

Weird Tales



MAY, 1951

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

NOVELETTES

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*The boy knew all sorts of stories about witches and devils
and bat men that suck your blood, and haunts . . . so
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*Its altars suggestively low—as if made for creatures
that crawled rather than went upright.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

THE CUCKOO CLOCK

by David Eynon



It piqued the curiosity—that a clock could be lethal. . . .

I

OF ALL the tiny, fortified towns sprinkled along the edge of the Black Forest in Bavaria the quaintest is Rothenburg. It crowns a steep hill, its guard towers facing out across the twisting Tauber River. At noon and at midnight, the shutters on the highest window in the old clock tower open slowly and a mechanical dummy of a 15th century Burgomeister bows gravely. For a few seconds the old nobleman, moved by a medieval mechanism, glares down at the cobblestones of the town square—the same stones that clanged under the hooves of the Crusaders' horses—then the Burgomeister straightens up abruptly and the shutters clap to.

On fair afternoons the sun, diffused by the leaves of the lindens, throws mottled shadows across the alleys of the burg. Children scampering home from the *gauschule*, cluster briefly around a scissors grinder or skip along in the wake of a hurdy-gurdy. Old men sit in the shade of the tinkling fountain and young girls sing softly to themselves as they fill their kettles with water.

Just off the square, down a narrow, twisting street, sits the shop of Wilhelm Stunde. It is a tiny building, bent over with age like its proprietor. Through the dusty shop window a hundred clocks, of a hundred sizes, stare out at the people passing through the alley.

In the front of the window a miniature shepherdess flicks the seconds away with dainty motions of her crook. A blacksmith in the corner shapes the minutes with stiff blows of his hammer on a thumb-sized anvil. Back in the shadows at the rear Father

Time reaps his hours with slow, decisive strokes of his scythe.

Wilhelm was famous throughout the Tauber Valley for his clocks. "Old Wilhelm can fix it—if anyone can," the peasants used to say. And sometimes they might add "He's a queer sort, that Wilhelm. But he knows his business."

And Wilhelm's ingenuity wasn't limited to clocks alone. He had made the Carillon in the cathedral spire. His gifted fingers had fashioned the image of the Burgomeister that sat in the clock tower. The bell that sounded the hours in vibrant tones that rang out across the city owed their resonance to Wilhelm's sensitive ears.

The children often gathered before the dusty window of Wilhelm's shop to watch with wonder the assortment of figures and numbers that told the time—all accurate within a fraction of a second.

Sometimes, if Wilhelm were in a cheerful mood, he invited the youngsters in to amaze them with some new, oddly contrived clock that would widen their eyes as they watched. It might be a large timepiece, with figures that came out and performed on the hours. Or a small clock, with tiny chimes that made the children tingle all over. They would giggle and laugh and a passerby would say to his companion, "There's old Wilhelm, making the children's ears ring again." And the companion, remembering his own childhood, and the wonderfully exciting, all too brief, adventures in Wilhelm's shop, would nod and smile wistfully to himself.

Inside the shop, amid the cobwebs and dust and a thousand tiny wheels and gears, Wilhelm would be bending over an ailing timepiece and probing its mechanism gently, gradually coaxing it back to life.

A **SPLENDIDLY** dressed cavalier, evidently unused to traveling on foot, picked his way carefully down the alley and halted uncertainly before the shabby building. He squinted at the weathered script on the front of the shop and then observed the huge watch—Wilhelm's trademark—hanging from a rusty iron rod over the door.

It was beneath the dignity of the Baron—

the eighth Baron of Rothenburg—to visit such a shop. But Wilhelm had constructed the mechanical image of the old Burgomeister that sat in the town clock tower. And the Baron was pleased, more than pleased, with the image of his great grandfather. Didn't everyone say that the figure was amazingly life-like?

"You can almost see him breathing!" had said the physician, on the day when the new clock was dedicated. Yes, it was a masterpiece, this clock, and a fitting memorial to the Baron's ancestor. Besides, local custom held that some part of the payment—a florin at least, must be presented in person by the Baron. It was the way the people assured themselves of a certain contact with their nobility.

The Baron pushed the warped door open and hesitated for a second until his eyes adjusted to the gloom inside. Wilhelm, recognizing the nobleman, sprang up from his bench and bowed as low as his twisted spine would permit.

"Your Excellency!"

"Good day," said the Baron, nodding to the old clockmaker. "I have come to thank you for your efforts on the clock—it was an excellent piece of work, a real accomplishment."

"Your Excellency is too kind," Wilhelm said.

"Not at all," said the Baron. "I am quite pleased. You will find a little something extra with your fee," he said, tossing a leather pouch to the craftsman.

