with the occasional visit from family and friends. Soon, his grandparents were together again after the sadness of attending his grandmother's funeral. Holidays the whole family had spent together at the seaside, Christmas and birthday parties all

intermingled in glorious happiness.

These experiences weren't limited to sight. Tastes, smells and sounds bombarded his senses, and he could clearly hear some snatches of conversation. He saw himself getting smaller until he was a baby, followed by his father treating Oswyn's pregnant mother to an unwanted easy life. Then his parent's wedding, followed by his father as a small boy on fishing trips with Oswyn's much younger grandfather.

The pictures rolled on like a long family movie running in reverse, peeling back the years. Transitions were not always smooth, and he saw only the highlights. They were perfect memories, taken directly from the mind. And he understood everything. Reading, seeing and hearing backwards seemed second nature.

His grandfather was now a young boy living in the country, then buildings exploded while his great-grandfather protected the child. Oswyn's original smile faded, his lips a thin line while the love, fear, sadness and happiness of these years played with his feelings. He felt the hunger of the lean times while anger bubbled at the frustration of trying to find work.

Wars and natural death quickly followed times of great joy, the emotional roller-coaster ride speeding through the generations. So many relations, aunts, uncles and cousins through great-, great-great and further. He never realised so many had existed.

As the years reversed, so the holidays ended. Houses, though neat and tidy, were dark and stark. Long days of never-ending work led to early nights to save fuel and candles, but the coldness persisted. Something else was different to how

things were now. He realised that computers, televisions and radios were all absent. Evenings were a time when the family sat together. Talking, telling stories, mending and making clothes and furniture. A hard but simple life.

He saw Oliver Cromwell leading a jubilant army through his ancestor's village, their horses covered in gore. Three generations of blacksmiths hammered out a living. Then back to the fields, managing forest and land until foreign knights wearing chain mail passed by, glaring their defiance.

The journey was nearing its end, slowing perceptively as it moved through the dark ages. And he knew. Almost as though he were his far distant ancestor, he knew. The cold stone walls were familiar, the room a second home where he carried out his experiments, ignoring the dark corners and long cobwebs. Time turned suddenly, disorientating him, as this ultimate episode ran forward through time. His eyes moved along the shelves of preparations and his chest swelled with satisfaction at his successes. He could feel the heavy, cold metal in his hands and, looking down, saw the finished base of lead. He knew how he had moulded, beaten and carved the metals to exacting specifications. The pure quartz crystals, used to make the glass, he had personally selected and ground finely using the tools he had made. He had even produced the sand by using more of the crystals. These were the larger crystals and fascinating because, as they had broken, they retained the same crystal shape. Smaller and smaller he had ground them, becoming hundreds, thousands then tens of thousands of miniature duplicates of the originals.

The perfectly rounded, smooth and polished feet had taken

six long months alone to bring to their present condition. Yet he had never considered giving up the seemingly endless task of finely grinding the hard agate.

The heat from the kiln still brought a sweat to his forehead although he had blown and rolled the glass bulbs many hours ago. Complete, the bulbs now rested on the bench beside him, the sand already absorbing the first records of his bloodline. No more would man forget his past. The runes assured it. Not only would the crystals absorb the thoughts of his descendants but the first born in each generation would be male. Unfortunately, his complicated spells meant he could only precisely attune the minds of every other generation to the crystals. His nimble hands carefully put the hourglass together, taking care that the posts were in the correct order and orientation. He read the runes on the first post, speaking the incantation aloud for the last time.

Oswyn felt himself shudder, then blinked his eyes which felt as dry as the sand. As the last grain fell, he realised the uppermost base was gold. He stared at the lower base - it was gold too! Then slowly, so slowly that he barely noticed, the upper base lost its yellow sheen, becoming duller until it was again a grey slab.

'We have named the eldest boy in every other generation Oswyn,' his grandfather told him softly. 'I am Oswyn, and my grandfather was Oswyn, as was his before him. You will name your grandson Oswyn too and, as you saw, the sand has plenty of room for many more generations to store their memories.'

The boy looked at the hourglass with new interest. A respect that bordered on awe. This was better than virtual

The Hourglass

reality, far superior to a video or DVD, and all you had to do was to turn it one way to record, then the other for playback.

'When can I have it, granddad?' he asked enthusiastically.

'Soon,' the old man laughed. 'Now you must learn what memories to store.'

He couldn't take his eyes from the hourglass. It seemed he had been living its history for hours. Had it really only taken three minutes? His stomach rumbled and gurgled as though arguing the time. He glanced at his watch and began reaching for the glass of lemonade before it struck him, harder than if the ghouls upstairs had dropped the hourglass on his head from the top of the stairs.

As he raised his wrist for another look, he saw his grandfather smiling at his confusion. His other hand pulled back the shirt-sleeve for a better look. He had not been mistaken. The time was six-thirty. Playback had taken two and a half hours.

No wonder I feel hungry, he thought.

THE END