

A black silhouette of a person wearing a trench coat and boots, walking towards the right. The silhouette is centered on a green background. The text 'THE NINE MILE WALK' is overlaid on the silhouette in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

**THE NINE
MILE
WALK**

THE NICKY WELT STORIES

HARRY KEMELMAN

***NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR**



The Nine Mile Walk

The Nicky Welt Stories

Harry Kemelman



To Arthur and Doris Fields

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Introduction

Nicky Welt was born in the classroom. I was teaching a class in advanced composition and trying to show my students that words do not exist *in vacuo* but have meanings that can transcend their usual connotations, that even short combinations can permit a wide variety of interpretations. The headline of a story in the newspaper lying on my desk caught my eye—something about a hike planned by the local Boy Scout troop—and I wrote on the blackboard, “A nine mile walk is no joke, especially in the rain.” I invited my class to draw what inferences they could from the sentence. As frequently happens with pedagogical brainstorming, the experiment was not too successful. I’m afraid my class regarded it as an elaborate trap and the safest course was to remain silent. But as I coaxed and offered hints and suggestions, I myself was caught up in the game. I made inference upon inference, projection upon projection, and was led further and further....

It occurred to me that I had the material for a story, and when I got home, I tried to write it, but it did not jell. I put the idea aside and a couple of years later, when something recalled it to mind, tried it again. It went no better than the first time. I tried it again several years later, and again several years after that.

Then, fourteen years after my initial try, I tried once again. This time it went. The story flowed, and I knew when I finished at the end of the day that it would require little or no revision. A writer is frequently asked how long it takes to write a story. So there is one answer: it takes one day, or fourteen years, depending on how you look at it.

I sent it off to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, where it was accepted almost immediately, along with a letter from the editor promising to buy as

many stories of the same type based on the same character as I could write. But it was more than a year before I was able to come up with another.

The Nicky Welt stories attracted attention, I think, because they were the epitome of the armchair type of detective story. The problems were solved by pure logic, and the reader was given the same clues that were available to the detective hero. Furthermore, Nicky Welt was given no advantage, no special powers of intuition, no profound knowledge of criminology. In all candor, this was not so much a matter of choice as of necessity, since I myself had no such knowledge.

Shortly after the publication of “The Nine Mile Walk” I was approached by several publishers who were interested in seeing a full-length manuscript about Nicky Welt. Naturally, I was flattered, but at the same time I felt I had to refuse. I felt that the classic tale of detection was essentially a short story—the primary interest on the problem, with character and setting emerging as adjuncts. Hence to stretch such a story to novel length would call for either engulfing the reader in a tedious recital of every little step that led the hero to his solution—many of these, necessarily, steps in the wrong direction—or posing a problem so complex that the reader would be as puzzled at the end as he was in the beginning. And yet I was intrigued by the idea of writing a full-length book.

The solution was as unexpected—and as logical—as any dreamed up by Nicky Welt.

Some years later, when I moved to the suburbs, I became interested in the sociological situation of the Jew in suburbia. This, I felt, could best be handled in the form of fiction, so I wrote a novel called “The Building of a Temple.” I sent the manuscript around to various editors, all of whom wrote me nice notes but regretfully had to decline it.

I had all but given up hope of having it published when fortunately it came to an editor, who, while agreeing that the manuscript as it stood was unsalable, considered the subject itself of enough interest to suggest lines of revision that would make it more suitable for the general public. Moreover, he knew and admired the Nicky Welt stories, which by now had grown into a respectable body of work....

As we discussed the book, once again meanings transcended usual connotations; inference piled upon inference; subjects, characters, events

became blended; and what emerged—as in “The Nine Mile Walk”—was a totally new concept, but a solid projection from the original material.

Why not incorporate my detective stories with my novel of the Jewish suburban community? The traditional function of the rabbi, as opposed to the priest or minister, is as a judge, interpreter of the Law, rather than as a religious leader. How better show this than by getting him involved in a murder mystery and having him work his way out of it?

The solution also had the merit of resolving that problem of the full-length mystery novel. The murder would provide only one thread, albeit an important one, of a larger narrative. That would be the story of the entire community in which the murder occurs and which affects everyone involved. The result, of course, was the creation of the “unorthodox” mystery novels featuring Rabbi David Small—*Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* and *Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry*.

