

Night Must Not Come

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*Ever since the birth of time
fires have been kept at night
and man has never allowed
complete darkness, for evil
things are waiting out there
beyond the light.*

HHEAD defense warden Charles Higgins of Sector 6 looked up as two of his subordinates came into the OCD office.

One of them, a middle-aged woman, white helmet covering gray hair, plumped down into a chair near Higgins' desk. Her companion, a short, swarthy man stood leaning against the wall.

"How long to go, Chief?" The woman spoke.

Higgins glanced at a card on his desk. "We'll get the sirens at 8:15."

The three lapsed into silence. In a few minutes, other wardens entered the office.

Higgins spoke to some, nodded to others. He had reason to be proud of his district and his wardens. They were well organized for tonight's job. In less than a quarter of an hour New Dixon, large Eastern metropolis would have its first city-wide blackout. For the first time all the millions of diversified lights would go out. All activity would cease, there would be complete darkness.

Higgins looked around the room approvingly. His two deputies—the housewife, Mrs. Carey, the stocky corner grocer, Mr. Adreco—were, like the others, plain citizens banded together in a common

cause. He was proud of them all, he thought, as he silently went through the roll call. All were present but his first deputy, Professor James Everett of New Dixon College.

The head defense warden frowned a bit to himself. Everett had been worrying him lately. To be sure, the professor had been one of the first to join up and had always proven himself an enthusiastic volunteer. But recently he had skipped a few meetings. And only yesterday when Higgins had mentioned the blackout scheduled for tonight Everett had seemed very perturbed at the news. Oh well, these professors of Sociology were unpredictable. Everett would be all right.

Higgins' train of thought was brought back to the immediate as he heard his name called imperatively from the hall. All eyes were on the door as Professor Everett hurried in. His face was feverish and his small frame beneath his rumpled suit seemed to quiver with excitement as he headed for Higgins. He leaned over the desk for a moment to catch his breath.

"Professor, why haven't you your equipment," Higgins started to remonstrate, noting the other's dress, "Man, you know we've got this drill coming up in a few minutes."

Everett had caught his breath somewhat now. Ignoring the question, he clutched the chief's arm. "Listen, Mr. Higgins, that's what I've got to tell you. The drill . . . we've got to stop it. Do you understand me, we can't have the blackout!" So saying Everett collapsed into a chair.

FOR a moment nobody spoke. Higgins noted that the other wardens in the room showed the same astonishment and bewilderment that he felt. Charles Higgins rose to the occasion. He came around his desk, smiling, and laid his hand on Everett's shoulder.

"I know how it is. We're all keyed up,

I'll confess I am. But once we get on the job that'll all disappear. Now you get your equipment, Professor, and we'll go over the assignments once more. I want our district to be 100 per cent. Come on, man, we haven't got much time."

Everett shuddered and then visibly took hold of himself. He straightened in his chair and then spoke, making an effort to keep his voice level.

"Higgins, I've stumbled on something. There isn't time to explain, but we've got to call off tonight's blackout."

"Impossible," the chief snapped. "If you're feeling ill, we'll get along without you. I'll get one of the others to take your post."

"It isn't that, I'm all right. It's just that I know we're making a terrible mistake. We've got to call this thing off until some kind of investigation can be made. There's something . . . something I don't understand."

The other wardens were staring incredulously. Higgins could see they didn't know quite how to take the actions of the usually dignified reserved professor. The sector head was as puzzled himself.

"In heaven's name, Professor, what do you mean? What kind of investigation . . . and of what?"

Everett spoke now with an effort, "An investigation of the forces that I am convinced will be loosed on this city if we put all the lights out tonight!"

Mrs. Carey smiled and spoke accusingly, "Now, Professor, don't tell us you're afraid of the dark?" It was a relief to hear the answering chuckles from the others. Higgins turned again to Everett.

