

Cook's Clock by Kate Mulley

Characters:

Ravi- early 30s, Indian man.
Emma- 30, Englishwoman
Sara- late 20s, Indian woman
Neel- late 20s, Indian man
Child- 9, Indian child
Man- 60, Indian man

Setting:

A town in northern India, present day.

The stage is dark. A clock is ticking. Two people stand onstage facing out. Behind them a screen shows a video of the face of an old clock playing in real time. It is 20 minutes to 4.

It's in here. RAVI

Could you turn the lights on, please? EMMA

They are on. RAVI

Are they? EMMA

The electricity comes and goes. RAVI

Oh. EMMA

So I'm afraid you can't see it. RAVI

And I've come all this way. EMMA

Hopefully they will come on soon. RAVI

How long does it usually take? EMMA

It's not an exact science. RAVI

If it were they would work all the time, I suppose. EMMA

Yes, precisely. (*pause*) Have you seen it before? RAVI

Not in person. EMMA

No, but a photograph? It is very famous. RAVI

A very old photograph. EMMA

Shall I describe it to you? RAVI

If you'd like. EMMA

Lights flash on. There is a burst of color and music. There is a crowd of people huddled around a door. A child, two men, one woman. They all speak very quickly. And are watching the screen.

Eighteen minutes! CHILD

Yes, yes. NEEL

Shouldn't you be in school? SARA

No, we just got out. CHILD

So short the school days now. SARA

No they are not. They go on forever. In class today, I almost fell asleep because I was so tired and the hours dragged on and on— CHILD

Quiet child, I'm watching the clock. MAN

There's nothing to watch. NEEL

Nothing to watch! Nothing to watch! There is everything to watch. MAN

Do you want to know what we learned about today? CHILD

Of course, I do. SARA

Today we learned the times table. CHILD

Give me the nines then. SARA

The nines? CHILD

Yes. SARA

Oh, but the nines are hard. CHILD

No they aren't. SARA

They are. CHILD

There's a trick. SARA

There's a trick? CHILD

Don't teach her tricks. NEEL

Why not? SARA

Seventeen minutes!! CHILD

She's a girl. NEEL

What does that have to do with it? SARA

Well— NEEL

The *trick* is that all the numbers add up to nine. SARA

What do you mean? CHILD

So. 9 times 2 is 18, right? SARA

Right. CHILD

And 1 plus 8 is 9. SARA

It doesn't work for all of them though. CHILD

Yes, it does. SARA

9 times 8 is.... CHILD

72. NEEL

And 7 plus 2 is... CHILD

9. MAN

Oh! CHILD

The lights darken again. We see the two people facing out.

So will it be another few minutes, or more like hours? EMMA

It's never the same. RAVI

That must be frustrating. EMMA

No, we are used to it. RAVI

But it's always different. EMMA

Yes, that is what we are used to. RAVI

How dreadful. EMMA

A long pause.

RAVI
Do you like India, Miss Emma?

EMMA
Very much so.

RAVI
I'm glad. India is a fine country.

EMMA
It is! So vibrant!

RAVI
Do you mind my asking... are you married?

EMMA
Oh, no.

RAVI
Why not? You would make a good wife.

EMMA
That's the problem.

RAVI
Why is that a problem?

EMMA
No one's looking for a good wife.

RAVI
You have come to the right country, Miss Emma. Here we look for good wives.

EMMA
I'll keep that in mind.

RAVI
Have you, maybe, come to India looking for a husband?

Emma laughs.

EMMA
Oh, no. I've come for the clock.

RAVI
It is a very fine clock.

EMMA
It is. (*pause*) Actually, I've come to bring it back to England.

Silence.

EMMA

The clock was designed by my great-great-grandfather.

RAVI

Archibald Cook?!

EMMA

Erm... yes.

RAVI

You are related to Archibald Cook?

EMMA

Yes.

RAVI

You should have told me before.