In a sense, then, Rabbi David Small can be said to be the son of Professor Nicholas Welt.

And now Nicky too is appearing in book form. I am glad, because he has always occupied a special place in my affection. I enjoy reading—and writing—the classic detective story. In fact, the last story in the book, “The Man on the Ladder,” is my most recent piece of fiction. Even more, I consider the genre itself important because it is the one modern form primarily dedicated to giving pleasure to the reader. We are apt to forget these days that that is the principal purpose of literature.

H. K.

Marblehead, Massachusetts

Time and Time Again

Although it was more than two years since I had left the Law Faculty to become County Attorney, I still maintained some connection with the university. I still had the privileges of the gymnasium and the library and I still kept up my membership in the Faculty Club. I dropped in there occasionally for a game of billiards, and about once a month I dined there, usually with Nicholas Welt.

We had finished dinner, Nicky and I, and had repaired to the Commons Room for a game of chess, only to find that all the tables were in use. So we joined the group in front of the fire where there was always interminable talk about such highly scholarly matters as to whether there was any likelihood of favorable action by the trustees on an increase in salary schedules—there wasn't—or whether you got more miles per gallon with a Chevrolet than you got with a Ford.

This evening as we joined the group, the talk was about Professor Rollins' paper in the *Quarterly Journal of Psychic Research* which no one had read but on which everyone had an opinion. The title of the paper was something like "Modifications in the Sprague Method of Analysis of Extra-Sensory Experimentation Data," but the academic mind with its faculty for generalization had quickly gone beyond the paper and Rollins' theories to a discussion on whether there was anything in "this business of the supernatural," with burly Professor Lionel Graham, Associate in Physics, asserting that "of course, there couldn't be when you considered the type of people who went in for it, gypsies and what not." And gentle, absentminded Roscoe Summers, Professor of Archaeology, maintaining doggedly that you couldn't always tell by that and that he had heard stories from people whose judgment he respected that made you pause and think a bit.

To which Professor Graham retorted, “That’s just the trouble. It’s always something that happened to somebody else. Or better still, something that somebody told you that happened to somebody *he* knew.” Then catching sight of us, he said, “Isn’t that right, Nicky? Did you ever hear about anything supernatural as having happened to somebody you yourself knew well and whose word and opinion you could rely on?”

Nicky’s lined, gnomelike face relaxed in a frosty little smile. “I’m afraid that’s how I get most of my information,” he said. “I mean through hearing about it at third or fourth hand.”

Dr. Chisholm, the young instructor in English Composition, had been trying to get a word in and now he succeeded. “I had a case last summer. I mean I was there and witnessed something that was either supernatural or was a most remarkable coincidence.”

“Something on the stage, or was it a seance in a dark room?” asked Graham with a sneer.

“Neither,” said Chisholm defiantly. “I saw a man cursed and he died of it.” He caught sight of a pompous little man with a shining bald head and he called out, “Professor Rollins, won’t you join us? I’m sure you’d be interested in a little incident I was about to tell.”

Professor Rollins, the author of the paper in the *Quarterly*, approached and the men sitting on the red leather divan moved over respectfully to make room for him. But he seemed to sense that he was being asked to listen as an expert and he selected a straight-backed chair as being more in keeping with the judicial role he was to play.

I spent my summer vacation (Chisholm began) in a little village on the Maine coast. It was not a regular summer resort and there was little to do all day long except sit on the rocks and watch the gulls as they swooped above the water. But I had worked hard all year and it was precisely what I wanted.

The center of the town was inland, clustered about the little railroad depot, and I was fortunate in getting a room way out at the end of town near the water. My host was a man named Doble, a widower in his forties, a decent quiet man who was good company when I wanted company and who did not obtrude when I just wanted to sit and daydream. He did a little farming and had some chickens; he had a boat and some lobster pots; and

for the rest, he'd make a little money at various odd jobs. He didn't work by the day but would contract for the whole job which put him a cut above the ordinary odd jobman, I suppose.

