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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CUCKOO CLOCK ***

THE CUCKOO CLOCK

BY WESLEY BAREFOOT

You know a murderer preys on your household—lives with you—depends on you—and you have no defence!

DEATH wore the seeming of a battered Chevrolet.

The child's scream and the screech of rubber on concrete knifed through two seconds of time before snapping, like a celery stalk of sound, into aching silence. The silence of limbo, called into being for the space of a slow heartbeat. Then the thud of running feet, the rising hubbub of many voices.

"Give her air!"

"Keep back. Don't try to move her."

"Somebody call an ambulance."

"Yeah, and somebody call a cop, too."

"I couldn't help it." It was the driver of the ramshackle Chevvie. "She fell off the curb right in front of me. Honest to God, it wasn't my fault."

"Got to report these things right away," said the grey-haired man beside him. "No cause to worry if you ain't to blame."

"Probably no brakes," said a heavily accented voice, and another spoke as if on cue, "Probably no insurance, neither."

"Let me through! Oh, please—" The woman's voice was on the edge of hysteria. She came through the crowd like an automaton, not seeing the people she shoved and elbowed aside.

"D.O.A.," said the woman heavily. Her face was no longer twisted with shock, and she was almost pretty again. "D.O.A. Dead on arrival, it means. Oh, Jim, I never knew they said that." Suddenly there were tears in her blue eyes. There had been many tears, now.

"Take it easy, Jean, honey." Jim Blair hoisted his lank six feet out of the old rocker, and crossed the room, running a nervous hand through his cornshuck hair. *She's only thirty, he thought, and I'm three years older. That's awfully young to have bred three kids and lost them.* He took her in his arms. "I know how tough it is. It's bad enough for me, and probably worse for you. But at least we're sure they'll never be bomb

Illustrator: Ernie Barth

fodder. And we still have Joanna."

She twisted away from him, her voice suddenly bitter. "Don't give me that Pollyanna stuff, Jim. 'Goody, goody, only a broken leg. It might have been your back.' There's no use trying to whitewash it. Our kids, our *own* kids, all gone. Dead." She began to sob. "I wish I were, too."

"Jean, Jean—"

"I don't care. I mean it. Everything bad has happened since Joanna came to live with us."

"Darling, you can't blame the child for a series of accidents."

"I know." She raised her tear-stained face. "But after all— Michael, drowned. Then Steve, falling off the water tower. Now it's Marian." Her fingers gripped his arm tightly. "Jim, each of them was playing alone with Joanna when it happened."

"Accidents, just accidents," he said. It wasn't like Jean, this talk. Almost— His mind shied away from the word, and circled back. Almost paranoid. But Jean was stable, rational, always had been. Still, maybe a little chat with Doctor Holland would be a good idea. Breakdowns *do* happen.

They both turned at the slamming of the screen door. Then came the patter of childish feet on the kitchen linoleum, and Joanna burst into the room.

"Mommy, I want to play with Marian. Why can't I play with Marian?"

Jean put her arm around the girl's thin shoulder. "Darling, you won't be able to play with Marian for—quite a while. You mustn't worry about it now."

"Mommy, she looked just like she was asleep, then they came and took her away." Her lips trembled. "I'm frightened, Mommy."

Jim looked down at the dark eyes, misted now, the straight brown hair, and the little snub nose with its dusting of freckles. *She's all we have left, poor kid, and not even ours, really. Helen's baby.*

He looked up as the battered cuckoo clock on the mantel clicked warningly. "Time for little girls to be in bed, Joanna. Run along now like a good girl, and get washed." Even as he spoke the miniature doors flew open and the caricature of a bird popped out, shrilly announcing the hour. It cuckooed eight times, then bounced back inside. Joanna watched entranced.

"Bed time, darling," said Jean gently. "School tomorrow, remember? And don't forget to brush your teeth."

"I won't. Goodnight, Mommy, goodnight, Daddy." She turned up her face to be kissed, smiled at them, and was gone. They listened to her footsteps on the stairs.