"A thousand thanks, Herr Baron," said Wilhelm, feeling the weight of the pouch. The Baron, distracted by the ticking which sounded from every nook of the tiny room, was inspecting an egg-shaped timepiece on the shelf.

"A dull business, I imagine," said the Baron, who had been a soldier most of his life.

"Pardon, Excellency?"

"Rather dull, I imagine," repeated the Baron. "Fooling around with clocks, I mean."

The Baron passed on to a large clock in the corner which had the twelve apostles marching around its crown.

"Not at all, Your Excellency," said Wilhelm. "Not a bit of it."

"Hein?" asked the Baron, raising an eyebrow. "There are only twelve hours a day, only sixty minutes in an hour, sixty seconds to a minute. What more can a clock say?" The Baron stopped to watch a small ship rocking endlessly back and forth across the face of a timepiece on the wall.

"Ah, but there are many kinds of clocks, Herr Baron," said Wilhelm, taking off his apron and stepping over to the Baron. "Here, for instance, is a clock that tells the seasons." Wilhelm pointed to a medium-sized timepiece with a revolving face that showed the condition of the moon.

"And here," said Wilhelm, "here is a clock that shows the signs of the Zodiac. And another clock that shows the rise and fall of the tides."

"Yes, of course," the Baron chuckled. "But a clock never really does anything important, it's always passive, so to speak. There isn't a clock, for instance," said the Baron with a smile, "that could kill a man, say, is there now?"

"Oh yes, yes there is," said Wilhelm smiling to himself.

"No!" said the Baron, surprised in spite of himself. "Not really?"

"I assure Your Excellency," said Wilhelm earnestly, scuttling back into the rear of his shop, "that it is so." Wilhelm opened a cabinet in the paneling of the wall and brought forth a beautifully designed, intricately carved clock.

"This," said Wilhelm, holding up the delicately worked timepiece, "this clock can kill!"

"What?" exclaimed the Baron, laughing heartily. "A cuckoo clock kill a man? Niemand! You are joking!"

"But no, Herr Baron," said Wilhelm seriously. "I tell the truth. This clock can kill!"

"So?" said the Baron warily. "Perhaps there is gunpowder inside that will explode at a certain time?"

"No, Excellency," said Wilhelm. "Inspect the clock if you like." Wilhelm offered the cuckoo clock to the Baron, who handled it testily. He opened the back and cautiously peered inside.

"You see, Herr Baron," said Wilhelm, "it is in all respects a normal clock."

"No hidden pistol—no poisoned needle in the key?" asked the Baron incredulously.

"None," said Wilhelm.

"Then how does it kill?" asked the Baron, fascinated.

"Pardon, Herr Baron," said Wilhelm, bowing, "but that is my secret, if you do not mind."

"A fool's secret," laughed the Baron. "And a fool's clock," he added, thrusting the timepiece back at the watchmaker.

THEN the Baron hesitated for a second. He privately thought that Wilhelm was mad, quite mad. Still, it piqued his curiosity to have the clockmaker insist so strongly that the clock was lethal.

"I'll tell you what," said the Baron. "Let me take this clock for tonight. If it proves in any way dangerous, you shall have a hundred florins."

"No, Excellency," said Wilhelm firmly, "it would be too hazardous, I fear."

"Ah!" said the Baron. "So you were bluffing, eh? The clock is not so deadly after all!"

"It is," insisted Wilhelm. "It is deadly beyond belief!"

"Well, then," said the Baron archly, "we will just see. Let me have the clock," he ordered.

"Please, Herr Baron, do not tamper with it, I beg of you."

"The clock!" demanded the Baron.

"No, no, Excellency!" shrieked Wilhelm, hugging the mechanism to his chest. "Forget what I have said. Forget the clock and leave in peace!"

"Give me the clock!" shouted the Baron. "Come, give it to me immediately!" The Baron struck Wilhelm across the face and grabbed at the timepiece. The old clockmaker staggered back against his counter and watched the nobleman tuck the clock under his arm. At the doorway the Baron hesitated and turned to look at the trembling little man. "Remember," he said, "a hundred florins if it works."

"Please, Excellency!" said the desperate Wilhelm.

"If it fails," said the Baron crisply, "I feel sorry for you!"

II

THE Baron pushed his chair back from the table and watched his servants clearing the supper dishes. It had been a pleasant meal—venison he had killed himself and good Rhenish wine to wash it down. The Baron lighted a pipe and settled deeper into his armchair.

"Will there be anything else, Herr Baron?" the servant asked.

"Anything else? Oh, yes. There is a clock in the hall—on the large table—bring it here and hang it over the fireplace. Over there where the light is good."

"Very good, Herr Baron."