Ours was the last house on the road and our nearest neighbor was about a hundred yards away. It was a large nineteenth century mansion, set back from the road, and decorated with the traditional fretsaw trim and numerous turrets and gables. It was owned and occupied by Cyrus Cartwright, the president of the local bank and the richest man in town.

He was a brisk, eager sort of man, like the advertisement for a correspondence course in salesmanship, the type of man who carries two watches and is always glancing at his wristwatch and then checking it against his pocket watch.

(Chisholm warmed as he described Cyrus Cartwright, the result of the natural antipathy of a man who spends his summer watching sea gulls for the type of man who weighs out his life in small minutes. Now he smiled disarmingly and shrugged his shoulders.)

I saw him only once. I had come in town with Doble and before going home, he stopped in at the bank to see if Cartwright was still interested in making some change in the electric wiring system in his house which they had talked about some months ago. It was typical of Doble that he should only now be coming around to make further inquiry about it.

Cartwright glanced at the radium dial of his wrist-watch and then tugged at his watch chain and drew out his pocket watch, squeezing it out of its protective chamois covering. He mistook my interest in the ritual for interest in the watch itself and held it out so that I could see it, explaining with some condescension that it was a repeater, a five-minute repeater he was at some pains to point out, and then proceeded to demonstrate it by pressing a catch so that I could hear it tinkle the hour and then in a different key tinkle once for every five-minute interval after the hour.

I made some comparison between the man who carries two watches and the man who wears both a belt and suspenders. But though he realized I was joking, he said with some severity, "Time is money, sir, and I like to know just where I am with both. So I keep accurate books and accurate watches."

Having put me in my place, he turned to Doble and said crisply, "I don't think I'll bother with it, Doble. It was Jack's idea having the extra light and

switch in the hallway and now that he's gone into the service, I don't think I'll need it. When it gets dark, I go to bed."

Once again he glanced at his wristwatch, checked its accuracy against his pocket watch as before, and then he smiled at us, a short, meaningless, businessman's smile of dismissal.

As I say, I saw him only that once, but I heard a great deal about him. You know how it is, you hear a man's name mentioned for the first time and then it seems to pop up again and again in the next few days.

According to Doble, Cartwright was a tight-fisted old skinflint who had remained a bachelor, probably to save the expense of supporting a wife.

When I pointed out that paying a housekeeper to come in every day was almost as expensive as keeping a wife, and that in addition he had brought up his nephew Jack, Doble retorted that nobody but Mrs. Knox would take the job of Cartwright's housekeeper and that she took it only because no one else would take her. She was almost stone deaf and general opinion was that her wages were small indeed.

"As for Jack," he went on, "the old man never let him see a penny more than he actually needed. He never had a dime in his pocket, and when he'd go into town of an evening, he'd just have to hang around—usually didn't even have the price of a movie. Nice young fellow too," he added reflectively.

"He could have got a job and left," I suggested.

"I suppose he could've," Doble said slowly, "but he's the old man's heir, you see, and I guess he figured it was kind of politic, as you might say, to hang around doing any little jobs at the bank that the old man might ask of him."

I was not too favorably impressed with the young man's character from Doble's description, but I changed my mind when he came down a few days later on furlough.

He turned out to be a decent chap, quiet and reserved, but with a quick and imaginative mind. We grew quite close in those few days and saw a great deal of each other. We went fishing off the rocks, or lazed around in the sun a good deal talking of all sorts of things, or shot at chips in the water with an old rifle that he had.

He kept his gun and fishing rod over at our house. And that gives some indication of the character of Cyrus Cartwright and of Jack's relations with

him. He explained that his uncle knew that he wasn't doing anything during this week of furlough and didn't really expect him to, but if he saw him with the fishing rod, that traditional symbol of idleness, it would seem as though he were flaunting his indolence in his face. As for the gun, Cyrus Cartwright considered shooting at any target that could not subsequently be eaten as an extravagant waste of money for shells.

Jack came over every evening to play cribbage or perhaps to sit on the porch and sip at a glass of beer and argue about some book he had read at my suggestion. Sometimes he spoke about his uncle and in discussing him, he was not bitter—ironic, rather.

