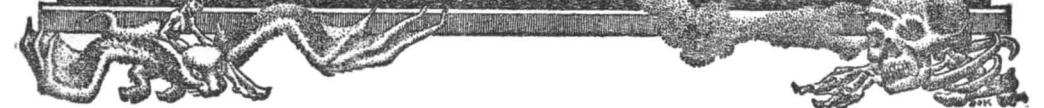


Weird Tales



JULY, 1953

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Dread Summons

BY PAUL ERNST

HERB MELLER stared at the great house on Chicago's chief boulevard with a grim and savage pride, the house that had once belonged to that bleak old financier, R. J. Hill.

The structure was six stories tall, containing nearly forty rooms. It was a palace; built thirty years before at a cost of over two million dollars; situated now on land so valuable that if it were covered with gold pieces the sum would hardly approximate its worth.

A palace! One of the costliest buildings in Chicago! Yet it was but a fraction of what Meller had wrested from the Hill estate. He had looted millions from the fortune of the ferocious old man who had taken so long in dying. This house on the boulevard faded into insignificance when compared to the total.

Yet for Herbert Meller it was a symbol, and its possession gave him more exultation than all the rest. The very citadel and personal pride of old Hill had been won when

he took that house away from Hill's spinster daughter.

Meller walked from the sidewalk to the great flags leading up to the door of the palace. He stared with swelling approval of himself at the ponderous iron grillework of the front door. Born on the wrong side of the tracks, eh? Well, he'd shown Hill and all his crew.

There was a thrill in finding the key to the house on his fat-ring. "I don't know that you'll want to bother looking in the old mausoleum," the agent had said, giving him the key, "as long as it is to be torn down so soon anyway."

But he had wanted to look through it. In a week, men would be here to dismantle the house, which had become a positive liability through the years, a worthless lump of stone and splendor on an invaluable site. A hotel corporation had bought the place for that site. The Hill home was only in the way.

He inserted the key in the massive lock. Imported from Italy, the iron grillework of the door had been. Old Hill had spread himself on his house.

"Much good it did him!" Meller spat viciously as he worked with the key.

Meller always saw red when he thought of the grim, hard old man. A blatant pusher, a cheap gambler, Hill had called Meller. The old man had refused steadily to have anything to do with the ruthless young fellow who was springing so far and so swiftly from the slums. "Damned young slug," the old man had said once—to his face. And Meller had never forgotten nor forgiven.

THE door suddenly opened as he was fiddling with the key. An old man, at least seventy, dressed in a plain blue serge suit faced him in the doorway.

Meller was startled for a moment. Then he remembered that the old Hill butler had volunteered to stay on as caretaker till the place was torn down—for nothing. The old fool!

"Yes, sir?" the butler quavered, inquiringly.

"I'm Meller."

The announcement made no impression.

"The man who owns this house now," Meller said impatiently.

"Oh! Oh, yes, sir. And you want to look around?"

Meller nodded and pushed his way in. He was shorter than the old servant; a short fat man who, even at forty-one, puffed a little as he walked and perspired freely from a fat, rather apoplectic-looking countenance.

"Shall I direct you, sir?" said the butler.

"No." Meller clipped it out harshly. "Get out of here. I can find my own way around, I guess."

"Very good, sir. There is the elevator."

He pointed with a gnarled old hand to an automatic cage at the rear of the front hall. And Meller almost snarled as he gazed at that. An elevator in a private home! In the home he'd been raised in there hadn't even been a bathroom or electricity.

"All right," he said, more to himself than to the servant. He walked toward the elevator, meanwhile looking at the hall of this home in which he would once have been treated as dirt but which was now his—at least till the hotel people tore it down.

He tapped irritably at the floor with his cane. The wood was as ornate, as beautifully inlaid as a table-top. It woke savage hate in him. The ferrule of his stick was of metal and scuffed to a sharp rim around the edge. He dug deep with the ferrule and then dragged the cane after him.

A great raw scratch resulted in the softly polished, lovely wood. Behind him, Meller heard the old servant gasp as though he had been struck.

"What the hell?" said Meller harshly. "The joint's coming down soon anyway."

He made more scratches, as if he had his stick in the face of old Hill himself. He spelled his name in raw tears in the inlaid wood, laughing as he did so. Then he went on to the elevator.

An elevator in a private house! It still annoyed him, particularly such a little jewel-case as this mahogany and rosewood cage that bore him silently up toward the second floor at a touch of his finger.