EMMA

I didn't think it would make a difference.

RAVI

We must arrange a feast.

EMMA

Oh, that seems a little extravagant.

RAVI

This clock he bestowed upon us was the greatest gift our town could have. Our prized possession. To host the offspring of this great man is a true blessing.

EMMA

It's not like I knew him.

RAVI

But perhaps you carry a piece of his genius inside you.

EMMA

Yes, maybe.

RAVI

I will be right back.

EMMA

Where are you going?

RAVI

I will be right back.

RAVI leaves EMMA. Lights flash on. We see the group of people huddled around the door again. The door bursts open and we see RAVI.

Ravi!	SARA
Everyone. We must start planning a feast.	RAVI
A feast? For what?	NEEL
The white woman is related to Archibald Cook.	RAVI
The man who built the clock!	CHILD
Yes!	RAVI
Can I meet her?	CHILD
No, not yet.	RAVI
Where do you expect me to conjure up a feast from?	SARA
That's not my problem.	RAVI
We don't have enough food.	SARA
Buy some.	RAVI
From where?	SARA
Raj.	RAVI
With what money?	SARA
	RAVI

I don't know.

SARA

I'm not preparing a feast for a white woman just because of who her ancestors were. If she can afford to travel to our town, she can feed herself.

RAVI

Sara! We must present ourselves in a good light.

SARA

And how will serving her a meal of roti and dal do that?

RAVI

There is o meat?

SARA

Of course no meat.

CHILD

I'd like to have a feast.

RAVI

I think we would all like to have a feast.

SARA

I'd like to know what food you expect us to serve.

NEEL

Get the white woman to pay.

RAVI

What?

NEEL

She has the money.

RAVI

But she's our guest.

NEEL

And she has money.

SARA

I don't want any charity from this Englishwoman.

RAVI

She's lovely. *(to Neel)* She's not married yet.

NEEL

Is she pretty?

SARA

She's pale as a ghost. Orange hair.

RAVI

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

SARA

You're an idiot.

NEEL

Let me see her.

NEEL goes over to the door and opens it. Peeking in. He closes the door.

NEEL

Where are the lights?

RAVI

Not working.

NEEL

Ah.

NEEL opens the door again. The scene changes to the dark room.

NEEL

Good day.

EMMA

Ravi?

NEEL

No. I am Neel.

EMMA

Where did Ravi go?

NEEL

He's preparing the feast.

EMMA

Oh. That's very kind of him. I told him not to bother.

NEEL strikes a match, lighting up EMMA's face.

NEEL

You are from England?

EMMA

Yes, London.

NEEL

I studied in London.

EMMA

Did you?

NEEL

Yes. English literature.

EMMA

Really? What period?

NEEL

Victorian.

EMMA

Wow. I love Victorian literature. You must quite like the clock as well.

NEEL

No, the clock is a silly contraption.

EMMA

Oh, Ravi made it sound like—

NEEL

Ravi is always speaking for everyone.

EMMA

Oh, I'm sorry—

NEEL

London is a terrible city.

EMMA

Why? I love London.

NEEL

It is filled with so many people. And they are all so different. And speak different languages. It is confusing.

EMMA

That's what's so wonderful about London.

NEEL

It is lonely.

The match burns NEEL's fingers, he drops it on the floor and steps on it.

EMMA
So you came back to India?

NEEL
I could not stay in London even if I had wanted to.

EMMA
No, I suppose not.

The door opens a crack.

SARA
Neel?

NEEL
Yes.

SARA
Can I have a word?

NEEL
Yes, Sara.

NEEL leaves, lights flash on, revealing NEEL coming back into the room.

SARA
Well?

NEEL
It's too dark. I cannot see her well enough.

RAVI
If anyone marries her. I do.

NEEL
You are already spoken for.

RAVI
It is a very loose arrangement.

NEEL
I'll tell her you said that.

RAVI
No. no, don't do that.