On one occasion he explained, "My uncle is a good man according to his lights. He likes money because it gives him a sense of accomplishment to have more than anyone else in town. But that alone doesn't make him a hard person to live with. What does make him difficult is that everything is set in a rigid routine, a senseless routine, and his household has to conform to it. After dinner, he sits and reads his paper until it gets dark. Then he looks at his wristwatch and shakes his head a little as though he didn't believe it was that late. Then he takes his pocket watch out and checks the wristwatch against it. But of course, even that doesn't satisfy him. So he goes into the dining room where he has an electric clock and he sets both watches by that.

"When he's got all timepieces perfectly synchronized, he says, 'Well, it's getting late,' and he goes upstairs to his room. In about fifteen minutes he calls to me and I go up to find him already in bed.

"'I forgot to fix the windows,' he says. So I open them an inch at the top and an inch at the bottom. It takes a bit of doing because if I should open them a quarter of an inch too wide, he says he'll catch his death of cold, and if it is short of an inch, he's sure he'll smother. But finally I get them adjusted just right and he says, 'My watch, would you mind, Jack?' So I get his pocket watch that he had put on the bureau while undressing and I put it on the night table near his bed.

"As far back as I can remember, I've had to do that little chore. I am sure he insists on it so as to fix our relations in my mind. While I was away, he must have remembered to do it for himself, but the first day I got back I had to do it."

(Chisholm looked from one to the other of us as if to make sure that we all understood the characters and their relations with each other. I nodded encouragingly and he continued.)

Jack was scheduled to leave Sunday morning and naturally we expected to see him Saturday, but he did not show up during the day. He came over in the evening, after dinner, however, and he was hot and angry.

“The hottest day of the summer,” he exclaimed, “and today of all days my uncle suddenly finds a bunch of errands for me to do. I’ve been all over the county and I couldn’t even take the car. I’ll bet you fellows were lying out on the beach all day. How about going in for a dip right now?”

Well, of course, we had been in and out of the water all day long, but it was still hot and muggy, and besides we could see that he wanted very much to go, so we agreed. We took some beer down and we didn’t bother with bathing suits since it was already quite dark. After a while, however, it began to get chilly. It had clouded up and the air was oppressive as though a storm were impending. So we got dressed again and went back to our house.

The atmosphere had a charged, electric quality about it, and whether it was that or because he was leaving the following day, Jack was unusually quiet and conversation lagged. Around half past eleven, he rose and stretched and said he thought he ought to be going.

“It’s been good meeting you,” he said. “I didn’t look forward to this furlough particularly, but now I’m sure I’m going to look back on it.”

We shook hands and he started for the door. Then he remembered about his fishing rod and his rifle and came back for them. He seemed reluctant to leave us, and Doble, understanding, said, “We might as well walk down with you, Jack.”

He nodded gratefully and all three of us strolled out into the darkness. We walked along slowly, Jack with his fishing rod over one shoulder and his gun over the other.

I offered to carry the gun, but he shook his head and handed me the rod instead. I took it and walked on in silence until we reached the gate of his uncle’s house. Perhaps he misinterpreted my silence and felt that he had been ungracious, for he said, “I’m a lot more used to carrying a rifle than you are.” And then lest I take his remark as a reflection on my not being in

the service, he hurried on with, "I'm kind of fond of this gun. I've had it a long time and had a lot of fun with it."

He patted the stock affectionately like a boy with a dog and then he nestled the butt against his shoulder and sighted along the barrel.

"Better not, Jack," said Doble with a grin. "You'll wake your uncle."

"Damn my uncle," he retorted lightly, and before we could stop him, he pulled the trigger.

In that silence, the crack of the rifle was like a thunderclap. I suppose we all expected one of the windows to fly up and the irate voice of old Cartwright to demand what was going on. In any case, instinctively, like three small boys, we all ducked down behind the fence where we could not be seen. We waited several minutes, afraid to talk lest we be overheard. But when nothing happened, we straightened up slowly and Doble said, "You better get to bed, Jack. I think maybe you've had a little too much beer."

"Maybe I ought at that," Jack answered and eased the gate open.

Then he turned and whispered, "Say, do you fellows mind waiting a minute? I think I may have locked the door and I haven't a key."

We nodded and watched as he hurried down the path to the house. Just before he reached the door, however, he hesitated, stopped, and then turned and came hurrying back to us.