"Jim, I'm sorry about the things I said." Jean's voice was hesitant, a little ashamed. "It *is* hard, though, you know it is— Jim, aren't you listening? After all, you don't have to watch the clock now." Her smile was as labored as the joke.

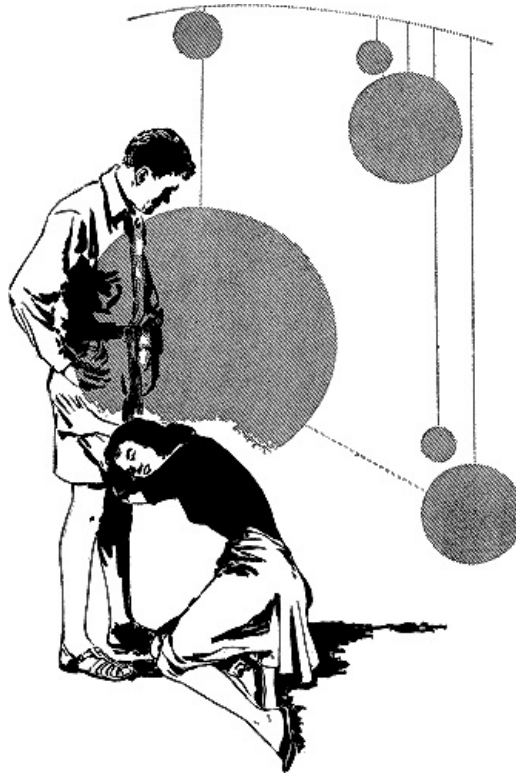
He smiled back. "I think I'll take a walk, honey. Some fresh air would do me good."

"Jim, don't go. I'd rather not be alone just now."

"Well." He looked at her, keeping his expression blank. "All right, dear. How about some coffee? I could stand another cup." And he thought: *Tomorrow I'll go. I'll talk to Holland tomorrow.*

"Let me get this straight, Jim." Holland's pudgy face was sober, his eyes serious. "You started out by thinking Jean was showing paranoid tendencies, and offhand I'm inclined to agree with you. Overnight you changed your mind and began thinking that maybe, just maybe, she might be right. Honestly, don't you suspect your own reasons for such a quick switch?"

"Sure I do, Bob," Blair said worriedly. "Do you think I haven't beaten out my brains over it? I know the idea's monstrous. But just suppose there *was* a branch of humanity—if you could call it



human—living off us unsuspected. A branch that knows how to eliminate—competition—almost by instinct."

"Now hold on a minute, Jim. You've taken Jean's reaction to this last death, plus a random association with a cuckoo clock, and here you are with a perfectly wild hypothesis. You've always been rational and analytical, old man. Surely you can realize that a perfectly normal urge to rationalize Jean's conclusions is making you concur with them against your better judgment."

"Bob—"

"I'm not through, Jim. Just consider how fantastic the whole idea is. Because of a series of accidents you can't accuse a child of planned murder. Nor can you further hypothesize that all orphans are changelings, imbued with an instinct to polish off their foster-siblings."

"Not *all* orphans, Bob. Not planned murder, either. Take it easy. Just some of them. A few of them—different. Growing up. Placing their young with well-to-do families somehow, and then dropping unobtrusively out of the picture. And the young growing up, and always the natural children dying off in one way or another. The changeling inherits, and the process is repeated, step by step. Can you say it's impossible? Do you *know* it's impossible?"

"I wouldn't say impossible, Jim. But I *would* say that your thesis has a remarkably low index of probability. Why don't others suspect, besides you?"

Jim spread his hands hopelessly. "I don't know. Maybe they do. Maybe these creatures—if they do exist—have some means of protection we don't know about."

"You need more than maybes, Jim. What about Joanna Simmons' mother? According to your theories she should have been well off. Was she?"

"No, she wasn't," Jim admitted reluctantly. "She came here and took a job with my outfit. Said she was divorced, and had lived in New York. Then she quit to take a position in California, and we agreed to board Joanna until she got settled. Warrenburg was the town. She was killed there quite horribly, in a terrible auto accident."