THERE was gilt inlay in the panels. He amused himself by scratching some of it out with his stick on the way up. Then

the cage stopped. He opened the door and stepped into a second-floor hall which was smaller than the first-floor reception hall but even more luxurious. The floor was of marble, as were the curving stairs up from the first floor. The marble was bare. The interminable, specially woven strip of oriental carpeting that had padded the staircase and stretched down the corridor had been sold by Hill's daughter along with the other furnishings. Meller's heels rang as he walked down it.

Rooms! An acre of rooms! But he wasn't going to go through all of them. He only wanted to see the suites belonging to old Hill and the wife whose death had been such a shock to him, and the daughter who was now virtually penniless as the result of Meller's clever manipulations. Those three master suites were on this floor.

He walked into the door opposite the elevator cage. He entered what seemed an entire apartment, but eventually resolved itself into two great rooms, with alcoves resulting from the Victorian architecture which was the characteristic of the place. Two huge rooms. One a bedroom, done in dark ivory with walnut trim, opening onto a vast and masculine-looking bath; the other a paneled living room and library.

This was old Hill's suite. The very air breathed of the bitter old man who till his death had held his associates and enemies, particularly his enemies, in awe of him.

Hill's home had been his love, his fortress. This two-room suite had been the heart of the home, inviolate from all trespassing, dedicated to the fierce nonagenarian who had wrung from a world of smoke and blood and grime the great fortune that had melted at his death.

Meller laughed. There was a mirror on one wall from floor to ceiling. He walked to it, and laughed again. Then his cane lashed out viciously. Thick, that mirror. Quadruple plate. Built to last, as all Hill's things were. It took three ringing cracks before the mirror broke. Then it fairly cascaded to the floor, making a great clatter on the inlaid wood.

The house seemed as still as a tomb when the clatter ceased. In the silence Meller

stood with a funny feeling in the pit of his paunch. He felt a little afraid, somehow. It was his mirror to break if he pleased. It might as well be broken now as later when the house was ripped down.

And yet, he felt—well, funny.

He could almost see Hill coming toward him from the bedroom, grizzled eyebrows drawn together in the savage knot that had made so many tremble. A tyrannical, powerful, frightening old man.

Meller's too-plump shoulders straightened. No, he wouldn't admit it. By God, he hadn't been afraid of old Hill. That time the old man had figuratively thrown him out of his office by simply walking toward him, while Meller retreated step by step from his blazing eyes—he hadn't been afraid of Hill, he had simply shown him the respect any younger man gives an old one. The time Hill had almost gotten every cent Meller owned in the steel mill deal—

Meller snarled. Well, Hill had died before that went through. And now he had Hill's hide! Or rather the hide Hill had bequeathed to the dreamy-eyed, silly, retiring woman of forty-five who was his daughter.

MELLER turned to the near wall. In a gesture that was childish, though it did not occur to him as being such, he spat on the immaculate cream surface, like the little foul-mouthed, milk-stealing gutter urchin he had once been. With satisfaction he watched the smearing trickle that resulted; watched it spatter slowly down on the fragments of mirror.

Seven years' bad luck, the mirror was supposed to represent. But he wasn't superstitious. He didn't believe in such junk.

He left the rooms that were like an empty shell waiting only for the return of their grim master, and went to the next apartment.

Two rooms here, too. All in pink. Must have been Hill's wife's rooms. Yes, there was a picture of the old boy on a wall between two great windows. The sale hadn't taken in this picture, probably because it was intrinsically worthless. An oil painting, of the old man's head, about eighteen inches square.

Meller laughed again and thrust the ferrule of his stick slowly through the canvas till the wall stopped it. He thrust the metal through the old man's nose—that formidable beak that had matched in jutting power his craggy old jaw. Then he went on to the third suite on this side of the hall; a suite the door of which was just at the head of the great marble staircase.

This was in French gray with silver trim. It too had been a woman's apartment; but the apartment of a younger woman. It took no subtle intuition to read that. It had belonged without doubt to Hill's daughter.

Meller visioned the daughter. A woman, but so sheltered from life by a doting father that she was no more knowledgable than a girl of eighteen. A person so sensitive and shy and retiring that she was almost a hermit. That was why she had never married, probably. Well, too damned bad for her. Should have a husband to support for her now. Meller doubted if she would have fifty dollars a month out of the wreck he had made of her father's fortune.

Meller grinned. The daughter, Beatrice Hill, had actually sought him out for financial advice. Hill's lawyer, that old spider Macy, was responsible for that. After a fat bribe, he had told the daughter that Meller was to be trusted implicitly, that Meller had become Hill's closest associate just before his death.