"Could you put me up for the night, Doble?" he asked in a whisper.

"Why sure, Jack. Was the door locked?"

He didn't answer immediately and we started down the road to our house. We had gone about halfway when he said, "I didn't check to see if the door was locked or not."

"I noticed that," I remarked.

There was another silence and then as we mounted the porch steps, the moon, which had been hidden by clouds, suddenly broke through and I saw that he was deathly pale.

"What's the matter, Jack?" I asked quickly.

He shook his head and did not answer. I put my hand on his arm and asked again, "Are you all right?"

He nodded and tried to smile.

"I've—I've—Something funny happened to me," he said. "Did you mean what you said the other day about believing in spirits?"

At first I could not think what he was referring to, and then I remembered having argued—not too seriously—for belief in the supernatural during a discussion of William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which I had lent him.

I shrugged my shoulders noncommittally, wondering what he was getting at.

He smiled wanly. “I didn’t really have too much beer,” he said and looked at me for confirmation.

“No, I don’t think you did,” I said quietly.

“Look,” he went on, “I’m cold sober. And I was sober a few minutes ago when I started for my uncle’s house. But as I came near the door, I felt something like a cushion of air building up against me to block my progress. And then, just before I reached the door, it became so strong that I could not go on. It was like a wall in front of me. But it was something more than an inanimate wall. It did not merely block me, but seemed to be pushing me back as though it had a will and intelligence like a strong man. It frightened me and I turned back. I’m still frightened.”

“Your uncle—” I began.

“Damn my uncle!” he said vehemently. “I hope he falls and breaks his neck.”

Just then Doble’s kitchen clock chimed twelve. The brassy ring, coming just as he finished, seemed to stamp the curse with fateful approval.

It made us all a little uncomfortable. We didn’t seem to feel like talking, and after a while we went to bed.

We were awakened the next morning early by someone pounding on the door. Doble slipped his trousers on and I managed to get into my bathrobe. We reached the front door about the same time. It was Mrs. Knox, Cartwright’s housekeeper, and she was in a state of considerable excitement.

“Mister Cartwright’s dead!” she shouted to us. “There’s been an accident.”

Since she was deaf, it was no use to question her. We motioned her to wait while we put on our shoes. Then we followed her back to the house. The front door was open as she had left it when she had hurried over to us. And from the doorway we could see the figure of Cyrus Cartwright in an

old-fashioned nightgown, lying at the foot of the stairs, his head in a sticky pool of blood.

He was dead all right, and looking up we could see the bit of rumpled carpeting at the head of the stairs which had probably tripped him up and catapulted him down the long staircase.

He had died as he had lived, for in his right hand he still clutched his precious pocket watch. The watch he was wearing on his wrist, however, had smashed when he fell and it gave us the time of his death. The hands pointed to just before twelve, the exact time as near as I could judge, that Jack had uttered his curse!

There was a minute of appreciative silence after Chisholm finished. I could see that no one's opinion had been changed materially by the story. Those who had been skeptical were scornful now and those who were inclined to believe, were triumphant, but we all turned to Professor Rollins to see what he thought and he was nodding his head portentously.

Nicky, however, was the first to speak. "And the pocket watch," he said, "Had that stopped, too?"

"No, that was ticking away merrily," Chisholm replied. "I guess his hand must have cushioned it when he fell. It had probably been badly jarred though, because it was running almost an hour ahead."

Nicky nodded grimly.

"What about Jack? How did he take it?" I asked.

Chisholm considered for a moment. "He was upset naturally, not so much over his uncle's death, I fancy, since he did not care for him very much, but because of the fact that it confirmed his fears of the night before that some supernatural influence was present." He smiled sadly. "I did not see him much after that. He had got his leave extended, but he was busy with his uncle's affairs. When finally he went back to the Army, he promised to write, but he never did. Just last week, however, I got a letter from Doble. He writes me occasionally—just the usual gossip of the town. In his letter he mentions that Jack Cartwright crashed in his first solo flight."

"Ah." Professor Rollins showed interest. "I don't mind admitting that I rather expected something like that."

"You expected Jack to die?" Chisholm asked in amazement.