NEEL
I would not marry an Englishwoman if my life depended on it.

RAVI

(matter of fact)
You did not find her pretty.

NEEL
She is horrible.

RAVI
We're still having a feast for her.

CHILD
A feast! I'm so hungry.

SARA
You are always hungry.

CHILD
Because I'm growing.

SARA
You are not growing that much.

EMMA peeks her head out of the door.

EMMA
Hello. It's quite dark in there.

RAVI
Miss Emma!

Awkward pause.

RAVI
We are planning your feast!

EMMA
I don't need a feast.

SARA
You see. She doesn't even want our feast.

EMMA
I have very strict dietary restrictions.

RAVI
What?

EMMA
There are many things I cannot eat.

RAVI
For religion.

No. EMMA

Why then? RAVI

They make me ill. EMMA

Oh. RAVI

Dairy, wheat, most meats. EMMA

What do you eat then? RAVI

Hummus. Spinach. White rice. EMMA

We cannot make a feast with that. RAVI

Ravi, we don't have that. SARA

Have you eaten Shahi Paneer? NEEL

No. EMMA

Sara's Shahi Paneer is delicious. NEEL

I can't eat paneer. EMMA

Why not? NEEL

It's dairy. I can't eat dairy. EMMA

Still. You must try it. RAVI

She can't eat it. I'm not going to make it if she's not going to eat it. SARA

EMMA

If I may, I'd like to talk about the clock.

CHILD

Is she talking about the clock?

RAVI

You must already know the history?

EMMA

Mostly.

RAVI

After a visit to India with his wife and son, Archibald Cook fell in love with the people of this humble town. The hospitality that he encountered and the kindness of the people affected him so deeply that he donated this clock, his favorite, to the people of the town, when he died. It took many years for the clock to arrive, but when it did, the townspeople were overjoyed and enchanted by its charming craftsmanship.

NEEL

It's a piece of trash. It belongs in a dump.

RAVI

Do not say that in front of Miss Emma.

NEEL

She can't understand me.

RAVI

You don't need to understand the words coming out of your mouth to read the expression on your face.

MAN

Ravi, don't get angry with Neel.

RAVI

I'm not getting angry.

MAN

You sound like you're getting angry.

EMMA

Excuse me.

NEEL

What?

Silence.

EMMA
I've come to take the clock back to London.

SARA
The clock?

CHILD
What does she want with the clock?

NEEL
Take it. It's yours.

RAVI
She cannot have the clock.

NEEL
Why not?

RAVI
It was given to us by Archibald Cook. It's in his will.

NEEL
Let her have it.

RAVI
Miss Emma, I cannot allow you to take the clock.

EMMA
Why not?

RAVI
It is very special to our village.

NEEL
It's rubbish.

RAVI
And we love it so dearly.

EMMA
I—

CHILD
Five minutes!!!

MAN
Oh! Only five minutes.

EMMA
What—

EMMA notices the screen showing the clock face.

EMMA
Is that the clock?

RAVI
Yes.

EMMA
Why is it on the television screen?

RAVI
So we can watch it.

EMMA
But can't you watch it inside?

RAVI
It's for when there are too many people inside.

NEEL
Or when the lights don't work.

EMMA
But why—

RAVI
(gleeful)
As you must already know, this clock is renowned for its craftsmanship and every hour, a certain scene takes place. The soldier comes into the room, the blacksmith continues to hammer, and then when the hour strikes, the soldier hits the bell with his gun.

EMMA
I didn't know that, no.

CHILD
Here he comes!

On the screen, a soldier has entered the "room" of the clock.

EMMA
And that's the soldier.

RAVI
Of course.

EMMA
Has the clock ever stopped?

RAVI

Oh, Miss Emma! No. If the clock stopped. I don't know what we would do.

NEEL

We would throw it in a trash heap.

MAN

We would send away to England for a repairman.

SARA

With what money?

MAN

Raj has money.

