

An Exceptional Ghost Story  
By the Author of "Beyond the Door"

# Prisoners of the Dead

By PAUL SUTER

I

**O**LD JOHN BAMBER turned in his arm chair before the fire, and looked steadily at his nephew. Death was in his face.

The effort required to keep his head from drooping betrayed itself in the sag of his mouth, the tense quivering of his thin neck. But the indomitable pride of mastery showed in him, too; he made no compromise with weakness. The cruel beak that was his nose—sharp as a knife-blade—still dominated his features. His voice, a little tremulous, still grated harshly.

"You may beg my consent till you rot," he said, in his dry cackle. "You won't get it."

Young John took an impulsive step which brought him from the soft, brown shadows of the vast room into the fire's dancing radiance.

"I'm afraid I can't take no for an answer, uncle—" he began, firmly.

But his words trailed off, at the look in the terrible old man's eyes. Old John seemed to be possessed suddenly of unnatural strength. He rose, tottering, to his feet. With extended arm and a yellow bird's claw of a hand, he pointed at his nephew. The flames from the fire-place lent a false glitter to his glazing eyes, and painted the front of his dressing-gown red; but they were powerless to color his face, or his livid arm, where the loose sleeve fell back and left it exposed. The younger man trembled in spite of himself at that ghastly figure, so defiant of the shadows that were pressing upon it, and yet so soon to be one with them.



The mood passed quickly. The old man sank again into his chair. He half-smiled, musingly, with something of cunning calculation in the smile. When he spoke, his weak, almost whispering tones were wheedling rather than harsh.

"You wouldn't kill your old uncle before his time, boy?"

The effect of that changed attitude was electric. Young John's defiance was gone, like a flame puffed out. This was his uncle, who had given him a home since boyhood—his only living relative. He sank down on the floor at the old man's knees.

"You needn't answer, my boy. I know you would not. I've no wish to be hard on you. Just a promise—a little promise. You'll give the old man that?"

"Anything I can, uncle," young John returned, rather doubtfully.

"You can. It won't mean much to you—you will know why without my saying it. You are to promise to have nothing to do with her—nothing, you understand—as long as I am in the house."

The young man started. The words he was listening to, though so weak as to be barely audible, were spoken with apparent deliberation. Yet, obviously, they could mean very little. The end could not be far away. Had not the doctor said—

The aged invalid, smiling sardonically, seemed to read his nephew's thoughts. He raised a thin hand in ironic admonition.

"There are no strings to it, my boy. That's the promise. It is all I ask of you."

"I promise!" young John exclaimed.

The old man nodded, with satisfaction.

"Though it isn't much to promise, I wish it to be binding," he continued.

"Will you raise your right hand?"

"You don't rely on my word?"

"A dying man's fancy," soothed the uncle, with a weak chuckle.

Young John raised his right hand.

"Now go!"

The mandate came with unexpected force. Young John Bamber's instinct was to remain; but he could not stand out against his uncle's will. Even while death waited in the shadows, old John remained master of his house.

Young John obeyed. As he opened the door to step into the dark hall, he glanced back and saw the quivering figure sitting in the chair; the face, with its high-arched nose, bent inflexibly toward him; the eyes still returning his gaze.

At the foot of the stairs the young man met Mrs. Murdock, the gaunt Scotch housekeeper.

"How is he?" she inquired, in a whisper.

"You had better go up," he replied.

On instinct, he waited, there at the foot of the stairs; and instinct was right. She had hardly vanished into the shadowy upper room when her tall figure reappeared at the door. In the light which flickered up the stairs from the gas lamp in the lower hall, he could see her hands opening and closing spasmodically—her only symptom of excitement.

"Please come, Mr. Bamber," she requested, quietly.

From her tone, and her vibrating hands, he knew what he should find: his uncle, dead in the chair; the face, with its hawk nose, sunk on the breast; the firelight still playing ruddily upon him.

Young John Bamber thought of the solemn oath he had just taken, and of how it now meant nothing.

## II

THE bleak afternoon which saw old John Bamber laid out in his library should have been dark; but in that steel town the cloudy days, when smoke and storm-wrack hid the sun, were brighter than much of the sunshiny weather. It was lurid, flickering brightness.

The red flame of the converter, bursting into the sky, shed its glow across main thoroughfares and back alleys, and pried into many darkened places. It peered through the leaded panes of the small window above the bookcase, and so entered the gloomy library where old John lay in his coffin. This library was under his former apartment. In that room the converter's light had caught him many a time, sitting in his arm-chair. Now it played about his knife-blade nose, softened his grim mouth, but failed utterly to redden his livid face as he lay there.

It was not much of a funeral. The minister and the undertaker came, since to them it was another job of work. Young John and Mrs. Murdock were present as a matter of course.

One other was there—little Jarvins, the sculptor, with his crinkled white beard, hunched shoulders, and furtive, squinting eyes. He had been the nearest approach to a friend old John Bamber had had in his later years. They had played backgammon and chess together. Usually, their evenings had ended in a quarrel, Jarvins slamming out of the house with a snarl and a promise never to return; but he always had returned. He had a better right than most to be at the funeral; better far than any of the neighbors, who had kept away from the

churlish old man in his life time, and who now, fittingly, contented themselves with watching and commenting from their porches, as young John, with the undertaker and two of the drivers, slid the coffin into the hearse.