Rollins nodded vigorously. "This was truly a supernatural manifestation. I haven't the slightest doubt about it. For one thing, Jack felt the supernatural forces. And the curse, followed almost immediately by its fulfillment even to the manner of death, that is most significant. Now, of course we know very little of these things, but we suspect that they follow a definite pattern. Certain types of supernatural forces have what might be called an ironic bent, a sort of perverted sense of humor. To be sure, when Jack uttered his fervent wish that his uncle fall and break his neck, he was speaking as a result of a momentary exasperation, but it is the nature of evil or mischievous forces to grant just such wishes. We meet with it again and again in folklore and fairy tales, which are probably the cryptic or symbolic expression of the wisdom of the folk. The pattern is familiar to you all, I am sure, from the stories of your childhood. The wicked character is granted three wishes by a fairy, only to waste them through wishes that are just such common expressions of exasperation as Jack used. You see, when supernatural forces are present, a mere wish, fervently expressed, may serve to focus them, as it were. And that is what happened at the Cartwright house that fateful evening."

He held up a forefinger to ward off the questions that leaped to our minds.

"There is another element in the pattern," he went on soberly, "and that is that whenever a person does profit materially through the use of evil supernatural forces, even though unintentionally on his part, sooner or later, they turn on him and destroy him. I have no doubt that Jack's death was just as much the result of supernatural forces as was the death of his uncle."

Professor Graham muttered something that sounded like "Rubbish."

Dana Rollins, who could have gone on indefinitely I suppose, stopped abruptly and glared.

But Professor Graham was not one to be silenced by a look. "The young man died as a result of a plane crash. Well, so did thousands of others. Had they all been granted three wishes by a wicked fairy? Poppycock! The young man died because he went up in a plane. That's reason enough. As for the old man, he tumbled down the stairs and cracked his skull or broke his neck, whichever it was. You say his nephew's curse must have been uttered about the same time. Well, even granting that by some miracle Doble's kitchen clock was synchronized to Cartwright's watches, that

would still be nothing more than a coincidence. The chances are that the young man uttered that same wish hundreds of times. It was only natural: he was his heir and besides, he didn't like him. Now on one of those hundreds of times, it actually happened. There's nothing supernatural in that—not even anything out of the ordinary. It makes a good story, young man, but it doesn't prove anything.”

“And Jack's sensing of a supernatural force,” asked Chisholm icily, “is that just another coincidence?”

Graham shrugged his massive shoulders. “That was probably just an excuse not to go home. He was probably afraid he'd get a dressing down from his uncle for shooting off his rifle in the middle of the night. What do you think, Nicky?”

Nicky's little blue eyes glittered. “I rather think,” he said, “that the young man was not so much afraid of his uncle asking him about the rifle as he was that he would ask him what time it was.”

We all laughed at Nicky's joke. But Professor Graham was not to be put off.

“Seriously, Nicky,” he urged.

“Well then, seriously,” said Nicky with a smile as though he were indulging a bright but impetuous freshman, “I think you're quite right in calling the young man's death an accident. Parenthetically, I might point out that Dr. Chisholm did not suggest that it was anything else. As for the uncle's death, I cannot agree with you that it was merely coincidence.”

Professor Rollins pursed his lips and appeared to be considering Nicky's cavalier dismissal of half his theory, but it was obvious that he was pleased at his support for the other half. I could not help reflecting how Nicky automatically assumed control over any group that he found himself in. He had a way of treating people, even his colleagues on the faculty, as though they were immature schoolboys. And curiously, people fell into this role that he assigned to them.

Professor Graham, however, was not yet satisfied. “But dammit all, Nicky,” he insisted, “a man trips on a bit of carpet and falls downstairs. What is there unusual about that?”

“In the first place, I think it is unusual that he should go downstairs at all,” said Nicky. “Why do you suppose he did?”

Professor Graham looked at him in aggrieved surprise like a student who has just been asked what he considers an unfair question.

“How should I know why he went downstairs?” he said. “I suppose he couldn’t sleep and wanted a snack, or maybe a book to read.”

“And took his pocket watch with him?”

“Well, according to Chisholm he was always checking his wristwatch against it.”

