

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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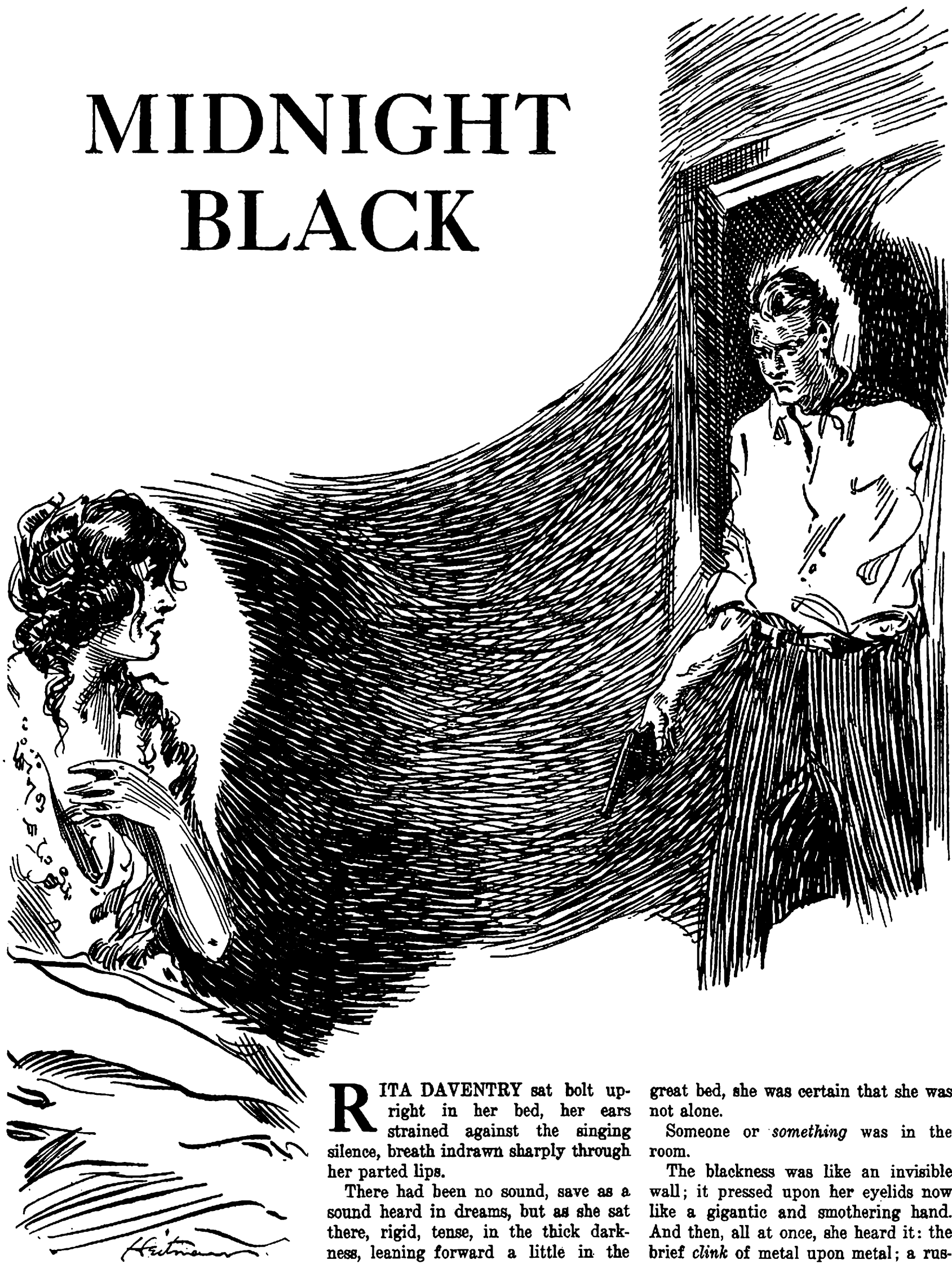
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MIDNIGHT BLACK



RITA DAVENTRY sat bolt upright in her bed, her ears strained against the singing silence, breath indrawn sharply through her parted lips.

There had been no sound, save as a sound heard in dreams, but as she sat there, rigid, tense, in the thick darkness, leaning forward a little in the

great bed, she was certain that she was not alone.

Someone or *something* was in the room.

The blackness was like an invisible wall; it pressed upon her eyelids now like a gigantic and smothering hand. And then, all at once, she heard it: the brief *clink* of metal upon metal; a rus-

tle, like the flicker of a wind-blown leaf.

Simply by reaching forth her hand she could have pressed the wall switch, flooded that midnight blackness with the blazing effulgence of the electrolier, but she could not. Eyes strained against that velvet black, she crouched now, in the immensity of the great bed, the silken case of the sheets turned suddenly to ice, her pulses hammering to the tension of her hard-held breathing, there in the stifling dark.

There came a clanking, a whirring as of wings invisible; then, from the wall clock, there boomed twelve heavy strokes—midnight.

She heard the slow *tick-tock* of that steady beat, and then, of a sudden she heard something else: the muffled ticking of a watch.