"Now listen, Professor Everett, we are—"

"You've got to hear me," Everett broke in. "Let me finish. Ever since the birth of time, ever since the birth of man, fires were kept at night. Complete darkness was never allowed by any tribe in any age. Areas

where cities grew up are particularly susceptible to these forces. Always a little light was kept somewhere. And as time passed and the cities developed, always through the darkness there would be lights. Of course, it was natural in a city to have light. Don't you see, though, that this was more than a coincidence. For lights and movement are the only protection against forces of darkness. And we're going to defy this. For the first time in the ages since man has lived on this earth, tonight there will suddenly be no lights, no lights at all—no street lights, no midnight pin-pricks of illumination on top of skyscrapers—just blackness.”

In his business as well as in this volunteer capacity, Higgins was essentially a practical man of action. His first interest was in calculating the effect this scene was going to have on his wardens and their part in tonight's drill.

He put his arm around Everett's shoulders. “Come on, you'd better go back up to your apartment.”

Everett brushed the arm away. He then pulled out of his pocket a red-leather faced book, placed it on the desk.

“See this?” he opened the ancient book.

HIGGINS bent over to read the almost illegible title, “Kendl's Theories of Tribal Folklore.” Everett's hands shook as he thumbed to a section in the middle of the book. Some of the leaves were held together with transparent tape and the entire volume looked about to fall apart.

Everett stabbed his finger at a passage on one yellow page.

Higgins bent lower, straining his eyes to read where the professor indicated.

“. . . it must be concluded that areas where early tribal gatherings took place were thought to be evil, particularly after sundown. Many persons were needed in these areas where no man dare lie down alone and sleep unguarded through the

night—always some were needed to tend the fires that stood between those gathered in these locations and the strange powers of darkness. It is logical to presume that these forces, inherent in darkness, and responsible for the instinctive fear that humans have always held for the dark, will always be a potential threat to mankind.

“In the future, let no one ignorant of these traditions forget the essential duty—to keep light always somewhere in the darkness.

“For man has a stake in this eternal struggle between light and dark—the stake is his very existence. . . .”

As Higgins read to himself, the slow, rising note of a siren growled out of the night into the little room. Instantly, the wardens went into action. Adreco grabbed the lever to turn off the street lamp in the front. Everett, realizing perhaps that he was too late in his warning message pulled himself together and reached for his helmet. Higgins noted with relief that he seemed determined to go through with his duty.

The chief warden issued last instructions, reached for his own helmet, and followed Everett into the street. Once outside the building, the wardens deployed to their posts.

Higgins noted with satisfaction the way apartment and dwelling lights were snapping out within a few seconds of the first warning. But he noticed that Everett, whose post was down at the corner, seemed reluctant to move away from the street light. The professor was scared. That was obvious.

In a few minutes, the surrounding buildings were completely dark. Higgins frowned down at the dial of his watch. In a few more minutes the second note of the siren should sound the red warning. This would mean all lights out, traffic would stop, and pedestrians would have to seek shelter

Everett was still near him.

"Come on, Professor, get down to the corner," he ordered.

Everett hung back. "Listen, Higgins, just one thing. Let's leave this light on here in the street."

"You're crazy! I know my instructions. Now get down to your post and see this thing through. You're setting a helluva example, Everett. I thought you'd be a man to fulfill your responsibilities to the fullest. Instead of that, I find you've cooked up some cock and bull story about what will happen if we turn all the lights out."

Without a further word Everett turned and trudged off down the street. Higgins pulled at his chin reflectively. It was puzzling. A man like Professor Everett! His thoughts were pulled back to the job at hand by the sudden, rising crescendo of the sirens again.

IMMEDIATELY Adreco moved to the street light and put it out. Another warden, Ed Harley, down on the avenue, motioned some pedestrians into a shelter with a brief flash of his torch.

Gradually the noise of the huge city slackened and stopped. One by one the last remaining lights winked out. The darkness of the first warning period now became an impenetrable blackness.

Higgins himself felt a sudden feeling of depression. Here he was in the heart of a city of millions—and yet he might as well be alone on a desert isle. Or the millions around him might as well have died!