So Beatrice Hill had come like a damned fool to her father's bitterest enemy. For advice! Well, he'd given her advice. He had shifted worthless securities on her in carload lots. Then he had made loans when her inherited fortune seemed to be in danger. Then, when the worthless securities he had "accepted" as "collateral" shook on the market, he had refused extension of the loans, and taken the whole. Had simply opened his hand and closed it on everything Hill had left. Beatrice had a small trust fund from her mother, that was all.

He had got revenge on the tribe of Hill, all right! He'd been told that Beatrice tried to kill herself.

The rooms were delicately beautiful, in a way representing the spirit of the girl who had grown to womanhood in them. There

were no overhead lights. The lamps were in wall brackets. These brackets were of carved crystal, and from the lamp-rings hung festoons of glittering crystal. Prisms, pear drops, pendants.

Meller stared at the softly glittering beauty of the crystals. Then his ever ready stick came up again. He lashed hard at one of the brackets. A shower of broken crystal, like dew-drops in sunlight, flashed to the polished floor. He went to the next, and did the same. In a moment there wasn't a crystal bracket left, in either bedroom or sitting-room. And with each thrust of his stick he felt as though he were smashing, hurting Hill himself.

In the bedroom he came upon something that once more drew laughter from his snarling lips, at the same time angering him when he recalled the home his own boyhood had known.

Near the living room door, set in onyx in the wall, were a dozen little switch-handles. They were tiny ebony plugs in a house phone system.

There was something for you, by heaven! A private telephone system for the house alone. An elevator in a private home; a complete telephone service. The old pirate had done well for himself, hadn't he?

He read the names etched in tiny copper plates under the bell plugs. Butler, garage, housekeeper, first guest room, second guest room, drawing-room, blue room, conservatory, Mrs. R. J. Hill, Mr. R. J. Hill—

Meller's cane raised to slash at the little switchboard, but slowly it lowered again. His snarling grin, like the grimace of a hyena over carrion that is all, all his, touched his red, sensual lips.

A bell for R. J. Hill, eh? When his daughter wanted to talk to her father she pulled that little ebony handle, and the old boy answered. Ring R. J. Hill.

Well, Hill was in hell now. Quite poetical that sounded. Hill in hell. Too bad his daughter couldn't try to put through a call for the old man now! Just as, in her helplessness, she had called on her father when she learned what had happened to his fortune. Standing in Meller's office, staring at Meller with incredulous, stricken eyes.

"Dad! Dad—"

Yeah! Call for R. J. Hill, and see what good it would do you.

The idea tickled Meller's not-too-sensitive sense of humor. Call for R. J. Hill. Page R. J. Hill. He ought to be in that end pot of boiling oil, boy. Get his attention, if the devils will let him alone for a minute, and tell him Herb Meller is paging him. Meller, the man he despised in life, and who has beaten him now. Call for Hill, from Mr. Meller. Maybe the old guy would come from hell in answer.

Meller's grin spread. His pudgy hand went up to the little switchboard. He touched with a tentative finger the plug over the name of the eagle-beaked old man who had awed him in life, but whom he had beaten in death.

Then, he pulled the little plug down. It was just like an office switchboard; the same in principle, if built of more elaborate materials. He was familiar with its workings.

He heard a bell ring, very softly, from somewhere. Old R. J.'s apartment? Or in hell?

It pleased him to imagine that he heard a faint, gruff voice answering. The voice of the man who had overpowered bankers and frightened promoters by sheer savage force of character.

"Hello," he said into the little phone. "Is this you, Hill? Is this you, you old—"

Profanity streamed from his lips.

"How do you like the owner of your house, Hill? Tell me I'm a crook who only stays out of jail because of the technicalities of the law, will you? Call me a shyster promoter and a robber of widows and orphans, will you? Announce before a board of directors that no decent man of business would associate with me? All right, now what do you think of me?"

He snapped the little lever back into place. Call R. J. Hill! Ring him in hell, and console him with what Meller had done to his daughter!

With his cane twirling jauntily, Meller went to the suite's bathroom. As big as a full room. Silver fittings; more crystal wall brackets. A pink marble tub. Would Beatrice Hill pass this site when there was a twenty-story hotel on it, and dream of that pink tub—taken from her, along with

everything else, by the man who had outsmarted old Hill in the end?

Meller lit a cigar and tossed the burnt match into the tub. He went back to the sitting-room, grinning at the switchboard as he passed. Call R. J. Hill, eh?

The hall door had swung almost closed behind him when he entered Beatrice Hill's apartment. Just before he got to it, to go out, he stopped. He thought he had heard a step outside and below. A slow step. . . .