The sound was not loud—it came to her as through walls of silence—but it was nearer now. She was certain of it.

The door was closed; it was a heavy, sound-proof affair; the intruder, whoever he might be, had entered by the window. Rita Daventry knew that he was armed, and desperate—desperate with the cold courage of a cornered grizzly; a housebreaker, who, if attacked, would shoot his way out, reckless of consequences. To such a man, murder, as the price of his liberty, would be a little thing.

And with the thought she stiffened; her mouth opened, to release the scream, at the first sound of which she knew that aid would come, unthinking, swift, reckless, too, in its first fury of intrepid action.

But she would not summon that scream.

On the floor above, her husband was working now in his laboratory. But the man below would have the advantage of that midnight black; with the opening of the door, he would shoot him down with the ruthless, cold cruelty of a wolf.

But that was not all the reason. To Rita Daventry, alone now with this invisible menace of the dark, there had come, on a sudden, a thought to freeze her blood, the thought of Ronald Armitage.

It had been only the night before, at a studio tea, that Armitage had made the threat, or the promise, that came to her now with a sudden, cold prevision of tragedy. Armitage was young, reckless, debonair, of an engaging manner with women; and Rita had encouraged him—well, just a little, she told herself.

It was a fascinating game—in the playing. The paying—that would be another matter. And as if the words

had been spoken in her ear, she was hearing now the smooth voice, thickened a trifle with his potations, with that faintly roughened, passionate undertone:

“... Daventry doesn't care, does he? Why should *you*? I tell you, Rita, you've gotten into my blood. Some night *between you and me*—the witching hour, ha? I *promise* you I'll be there; and you won't have to *look* to find me!”

The handsome, dissipated face had come close to hers; there had been a menace in the tone, as well as a caress. And the fact that the man had been—well—not himself could not condone. The noise, the lights, the music upon which, dancing together, they had floated as on a languorous, steep wave of sound and motion, could not condone.

Rita had had no excuse save the oft-repeated, sophisticated sophistry of “The last time; this will be the very last!” And she had gone on, protesting, if at all, with a half-mutinous, wholly unconsidered coquetry, which, at the last, had led to this!

RONALD ARMITAGE had the reputation of being something of a “blood;” the Armitages had sowed and reaped, and of young Ronald it was said that he would stop at nothing for the accomplishment of his desires.

And now, alone in that vast bed, hearing again that stealthy movement by the window, the girl checked again sharply in the act of reaching forth her hand. With her finger upon the button, she froze, rigid, as that smooth, stealthy advance moved closer.

There came a fumbling at the footboard; she heard the sound, like a faint, rubbing whisper, of naked fingers sliding upon polished wood. But the night was a moonless, black emptiness; the bed-chamber was like a tomb for blackness, dark as a wolf's throat, and yet alive with movement, with a tension drawn like a fine wire and singing at a pitch too low for sound.

At any moment, too, Daventry might come down; he was a careful man who guarded his house and the treasure therein with a meticulous observance. And sitting there, waiting, nerves at pitch, Rita Daventry tasted to the full the fruits of her single indiscretion. As between Armitage and her husband, she knew now beyond peradventure whom it was she loved, and with a love, as she knew now, fierce and protective, desirous above all things of the safety—the life, indeed, of the toiler on the second floor.

Armitage had never been in her bed-chamber, of course, although he knew its location, had seen it, from the outside, walking with Daventry through the corridor without. But in the darkness strange tricks are played with one's sense of direction. The room was a large one, lofty, high-ceilinged, its rear windows opening upon a service alley, and it had been by means of this alley that the midnight intruder had made entrance.

She could hear him now a little better—his breathing, hard-held and yet rising to that peculiar, sterterous quality that was almost like a snuffing, a quick, eager panting as of a hound questing his quarry in the dark. If Armitage had been drinking—but then, he must have been, or he would scarcely have made good his threat.

Daventry, though a studious, careful man, was a lion when aroused; he could shoot and shoot straight. And if the two should meet, there in that midnight black, it would be grim tragedy for one, or both—tragedy with none for witness save that pale girl new-risen from her couch of dreams, wide-eyed, her gaze fixed now in a sightless staring upon the black well of the night.

And then, as she shrank backward against the pillows, there came a thumping clatter, a thick, whispered oath, and a following silence that was more terrible than any sound.

He was coming now, around the footboard, along the side of the bed. She felt rather than heard that fumbling, stealthy advance; the fingers feeling along the counterpane; the noiseless *pad-pad* of the feet deadened by the thick pile of the Kermanshah rug; in imagination she could almost see the face, flushed now, bemused with drink, the leering, parted mouth. . . .

The scream, lodged in her throat now, seemed like a bird beating against bars; in a moment the silence would be ripped from end to end, as a sheet is ripped from point to point, with the tearing impact of that scream, rising heavenward with the first defiling touch of those groping fingers. Armitage's face on that evening had been the face of a satyr, high-colored, the nose sharpened to a point of greed, the eyes in a wide, avid staring upon the perfect curve of her shoulders, her neck.

And she had encouraged him with by-play of hand and eye, speech in a low rich contralto dealing in double meanings that yet had no meaning; glance provocative plumbing the depths of his—for this.