He shook himself of this mood. By God, he was letting that crazy professor affect him. He must make the rounds of his post now. Higgins realized with a sudden feeling of surprise that his other wardens had seemingly dissolved into the blackness. Even Adreco, nearest him, was invisible. Higgins started cautiously along the street. He almost ran into the lamppost.

"Joe," he called. "Joe Adreco, where are you?"

There wasn't a sound. Adreco was probably back near the building wall. Higgins moved on. Three dwellings down—he knew each post by heart—was Mrs. Carey. She should be in front of the apartment there. Higgins groped his way, not wanting to use his light. Suddenly after several more steps he realized that he must have walked by the house where she should have been. . . . Higgins began to walk more rapidly. The sound of his footsteps echoed dully from side to side of the street. At last he nearly tripped over the corner in the dark. Everett's post. Where was Everett? Higgins groped his way for a few yards either way and found nobody. An eerie thought came to him. His wardens had disappeared . . . in fact everybody had disappeared, he was alone!

For a moment he tried to grasp the situation and then cold sweat began to mat his forehead. . . . How could this be? Ed Harley, the wise-cracking member of his corps, surely he was at his post. . . . Higgins stumbled on a bit further and felt for the railing that ran around an old brownstone house off the corner. He knew every inch of this neighborhood, yet in the blackness it seemed strangely alien. His feet dragged over the uneven concrete pavement as he stumbled forward. He would allow himself one brief snap of his flashlight. After all, he could chance that.

HE TURNED his light toward where the row of brownstone buildings should be and snapped the switch shortly. The triggered beam of light darted out for a few short feet and then was diffused and lost in layers and layers of blackness. He couldn't see any row of houses. He couldn't see anything.

Higgins was a logical man, though. Of course, a fog must have come up, Ed, well, Ed must be here somewhere in this *murk*.

"Ed!" Higgins kept his voice down. "Ed, where are you?"

The sound of his own voice beat back at him as though the wet, oppressive curtain of night were a sounding board.

"I'll be damned," Higgins spoke to himself and straightened his shoulders. He was not the kind of man to be panicked by things that temporarily, at least, were . . . well, peculiar. But he wondered at the coldness that he felt in his arms and legs and the dampness of his forehead and hands.

After all, where were his wardens? In sector tests before this, they had always stuck to their posts. It was incredible that all of them should be off post at the same time. It was impossible. His mind flashed back to Professor Everett and his warning before the test. What had the old fool meant with his ancient book of folklore?

All this time Higgins had been stumbling forward and suddenly his outstretched hand came in contact with the rail he had been seeking. He gripped its dripping wet roundness and hung on. He realized why he hadn't been able to see anything . . . this was a heavy, dripping fog . . . thick, like, well, almost like some strange gas.

Higgins tried to shrug away the depression that oozed over him with the same stealth as the fog. He must get along back to post. With carefully rationed pricks of light from his torch he found his way up the street. And again he met no one where three, four of his wardens should have been. He finally gained the entrance to sector headquarters and stumbled in the doorway and down the hall to the blacked-out door of their office. He went in, closing the door behind him. He was irritated at the way his hand shook as he reached out to turn on the small desk light.

As the light flicked on, Higgins felt a new surge of confidence. Even so, he staggered as he headed over toward the basin

in the corner. He stared at himself incredulously in the mirror over the basin. His face was a dead white, his eyes dilated. God Lord, what had happened to him out there in the darkness?

JOE ADRECO turned the street light off in the same precise way he handled the scales in his grocery store. He had practiced this many times before and there was nothing to it. As he completed this job he moved back from the lamppost somewhat and into the area assigned to him in front of a row of tenements. He marveled at the sudden slowing down of the tempo of the city . . . and finally the utter silence. He looked up the street to his left where head warden Charles Higgins should be. Adreco was amazed at the impenetrable blackness. Of course, there was no moon tonight and it was a bit cloudy, but this fog that seemed to begin to swirl around him was a new wrinkle. It hadn't seemed thick a few minutes ago. Adreco shrugged and kept his sharp eyes peeled for any movement or light.

