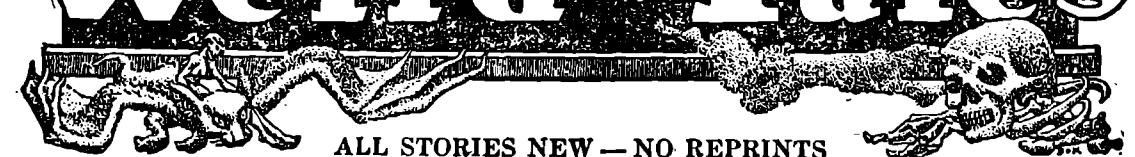


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1949

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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Lover in Scarlet

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

The most passionate lover of all. . . .

AFTERWARD the members of the coroner's jury never blamed the shutter, for they couldn't blame something of which they'd never heard. Such a prosaic object, a shutter, to give rise to the dread of that Other. But then the jury never knew, either, of the thing in the scarlet cloak.

Yet that was how it began, with the shutter that thudded in the night's rising

wind against the narrow brownstone front of the decrepit old four-story house.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. . . .

The old man lying in the black walnut bed listened and roused and pushed himself up on one scrawny elbow to clutch his nephew with his free hand, a hand more like a liver-spotted claw now than ever.

"Sh! Did you hear?" whispered Uncle Ralph. "Footsteps!"



Heading by Lee Brown Coye

Fred Kolbey listened to the monotonous thudding of the shutter. He was about to reassure the old man of the true origin of the sound when he bethought himself of his recent interview with the doctor.

"I have good news for you, my boy!" the doctor had said, once safely out of earshot of the sick man. "Your uncle's heart is responding splendidly to treatment. There's no reason why he should not go on living for years, barring accidents. Just keep him in a reasonably cheerful frame of mind, and be careful to guard him from sudden shocks."

Good news, Fred had thought sardonically, though he'd diplomatically dissembled his chagrin as best he could. Uncle Ralph would go on living, sitting on his money like a hen on an egg, too stingy to enjoy it or even let anyone else enjoy it.

Fred had felt the gall churn within him. Three weeks he'd wasted in this hell-hole already. Years now, probably, before he could ever expect to get his hands on any of the money. Of all the dirty rotten deals!

THE thudding shutter, his uncle's words, cut across his frustrated brooding now, and as quickly as that the idea was born. It just came to him from nowhere. It had happened before. Hunches. He got 'em, he played 'em, he always won. Didn't they call him Lucky Kolbey out at the track, in the back room at Shenley's?

"Footsteps, Uncle Ralph?" Fred said now, aloud. He appeared to listen. "Yes, someone is coming up the stairs." He let his eyes widen then, let them turn to meet the still wider eyes of the old man on the bed. "But there is no one in the house except us!"

Uncle Ralph whimpered. "It's someone coming after my money. Or—or it's someone coming after *me*!"

"Nonsense!" Fred cried, with what he hoped would sound like false heartiness. "I know what you're thinking, Uncle Ralph! You're thinking it's *Death* coming for you!"

The aged man gasped, and fell back against the pillows, his open mouth like a purse from which the drawstring had been removed.

Fred patted the brown claw nearest him, watched with satisfaction the labored

heaving of the thin chest under the sheet. "There, there, I'll go see who it is." He paused to add reflectively, "what it is."

Uncle Ralph groaned, the color of his skin like a faint wash of gray over ochre.

Fred had a thin smile for the darkened hall outside his uncle's bedroom. Keep him in a cheerful frame of mind, eh? Why hadn't he thought of this before? What could be easier than playing on the sick imagination of a man already at death's threshold? Once the ball was rolling it shouldn't take so very long.

Fred listened, and nodded approvingly. Already luck was with him, he noted, for the wind died just then, and the thudding of the shutter muted until it died away at last into silence. He waited a moment before reentering the bedroom.

Again his uncle had propped himself on one elbow, the better to watch with rheumy, apprehensive eyes for what might come through the door. When he saw it was only Fred, he groaned gratefully, and asked in a racked whisper, "What—what was it?"

Fred let his forehead furrow. "I thought I saw—But, pshaw! Of course I didn't!"

"What? What?" The swollen tongue came out, tried futilely to moisten dry lips.

"I must have imagined it. Calm yourself, Uncle Ralph! Don't you think I'd tell you, if I were sure I—"

"No!" The rheumy eyes narrowed cunningly. "You wouldn't tell me. You'd let me lie here, unknowing, and let it get me!"