"Oh, a brace of pistols, Franz—the Spanish ones. I'll load them myself." And we shall see, thought the Baron, how potent is the brainchild of this stupid clockmaker. The Baron felt slightly sheepish. He felt he had been tricked, somehow, into a foolish experiment.

Fortunately no one knows, he thought, no one can laugh—except myself, when I return the clock tomorrow morning—broken to bits!

The servant brought in the clock and hung it over the fireplace between two large candles. He placed the pistols, powder and shot on the table and then bowed out.

It was eight when the Baron had finished loading his weapons. As he tamped the balls firmly into place the large hand of the clock touched the hour.

There was a slight whir of gears and a tiny door flapped open in the top of the clock. A miniature bird, brightly painted, popped out from among the delicately carved oak leaves and began to chirp.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

"Ha," laughed the Baron. "What a stupid sound!"

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

"And who ever saw a bird with red wings and a blue body?" The Baron poured his glass full and smiled broadly. "This clock kill a man? Niemand!"

The Baron turned his chair around so

that it was facing the fireplace and he could see the clock more clearly. He checked the priming on his pistols and then refilled his pipe. The warmth of the fire spread over him and his head began to nod. An hour passed before he knew it.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" the bird chirped.

The Baron looked up sharply, roused unpleasantly from his doze.

"Lieber Gott!" he said. "What a stupid, irritating little bird."

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

"I'll be glad when I can take this unpleasant clock back to its maker," thought the Baron, taking a deep draught of wine. He lighted his pipe and drew on it slowly, letting the smoke trail out of his nostrils. As he watched the images forming in the flickering firelight his eyes grew heavy. The monotonous ticking of the clock put him in a trance and drowsiness from the wine spread slowly over his body.

"Cuckoo Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

"Gott in Himmel!" The Baron jumped up. "Not ten o'clock already?"

"Cuckoo!" The clock answered seven times more.

THE Baron got up from his chair and paced nervously across the floor to the liquor cabinet. He selected a bottle of Schnapps and jerked the cork from its neck.

For the next hour the Baron amused himself by alternately drinking and dreaming up schemes to punish the watchmaker for his foolishness.

"He will regret his audacity," said the Baron sternly, "in imposing such a stupid story on me. Oh, he will regret it extremely, that stupid clockmaker."

"Cuckoo!" went the bird, and repeated itself ten more times.

"How he will regret it!" said the Baron aloud, narrowing his eyes and clenching his fingers around the stein. The nobleman reloaded and checked his pistols again. At first the wadding refused to fit. It took him some time, in his drunken state, to get them tightly packed.

"Verdammit!" cursed the Baron. "I have

had enough! I am going to bed, and forget this nonsense." But the Baron didn't move from the room. He checked himself. What foolishness, he thought, to let such a miserable clock, made by a miserable, hunch-backed fool, annoy a person of his rank.

THE Baron settled down grimly in his chair, pistols in hand, and faced the clock. For an hour he sat, staring at the ornate hands as they slowly circled the carved numbers of the face. When they came together over the number twelve there was a whirl of gears and again the tiny door flap opened.

The bright little bird popped out.

"Cuckoo!"

"Now," thought the Baron, "we will have an end to this."

"See how loud you sing after this," said the Baron, slowly raising his pistol until it was leveled at the clock.

"Cuckoo!"

"You'll sing a different tune with a ball in your throat," said the Baron, trying to get a bead on the bird in the dim light.

"Cuckoo!"

"Damn it," cried the Baron, "why can't I hold my hand steady?"

"Cuckoo!"

"Shut up! Shut up!" screamed the Baron, squeezing the trigger of his pistol.

"Cuckoo!"

The ball hit a foot above the clock and sent a shower of plaster over the mantel.

"Cuckoo!"

"Gott in Himmel," cried the Baron, "will nothing silence you?" He fired his other pistol blindly.

"Cuckoo!"

The second shot shattered a tall mirror in the corner. Splinters of glass tinkled to the floor.

"Cuckoo!"

"Shut up!" the Baron screamed at the top of his lungs. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

"Cuckoo!"

The Baron lunged madly from his chair and clawed at the clock on the wall. The wooden frame of the timepiece was shattered under the Baron's body as he plunged to the floor.

"Cuckoo!" croaked the clock, whirring to a halt. "CUCKOO! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

When the servants broke into the room the Baron was dead, his face twisted in a paroxysm of rage. The wheels from the clock had rolled into every corner of the room. The tiny bird, its wings broken and hanging, lay inert on the hearth.

The Baron's death was the talk of Rothenburg for many months afterwards. Everyone had a theory—apoplexy, fits, drunkenness—but no one knew the truth. No one, that is, except Wilhelm.

But then, Wilhelm knew many strange things. He even knew a tone which, if sounded at the right pitch, and repeated at the proper intervals, could drive a man stark, raving mad.