And in that moment Rita Daventry knew fear; the primal fear of the wo-

man whose very protection has become her peril—the peril of the abyss.

And it was then that she heard it, like a summons of doom; the sound of heavy footsteps from the room above.

THE footsteps were coming down now; they beat hollowly against the iron treads of the staircase with rapid thunder.

Robert Daventry was coming, leaping downward, now to meet—the death that waited for him behind that closed door, or to deal it to the man who, somewhere in that smothering dark, crouched, automatic ready, waiting for the man who was coming—on the wings of death.

After all, her husband might not have heard that thumping clatter; all unknowing, he might be rushing downward to meet an ambush unsuspected and unknown. And that Armitage would shoot, the woman was convinced. For he would put but one construction upon that headlong descent. Daventry had heard him, knew that he was there, like a thief in the night, a marauder, an outlaw meriting the swift justice of the bullet.

And then, all at once, the steps ceased; a silence grew and held that was like the silence before storm, so that to the woman upon the bed it seemed that she abode in a vacuum of sound and silence, brooding upon the night in a volcanic, breathless calm.

It must be a nightmare that would pass, a waking dream that would presently dissolve in the sanity of peaceful slumber. She strove, as a drowning swimmer fathoms deep in dreams, to scream a warning, a command to the man—*her* man—silent now upon the threshold of life, or of death. But she could not.

And presently, how she could not have told, she knew that, where before there had been but *one* dim Presence in that bed-chamber, now there were *two*.

She had heard nothing, seen nothing, felt nothing; neither the opening nor the closing of the heavy door; no faintest sound of breathing; the silence held, borrowing a tension from the electric air. Remote, as through many thicknesses of walls, there came to her now, as from a world removed, the night noises of the City, muted by distance to a vague shadow of clamor, faint and far.

But that velvet black before her was, as she knew, most terribly endowed with motion, sinister, alive, awaiting merely the spark, the pressure of rigid finger upon trigger, the touch of hand against hand, the faintest whisper of a sound, to dissolve in a chaos of red ruin—and with it the ruin of her world.

Abruptly, again she heard that muffled ticking, this time close at hand, and with it, as she fancied, the faint breathing of a man. But even as she heard it, it receded, died; there came the faint *snick* of metal upon metal, like the *snick* and slither of a steel blade; it was followed by a sort of chugging impact, like the sound made by a knife sheathed home, say, at the base of a man's brain, or between the shoulders—a sound to freeze the blood.

That Armitage could have been capable of this she could not believe, but upon the instant her flesh crawled abruptly at the thought; of the invisible duelists but one remained now, and he was coming toward her; she fancied she could hear the faint, scarce-audible footfall on the thick pile of the rug.

And then—the silence was abruptly broken by a shattering crash. The intruder, unfamiliar with the room's interior, had swept a great vase from the mantel.

And then, distinct and clear, she heard the sodden impact of fist on flesh, a heaving grunt, the lift and strain of heavy bodies, close-locked.

And following this, in a sudden fury, all round the room the pictures rattled in their frames; the flooring shook; a heavy desk went over in a smashing ruin; grunts followed it, the straining shock of big men in a death-grapple. But mostly it was a fight in silence and darkness, with the quick, hard breathing of men at the last desperate urge of their spent strength.

With her finger again upon the light-switch, again she hesitated, and in that flash of time she heard all at once a quick, sobbing breath—a groan—then silence.

Somewhere out there in that midnight blackness her husband might be lying wounded—dead—above him the beast whom she had known as Ronald the Debonair, turning his face now toward the girl who, shivering and defenseless, crouched forlorn upon the bed.

But even as this fresh terror out of the dark assailed her, there came a heavy crash—another—the barking rattle of an automatic, the quick flashes stabbing into the murk to right and left.

The roaring crashes beat upon her ears like a tocsin of doom, and then, in answer, three answering shots, deliberate, slow. With them there came the slumping fall of a heavy body, and the labored breathing of a man.

The duel was over.

For a moment the silence held. Dreading what the coming of the light might

reveal, her finger, hovering upon the push-button, came away; then, with an agony of effort, made a darting thrust.

And as the light sprang to full flower she looked with white face and staring eyes, upon the tall figure in the doorway.

It was Robert Daventry!

BUT her hysterical, glad cry was stifled in her throat as her husband, bending forward over the rug, turned over the dead man with his foot.

Fearful, yet eager to see, she rose upon her knees, peering with wide eyes over the foot-board.

Then—hysteria seized her with, by turns, a sudden storm of mingled weeping and frantic laughter.

“That. . . . That. . . .!” she cried, pointing a shaking finger at the still figure on the carpet.

And then:

“Oh, my God! it might have been—!”

But Daventry, gazing with a grim face at the rigid figure of the house-breaker—the unclean skin, with its bristly stubble of unshaven chin, blue now under the lights—thought it merely the natural reaction of the terrific strain which she had undergone.

“You mean—it might have been—*me!*” he said slowly. “Well—of course. . . .”

“Of course, Dear,” lied Rita Daventry, with a misty smile.