"Uncle Ralph!" Fred sounded unbearably hurt. "Very well, then, I thought I saw something flee down the stairs when it heard me. Something in a scarlet cloak. I caught the white flash of—of bones, and there was a scarlet cowl that only partially hid a—a skull!"

The old man made a mewling piteous sound; and plucked feebly at the bed-clothes.

Fred laughed unconvincingly. "But of course I must have been mistaken! You lie here quietly now, while I go down to my room and finish up some work I must do."

"Don't leave me here all alone!"

"There's nothing to hurt you, and I'll be right below this room. You have your bell there on the table, and I'll hear you if you ring, or if you call me," Fred said, and

hurried out, purposely deaf to the frantic entreaties that followed him.

He must get away before the shutter started banging again. Better to leave the old man to his frightened thoughts, leave him to meet alone the renewed sound of the 'footsteps'.

Fred started down the stairs, praying to such gods as he acknowledged for the rising of the wind. Such was the power of the imagination, he thought in some amusement, that he even felt a little uneasy himself. True, he didn't hear footsteps that weren't there! Nuts to that! But damned if it didn't seem as if *eyes* were following his progress down the stairs! He felt this so sharply that he grew conscious of a chilly sensation in the small of his back.

Once in the quiet of his own room he forgot readily enough that queerly disturbing moment on the stairs. He listened instead, achingly, for the coming of the wind. And when it came, he mused, what should he do when next he was called to that room above? What should he say? Surely his own imagination was capable of depicting a yet more vivid horror, more graphic still, for the delectation of Uncle Ralph?

He listened. The wind was rising! The window rattled, and tree branches scratched the outer walls. And then it came.

Thump, thump, thump, thump...

Immediately Uncle Ralph's bell began to jangle fiercely. Fred grinned, and lolled at his ease, hands clasped behind his head. Let the old boy stew in his own juice yet awhile.

"Fred! Fred! Fred!"

Fred cocked his head. He could hear a muttering now, coming faintly down the stairs. An unintelligible jargon. Good! Uncle Ralph was gibbering to himself. It was several moments before a faint wail came again for Fred.

HE ROSE at last and started leisurely up the stairs, but near the top he broke into a run. "Uncle Ralph, what is it? I was in the bathroom, and—"

He stopped on the threshold of the bedroom. His uncle had managed somehow to get out of bed alone, to walk or crawl or drag himself halfway to the door before

collapsing where he lay on the floor. Fred hastened to him, lifted the stertorously breathing body, slapped the putty-colored face until the faded blue eyes opened to stare blindly, already lost in a semi-coma.

"Go, Fred!" His uncle panted. The voice came so faintly Fred had to bend an ear nearly to the gray lips. "Money in box—under bed. But don't wait, go! *It* was here! The thing—in scarlet! It loves you! It told me so! It wants me to die so it—can be alone—with you!"

The thin body shuddered as if from a racing motor within. Then it was still. Fred stared down, unbelieving. It couldn't have happened so quickly! He couldn't have succeeded so well! Uncle Ralph couldn't be dead! And then he smiled, remembering, before easing the body to the floor.

Lucky Kolbey!

He went to the bed then, stooped, lifted its damask draperies to pull the carved walnut chest from beneath it. He turned the key already in the lock, and eagerly threw back the lid. Currency! Bundles of it, bales of it! More than he'd ever dreamed!

He was still bending over the opened chest, gloating, when he felt again that uncomfortable sensation in the small of his back. He turned inquiringly, more in annoyance than fright. Shocked disbelief held him still momentarily. *It wasn't there? It couldn't be there?* He was leaping to his feet then, his eyes swivelling frantically.

But there was nowhere to flee, no way he could escape the thing in the doorway. The thing in the hooded cloak with its death's-head under the cowl of scarlet, its jaws clicking ingratiatingly, its eyeless sockets giving off an unholy light of what passed with it for love. Advancing toward Fred, it extended the chalk-white bones that were its arms.

It was happy, Fred's dazed mind recognized sickly. It had received its wish: It was *alone* with him at last!

"Sweetheart!" it grated in a hideous travesty of a voice.

He had time only to make a dreadful sound low in his throat before he felt the bony arms enfold him, before merciful oblivion came to him, borne on the swift wings of horror.