SARA

Raj does not have money. Raj only says he has money.

CHILD

Three minutes.

EMMA

This is all very exciting, but I do need to talk to someone about arranging for the clock to come back to England with me. I leave tonight.

NEEL

How do you plan to ship it all the way back to England?

EMMA
(*unsure*)

Freight.

RAVI leaves in the hubbub.

MAN

You cannot take this clock away.

EMMA

Is there a town authority I can speak to about this?

MAN

I am the mayor.

EMMA

Oh.

MAN

I'm not really the mayor. (*a pause*) You think the mayor of our town would sit around watching a clock all day? Silly Englishwoman.

EMMA

I don't know.

NEEL

Of course she thought you would be the mayor.

EMMA

Many mayors sit around and watch clocks.

The old man laughs.

MAN

The Englishwoman is funny.

EMMA

Thank you.

MAN

But she cannot have the clock.

CHILD

Why do you think you can take the clock away?

EMMA

It belongs to my family.

NEEL

It does not belong to your family. It was given to our town.

EMMA

I thought you didn't want the clock.

NEEL

I don't.

EMMA

Then help me take it back with me.

NEEL

Why?

EMMA

Because—

MAN

Look!

The clock has stopped. Everyone gasps.

CHILD

The clock has stopped!

Good riddance. NEEL

Oh how terrible! EMMA

This is your doing. MAN

Mine? EMMA

You come in here and you want to take our clock and it refuses to be taken. MAN

It's just a clock. EMMA

Just a clock! You do not deserve this clock if you think it is just a clock. MAN

I mean no disrespect. EMMA

How can you say that? NEEL

I didn't know. EMMA

RAVI rushes back in.

Oh no. What has happened to the clock? RAVI

It stopped. Where were you? SARA

Looking for Raj. RAVI

Did you find him? SARA

No. RAVI

The Englishwoman has cursed the clock. MAN

CHILD
I hate the Englishwoman.

EMMA
I haven't meant to cause any trouble.

NEEL
Of course you haven't.

EMMA
My grandmother is dying.

NEEL
I'm sorry.

EMMA
She always wanted to travel to India. She always wanted to see this clock. I thought maybe, that I could come here and bring it back to her before she died.

RAVI
But now the clock is broken, you cannot bring your grandmother a broken clock.

EMMA
I don't think it would make a difference whether it's working or not.

RAVI
But it is broken!

EMMA
It still has a sentimental value to it.

NEEL
Let her take the clock, if it's broken, what do you want with it?

MAN
I will not watch a broken clock.

CHILD
The soldier will never hit the bell again.

SARA
What about your cries of getting a repairman over from England?

MAN
We cannot afford that.

CHILD
I could try to fix it!

NEEL
How?

CHILD
I don't know. I'm clever though.

RAVI
You cannot give up because it's broken.

EMMA
Maybe, if you let me take it back with me, I could get it fixed. And then promise to send it back once my grandmother has seen it.

MAN
That is very expensive.

EMMA
I traveled all this way for it, didn't I?

RAVI
Yes.

NEEL
How do we know you won't keep it?

EMMA
You have my word.

NEEL
And you expect us to trust that?

EMMA
I will leave you this pendant. It belonged to my grandmother. I will return with the fixed clock and retrieve my pendant.

EMMA takes the pendant off, giving it to SARA.

SARA
It is beautiful.

NEEL
It will feed us for a year.

EMMA
May I go in, to see the clock?

RAVI
No, no. Not yet.

EMMA
Why not?

The lights are still not working. RAVI

It's ok. I will light a match. EMMA

But— RAVI

EMMA exits into the room. The lights darken and we are back in the room with the clock. There is silence. Except the ticking of the clock. EMMA lights a match, holds it up to her face looking out at the audience (where the clock is). The bell rings four times.

Oh. EMMA

Slowly the ticking clock sound fades. And the match burns her fingers. End of play.