The silence and blackness were oppressive. Once he called out, "Mr. Higgins! Chief, are you there?" There wasn't any answering sound. It was as though Adreco was completely alone, on guard in a cemetery. . . . It was funny, there was something kinda scary about all this, thought Adreco, and the old professor was to blame, shooting his head off before the drill the way he had.

All of a sudden Adreco got a funny feeling, it was as though somebody had him by the throat, it was hard to breathe—Adreco shook himself angrily. What was this? He wasn't getting scared?

Still, this fog was fierce—like breathing water. Adreco moved down the street, to the next post where Mrs. Carey was supposed to be. Their posts bordered. Mrs. Carey would have something bright to say, she of warm face and motherly nature.

Adreco beamed his torch ahead and through the swirling mist, picked out the spot where Mrs. Carey was posted . . . he gaped. Mrs. Carey off her post! That was unthinkable. But she wasn't to be seen.

Adreco called, "Mrs. Carey. Heh!"

His voice sounded little and futile. Adreco felt scared. By God, he *was* alone. Where were those others? Where was the sector chief and Mrs. Carey?

Joe gripped his light and huddled down into his overcoat. The fog moved around him and settled down like a damp cloak. Joe wished he was home, upstairs over his store . . . where there was warmth and brightness again.

MRS. CAREY had the row of buildings at the near-end of the block. With satisfaction, she noted the lights all out inside. Down the street she could barely discern Higgins and Adreco standing near the street light. As the second siren sounded she saw Adreco go to the light and turn it off. And then she could see no more. The figures of Adreco and Higgins snapped from view like images on a movie screen suddenly gone blank.

As she waited, Mrs. Carey pulled her collar up to protect her throat from the extreme dampness. Funny, she hadn't noticed the fog earlier in the evening. Pretty soon, Higgins would come by, inspecting the posts. She'd be glad to see anybody, it was so lonely . . . even that crackpot Everett. What had he meant with all that funny talk earlier?

Time passed and still no Higgins. Mrs. Carey wondered if he had missed her as he walked by in the stygian blackness. That seemed impossible, still she thought she'd walk down toward the street lamp to see if Adreco had seen him.

It was then she realized the density of the air and blackness. She inched forward until finally she bumped her shoulder into the street light.

"Joe," she called. "Oh, Joe." That was strange. Adreco off his post, too. Mrs. Carey shrugged and resumed her cautious walk up the street. No Higgins either. Very strange. Only her old aunt believed in disappearing acts; she must have missed Adreco and Higgins in the dark.

She wished this drill was over. And was it her imagination, or was the air getting heavier, pounding down on her head like pressured steam? Mrs. Carey put her fingers to her ears and grimaced. That professor and his stories would have them all believing in bogey tales.

PROFESSOR EVERETT went off down the street with Higgins' last words stinging him. Yet he had tried to do his best. He had tried to warn them. He gripped more tightly at the old leather-faced book he was holding: "Kend's Theories of Tribal Folklore." It was a fascinating work based on the entire history of tribal customs in this country. Indians, Dutch, French, English. Fascinating, that is, until Everett had stumbled on those fateful paragraphs tucked away in the middle of the volume and had done some thinking. But how could he make the others believe him? As he reached his post at the corner, he turned and looked back down the street. He could see a shadow in the darkness that must be Mrs. Carey. Beyond, he could see the faint light in the distance; the two figures beneath were Higgins and Adreco. Then Everett heard the second siren signal and the faraway dot of light from the street lamp flicked out.

Despite himself, Everett began to shake in the thick, chill air. From nowhere a fog seemed to build up around him. Good Lord, it was black. He beamed his light briefly at the ground. The concrete walk beneath him looked yellow and evil. He wondered when this damn thing would be over. And Higgins, Higgins should be coming by soon, shouldn't he?