"Have you any reason for suspecting skulduggery? Honestly, Jim? Or for labelling her one of your human—er—cuckoos?"

"Only my hunch. We had a newspaper clipping, and a letter from the coroner. We even sent the money for her funeral. But those things could be faked, Bob."

"Give me some evidence that they *were* faked, and I'll be happy to reinspect your views." Holland levered his avoirdupois out of his chair. "In the meantime, relax. Take a trip if you can. Try not to worry."

Jim grinned humorlessly. "Mustn't let myself get excited, eh? Okay, Bob. But if I get hold of any evidence that I think you might accept, I'll be back. The last laugh and all that. Pending developments you take it easy, too. Don't let yourself get overworked. Stay out of the sun. So long now."

"So long, Jim."

It was cool in the Warrenburg city hall, though outside the streets were sizzling.

"Sorry, Mr. Blair," said the stout, motherly woman with the horn-rimmed glasses. "We've no record of a Helen Simmons. Nothing whatever." She closed the file with resolute finality.

Jim stared at her. "Are you sure? There must be something. Mightn't there be a special file for accident cases? She was here in Warrenburg. She died here."

The woman thinned her lips, shook her head. "If we had any information, it'd be right where I looked. There isn't a thing. Have you tried her last address? Maybe they could tell you something. We can't."

"I'll try that next. Thanks a lot."

"Sorry we couldn't help you."

He went out slowly.

872 Maple was a rambling frame house dozing on a wide flower-bordered lot. There was nothing sleepy about the diminutive woman who opened the door to Jim's knock. Snapping black eyes peered at him from a maze of wrinkles. A veined hand moved swiftly to smooth down the white hair that framed her face.

"Looking for someone, young man?"

"Just information, Mrs.—"

"Collins, and it's Miss. Don't give out information about guests. You a bill collector?"

"No, Miss Collins. As a matter of fact, I'm trying to check up on an old friend I lost track of. Helen Simmons. She lived at this address for a while."

"Sure did. Well, come on in. Mind you, I don't usually do this, Mr.—"

"Blair." Without any fanfare a bill changed hands.

"Mr. Blair. Well, I can't tell you much. Try that green chair for size. What do you want to know?"

Jim studied the toe of his right shoe. His eyes were veiled. "I heard she was hurt, and hard up, and I was worried. My wife and I were friends of hers back east."

"Hurt, hard up? Humph! Not likely, spendin' all her time drivin' that English car around. Takin' trips. I'm not sayin' she didn't mind her manners, though."

"Did she have any close friends?"

"She was chummy with Edith Walton, the girl that works for Doc Mendel. He's county coroner in his spare time. No men. Didn't fool around at all. I'd a known."

Behind Jim's stony eyes the pattern took clearer form, as if a mosaic approached completion. A mosaic of carefully planned events that totalled horror. He shivered as the outlines of his hunch filled in. Helen—what creatures were these? Helen—not dead, not poor,—carefully planting ostensible proof of her death and going on to a new role, a new life, in London or Paris or Rome. A free, untrammelled life. And her child—if child was the word—in his home, repeating the pattern. Eliminating competition as her mother undoubtedly had done. The competition—his and Jean's children! Changeling, changeling— No, not that. Incubus! He shivered again.

"Rabbits on your grave, Mr. Blair?"

He looked up slowly. "Sorry. I was just wondering. Did Miss Simmons have a job while she was here?"

"No, she didn't. One thing she did do was rent a place. Used to be Blands Hardware. Paid a month's rent, too. Said some friends of hers were plannin' to open a mortuary. Seemed like a funny way for people to do business, but then, no affair of mine."

Funny? No, not funny at all, but icily, eerily logical. There had to be an undertaking parlor where he could send the funeral expenses. He wondered if Helen had laughed when she opened the letter. Everyone his, or her, own undertaker. And the carefully cultivated friend in the coroner's office. For stationery.

He got to his feet. "Thanks a lot, Miss Collins. You've been a great deal of help." He almost smiled as he asked, "I don't suppose she left a forwarding address?"