He shrugged, as it was not repeated. He must have imagined the sound. But it put him in mind of the way old R. J. had walked in the last few years of his life. His feet had gone bad on him. When he couldn't avoid walking, he had done it like a slow-motion picture. Slow, painful progress forward. Step by step on aching old feet. He had walked that way when he forced Meller from his office. Slow step after slow step, with Meller retreating back from his flaming old eyes. . . .

Another step. On the bare marble staircase, it seemed to be. A slow, dragging step. Unless he was still imagining—

No, there it was a third time. Distinctly a step. And it did seem to ring familiar. For a moment Meller tried to tell himself that he couldn't place the familiarity. But he could, all right. The step sounded—precisely like the step of old Hill.

He stared toward the switchboard and a feeling of chill touched his spine. He had summoned Hill. Had Hill—answered?

It was a crazy thought. He laughed aloud, and puffed at the cigar in his teeth. He was reaching for the knob when he heard the step again. Slow, labored. On the staircase. Just like Hill's painful crawl. . . .

Hell, it was the butler! The old man was coming up to investigate the crash of that mirror, or of the crystal brackets.

But he'd have been up here before now, if that were the case. Quite a while had elapsed since he had made a noise up here. Besides, the butler was an old fossil, just like Hill. He'd have used the elevator if he meant to come up. . . .

Meller began to sweat a little. All the time he had been standing there thinking, he had been hearing the steps, slowly, laboriously ascending the stairs. The butler, af-

course, he insisted to himself, wiping perspiration from his flabby face.

Thump, thump. A step at a time. A slow, painful crawl. God, it did sound like Hill!

Meller began to wish to heaven he had not pushed the phone switch over Hill's name. He wished he hadn't called those things into the phone. Had he heard a faint hello when he first lifted the receiver?

"I'm full of the jitters," he muttered aloud, listening to the slow, slow steps up the interminable marble staircase.

Listening to the steps. One step at a time, as if a feeble but determined body were hitching itself up a stair at a time and then resting.

"You out there," he called. "Butler—"

He had called it loudly. Echoes rang in the gray and silver room. His voice must have carried to the person on the stairs.

But there was no answer. Only more of the slow, labored steps. Closer now. Very near the top. And the door he was facing, the door he was so near, was right at the head of the stairs.

"Hey—you—out there—"

It was almost a scream that came from Meller's lips. Mad or not, the thought that that might really be Hill, come in answer to the blasphemous call, was drowning him in horror. Those slow steps were so exactly like old Hill's.

Step. A rest. Step. A pause. Step, step. Heavily, wearily, but indomitably, as someone—someone—ascended the stairs outside.

"My God—"

It was a moan that came from Meller's stiff lips. His cigar lay smoking on the bare floor. Then he drew a deep breath. Why, he was really trembling! This was a hell of a note! Meller, many times a millionaire at forty-one, feared as few in Chicago were feared—trembling in a vacant room at the sound of steps!"

"You out there! If you're the butler—say so!"

The steps paused—at the top of the stairs. And there was no answer.

Meller's last courage began seeping out of him. His fingers went up tremulously. He plucked at his shaking lips. The steps

resumed, with infinite effort, infinite doggedness. They stopped outside the door.

Was it the butler out there, or wasn't it?

But it was, of course! Oh, God, it had to be! A dead man obey a summons of the living? No, no! That wasn't possible. Even in a deepening sea of horror that made his heart pound till he could taste blood in his mouth, he knew that.

The door moved a very little. He wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been staring right at it with glaring eyeballs. It had been an inch or so open. Now it was two inches. Swinging open a very little. As if only a breath of pressure had been applied to it. Pressure such as no real hand, no flesh-and-blood hand, would exert. . . .

"I can't stand this!" Meller panted. "I'm being a fool—"

His hand went out. He clutched the knob of the door.

He knew it was the servant out there. Hell—who else could it be? There were only the two of them in that house. Only the two of them. . . .

The door moved a little against his hand. Moved, slyly, eerily—not as any normal person would have moved it. The butler, by God—deliberately trying to frighten him! It had to be the butler!

He flung the door open with a scream that echoed through the whole great house, flung the door open—and stood swaying there; stood swaying and stricken for a few seconds before he fell. . . .

It was half an hour before the butler came up the stairs. He had been in the kitchen. He had thought for a moment he'd heard a scream. But it was not repeated, so he had paid no more attention. The walls of the old mansion were thick.

He screamed himself, now, as he got to the top of the stairs and saw the thing in the doorway of Miss Beatrice Hill's apartment. Screamed just once and cowered back.

The man who had called himself Meller lay there, and his face—his face—

The butler managed to get to the phone in the hall and call the police. Then he fainted, as if he had been a woman.

He had never before looked at the face of a man who had been frightened to death.