Everett inched back to the front of the corner building. He placed his back against the round iron railing that ran its width. The fog was getting worse. The air was so laden with a reeking humidity that it was hard to breathe. Everett felt an indescribable loneliness. It was hopeless to fight any longer; he froze where he stood, his fingers stiffening on his torch, straightening, the torch dropping with a faraway thud to the sidewalk. He opened his mouth to cry out but he couldn't. He wheezed with the effort to get air . . . his other hand went rigid, the old book slipped from his fingers, and then the fog swept down over him, covering him up with layers and layers of suffocating black dampness.

ON THE all clear Higgins got up from his desk again. By now he had pulled himself together. He was annoyed at himself and at the results of the whole evening. He went out the door to the front of the building. There was Adreco turning on the street light.

"Where were you, Joe?" Higgins cracked rather irritably.

"Never budged but once, Chief, except to mosey down to Mrs. Carey's post. Guess I missed her in the murk though." For up the street coming toward them was the redoubtable Mrs. Carey.

Higgins sniffed the air. Strange, but the fog seemed to have disappeared as quickly as it had come. Just then two figures rounded the corner. One was Warden Harley. The other was a patrolman.

Harley called something that Higgins couldn't quite catch.

"What," Higgins answered.

Harley came up puffing and blowing.

"It's Everett."

Higgins repeated, "What?"

"He's dead," Harley waved down to the corner. The patrolman nodded, eyes on a notebook in which he was writing.

Higgins half ran down to the corner. The streets were still virtually empty. A first aid helper was standing by Everett. The professor was lying on his back right under the railing.

"He's dead, all right," observed the first aider. Higgins dispatched a messenger for a doctor. In a few minutes a physician from the block showed up. Examination revealed that Everett had apparently died from a heart attack. The blackout test had been too much for him.

It was a sober little group of wardens that tramped into the headquarters of Sector 6.

The news of Everett's death had come to each of them as a shock . . . for despite his eccentricities, the professor had always been an amiable and hard worker in their group.

Suddenly Higgins thought of something. He questioned Harley closely. No, nothing had been found near Everett. Higgins waited until the wardens had left the office and then called Police Headquarters. No, no book had been found among the professor's effects.

The following day Higgins obtained permission to go through Professor Everett's room up at New Dixon College. Everett had been a bachelor and his small room overlooking the quadrangle was spartan in appearance. But nowhere was there a sign of "Kend's Theories of Tribal Folklore."

On a hunch, Higgins went to the school library. The librarian showed interest im-

mediately on mention of Everett's name and, after offering some words of sympathy and admiration for the professor, went to his records.

Yes, Everett had borrowed Kendl's "Theories." And the book had not been returned! Only the fact that Professor Everett had been a staff college member enabled the college to lend out this book as it was a rare relic, and so far as known, there was only one copy in print. The librarian shook his head at the news Higgins offered that no trace of the book had been found.

"But nobody ever read the book except Professor Everett," he consoled himself and Higgins. "None of the students had reason to call for it. And the professor was the only member of the staff to use it. Of course, a rare book like that; it's most unfortunate. What do you suppose could have happened?" The librarian shook his head.

BEING as diligent and painstaking in his volunteer defense work as he was in his own business, Charles Higgins soon

caught the eye of those public officials always on the lookout for men of ability who are willing to serve a good cause. Within a fortnight of the city-wide test, Higgins had been named as assistant director of the whole Eastern area.

He brought to his new job a stern efficiency, an uncomfortably clear remembrance of the first complete blackout of a large city and certain definite convictions. It was he, for instance, who initiated a more liberal ruling on lighting in the great cities.

With official approval, he ordained that certain traffic and guide lights were to stay on; and, mindful of the numerous inexplicable accidents among wardens in the first complete blackout, these volunteers should henceforth be allowed a freer use of their hand torches.

To his new job—and just possibly influencing his decision, although he would have been the last to admit this—Higgins also brought a vivid memory of a page in an old book that had vanished in the darkness; a page warning those in cities ever to keep guardian lights through the night.