The old head shook decisively. "Not a thing. Just packed and left, one Monday morning."

All the loose ends tied up tight on a Monday morning. Nothing to cause suspicion. Nothing to worry about. Only a woman's almost paranoid hysteria,—and a glance at a clock. Not very much to unmask—incubus. And what could he do? What *could* he do? Start talking and land in an institution? Well, there was one thing.

"Thanks again, Miss Collins."

He went out.

Swanson didn't look like the general conception of a small-town newspaperman. One knew instinctively that his beard wouldn't have been tobacco-stained even if he'd cared to grow one. And he didn't have a bottle of bourbon in the file marked Miscellaneous, or if he did he didn't bring it out.

"That never came from my paper," he said precisely. He handed the clipping back to Jim. "We don't use that type, for one thing. For another, Miss Simmons, so far as I know, wasn't killed here or anywhere else."

"You knew her?"

"I knew of her. I never met her."

"What about this report of her death?"

Swanson shrugged; tented manicured fingers. "It's a hoax. Any job printing shop with a Linotype could do it. In all likelihood it was some place in San Francisco. That's closest. It would be very

difficult to check." His curiosity was showing.

"I see. Well, thanks for your time and trouble, Mr. Swanson."

"Not at all. Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

One thing to do. One thing that must be done.

Motors over the mountains. And riding with them, the numb resolve. Motors over the salt pans, the wheat lands, the corn belt.

The stewardess stops again. "Coffee, sir? A sandwich, perhaps?"

"I beg your— Oh, no. No, thanks."

She watches him covertly, uneasily, longing for the end of the run.

Motors in the night.

And the dull determination growing, strengthening.

The airport, baggage, the ancient taxi with the piston slap, and at last the dark, familiar street.

"Jim, you're back! Oh, Jim, darling. Next time they send you west I'm going too. I am!"

"Okay, Jean, sure. Why not?"

"What's the matter, dear? Oh, you're tired, of course. I should have known. Sit down, Jim. Let me get you a drink."

"In a minute, Jean." Do it now *now* NOW! "Where's Joanna?"

"She's in bed. Hours ago. Jim, has something—?"

"Nothing, dear. I just want to look in on her. And freshen up a bit, of course."

"Jim—"

He smoothed away the worried frown with his forefinger.

"In a minute, dear."

She smiled uncertainly. "Hurry back, Jim."

The stairs unwind irrevocably, slow motion in a nightmare. The bedroom door opens, the hall light dim on the bed and the child's face. Incubus in the half dark.

For a moment Jim remembered wondering somewhere, sometime, what strange powers of protection might be implicit in such a creature. As the thought came into his mind, Joanna stirred. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

He took one step toward the bed.

The little girl eyes over their dusting of freckles slitted. Then they opened wide, became two glowing golden lakes that grew, and grew—

There was the feeling of a great soundless explosion in his mind. Waves of cool burning in his brain, churning and bubbling in every unknown corner, every cranny. Here and there a cell, or a group of cells, blanked out, the complex molecules reverting, becoming new again. Ready for fresh punch marks. Synapses shorted with soundless cold fire, and waited in timeless stasis for rechannelling. The waves frothed, became ripples, were gone. He stood unmoving.

What was it he was supposed to do? Let's see— Tuck Joanna's blanket around her. But she was covered up snugly. Sleeping soundly, too, and for a few seconds he'd thought she was awake. And Jean was waiting downstairs, Jean and a cool drink.

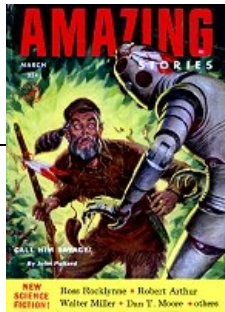
Oh, yes, stop in the bathroom.

The stairs wind up again. It is good to be with one's family, relaxed in the well known chair. Not a worry in the world.

He sat there, his mind at ease, not caring much about anything. He didn't even look up when the clock on the mantel whirred, and the ridiculous bird popped out of its nest to herald a new day.

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CUCKOO CLOCK ***

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