Nicky shook his head. “When you’re wearing two watches, it’s almost impossible not to check the other after you’ve glanced at the one, just as we automatically glance at our watches when we pass the clock in the jeweler’s window even though we might have set it by the radio only a minute or two before. But for Cyrus Cartwright to take his pocket watch downstairs with him when he had a watch on his wrist is something else again. I can think of only one reason for it.”

“And what’s that?” asked Chisholm curiously.

“To see what time it was on the electric clock.”

I could understand something of Graham’s exasperation as he exclaimed, “But dammit, Nicky, the man had two watches. Why would he want to go downstairs to see the time?”

“Because in this case, two watches were not as good as one,” said Nicky quietly.

I tried to understand. Did he mean that the supernatural force that had manifested itself to Jack Cartwright that night and had prevented him from entering the house had somehow tampered with the watches?

“What was wrong with them?” I asked.

“They disagreed.”

Then he leaned back in his chair and looked about him with an air of having explained everything. There was a short silence and as he scanned our faces, his expression of satisfaction changed to one of annoyance.

“Don’t you see yet what happened?” he demanded. “When you wake up in the middle of the night, the first thing you do is look at the clock on the mantelpiece or your watch on the night table in order to orient yourself. That’s precisely what Cyrus Cartwright did. He woke up and glancing at his wristwatch he saw that it was a quarter to twelve, say. Then quite automatically he reached for his pocket watch on the night table. He pressed the catch and the chiming mechanism tinkled twelve and then went on to

tinkle half or three quarters past. He had set the watches only a few hours before and both of them were going, and yet one was about an hour faster than the other. Which was right? What time was it? I fancy he tried the repeater again and again and then tried to dismiss the problem from his mind until morning. But after tossing about for a few minutes, he realized that if he hoped to get back to sleep that night, he would have to go downstairs to see what time it really was." Nicky turned to Chisholm. "You see, the jar from the fall would not have moved the watch ahead. A blow will either stop the movement or it might speed up or slow down the escapement for a few seconds. But a watch with hands so loose that a jar will move them would be useless as a timepiece. Hence, the watch must have been moved ahead sometime before the fall. Cyrus Cartwright would not do it, which means that his nephew must have, probably while transferring the watch, from the bureau to the night table."

"You mean accidentally?" asked Chisholm. "Or to annoy his uncle?"

Nicky's little blue eyes glittered. "Not to annoy him," he said, "to murder him!"

He smiled pleasantly at our stupefaction. "Oh yes, no doubt about it," he assured us. "After arranging the windows to his uncle's satisfaction and placing the watch on the night table, Jack bade his uncle a courteous good night. And on his way out, he stopped just long enough to rumple or double over the bit of carpet at the head of the stairs. There was no light in the hallway remember."

"But—but I don't understand. I don't see—I mean, how did he know that his uncle was going to wake up in the middle of the night?" Chisholm finally managed.

"Firing off his rifle under his uncle's windows insured that, I fancy," Nicky replied. He smiled. "And now you can understand, I trust, why he could not enter his uncle's house that night. He was afraid that his uncle, awake now, would hear him come in and instead of venturing downstairs, would simply call down to him to ask what time it was."

This time we did not laugh.

The silence that followed was suddenly broken by the chiming of the chapel clock. Subconsciously, we glanced at our watches, and then realizing what we were doing, we all laughed.

"Quite," said Nicky.

About the Author

Harry Kemelman (1908–1996) was best known for his popular rabbinical mystery series featuring the amateur sleuth Rabbi David Small. Kemelman wrote twelve novels in the series, the first of which, *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, won the Edgar Award for Best First Novel. This book was also adapted as an NBC made-for-TV movie, and the Rabbi Small Mysteries were the inspiration for the NBC television show *Lanigan's Rabbi*. Kemelman's novels garnered praise for their unique combination of mystery and Judaism, and with Rabbi Small, the author created a protagonist who played a part-time detective with wit and charm. Kemelman also wrote a series of short stories about Nicky Welt, a college professor who used logic to solve crimes, which were published in a collection entitled *The Nine Mile Walk*.

Aside from being an award-winning novelist, Kemelman, originally from Boston, was also an English professor.

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