It was a mean funeral, indeed, and soon over. From it young John returned to the rambling house, occupied now by the housekeeper and the shadows.

The one to whom his thoughts chiefly turned had not been at those last rites. She had had no place there. Now, her time was come. Until the funeral was done, he had refrained from visiting Mary Lane. She would know why: she understood the unreasoning hatred that had been in old John Bamber's mind, engendered by a petty quarrel of years ago with her father.

In his own room on the lower floor, the young man carefully parted over again his straight, dark hair—already precisely in order without any such attention; donned a fresh collar, though the one he had been wearing was fairly immaculate; employed meticulous fingers before the mirror to fit himself in every respect for Mary Lane's company. He might have seen a handsome, though pale countenance, and square shoulders in that mirror; instead, his thoughts dwelt on a petite, dainty girl, with blue eyes, whose curling hair was adorned rather than hidden by a nurse's white cap.

What was it that impelled John Bamber to go up for a moment to his uncle's room, before he visited Mary Lane? He had no business there. Nothing of his had been left behind in that vacant room. He might more naturally have donned his overcoat and walked from the house, with the quick stride that would have carried him to the place that was in his thoughts. Instead, he slowly mounted the stairs, in the yellow glare of the gas light in the hallway, and, seeing the door of that room ajar, pushed it farther open. The red glow of the converter was shining in through the far window.

He stopped at the threshold, and stared for one incredulous moment; then, with a terrible cry, and hands before his face, started back. His foot tripped on the top stair. He fell headlong to the bottom, and lay still.

## III

ON THE third day, the raving, gibbering mouth was quiet; the staring eyes closed; young John Bamber slept—not the troubled, fiercely interrupted sleep of delirium, but the healthy sleep of a tired man.

The slender girl, whose pretty face beneath her white cap was weary almost to

exhaustion, lay back limply in her chair and smiled.

"He is out of danger now, Miss Lane. Go home and rest. You can't have had a night's sleep in the last three days."

She looked up into the doctor's bearded face, and shook her head.

"I can carry on, doctor."

"It isn't necessary. Let Mrs. Murdock take your place tonight."

But she was cheerfully obstinate.

"Are you sure she could, doctor?" she demanded, archly; then, without awaiting his answer: "I'll stretch out on the sofa. If he even turns in his sleep, it will wake me."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and let it go at that. He had learned, in the past three days, that this quiet young woman, who had heard of John's illness and had come to take charge in her professional capacity of his sick room, had a will of iron where his welfare was concerned. Her authority had been unquestioned since the first day, when she had come out victor in a battle of wills with Mrs. Murdock. On the second day, Jarvins had dropped in. She had accepted the flowers he had brought her patient, but had excluded him from the room. As long as John continued in delirium, she preferred to let no one hear his ravings but the doctor and herself.

It had been strange delirium. More than once, Mary Lane had caught her breath at something that came from her patient's wild lips, and had shrunk away from him almost in terror. Once, when the doctor had been there to hear, she had broken down for a moment, and had cried, shudderingly:

"What does it mean, doctor?"

But he had shaken his head, with one large hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"Nothing at all. When he returns to his senses, he'll forget all about it. We must not take delirium seriously."

She had had to be content with that. Yet, pondering those delirious words, she had stolen away up the stairs, to peer into the vast room which had been old John Bamber's. She had seen gaunt Mrs. Murdock in there, dusting—that was all; that, and the vacant arm chair before the fireplace.

And now she slept, the sleep of youth and exhaustion. Impossible to wake her, it seemed; impossible, unless some sound came from her patient. But he also slept.

Somewhere, in the rambling, darkened house in that night, was the sound of shuffling footsteps; but these did not arouse the sleepers. . . .

She sprang up. Her name had been called. It was daylight.

John Bamber, bolt upright in his bed, was pointing a finger at her and shaking with emotion. Though his eyes burned with excitement, he was not delirious.

"Mary! You must go home. You mustn't stay here another minute," he commanded, hoarsely.

She took his outstretched hand between both of hers.

"Why, John?"

"I can't tell you why. You must go."

She suspected that a little of the delirium still lingered; so she glanced at the clock on the mantel, and sparred for time.

"It's only six o'clock," she told him. "Mrs. Murdock may not be up yet, to take my place. You have been very ill, John. I've nursed you."

He looked at her with feverish eyes that seemed to read her mind.

"I've been out of my head. What did I say?"

"Nothing of any importance." She kissed him. "Lie down again, dear. The doctor said he would be here early."

To her astonishment, he obeyed.

"You think I am still delirious," he said, more calmly. "I am not. Do you know why I ask you to leave this house?"

"Because you are not quite yourself, John," she answered, with conviction.

He shook his head.

"I am myself. As long as I was not, it would have been all right. But now my honor is involved. I promised."

"What did you promise?" she asked, humoring him.

"I promised to have nothing to do with you, as long—as long as—my uncle remained in this house."

A little shiver ran through her. She remembered the words of his delirium. And now his manner, though a trifle excited, certainly was not delirious. She forced herself to speak calmly.

"You couldn't break that promise if you wished, John. Have you forgotten, dear? Your uncle is not in this house. He was buried three days ago."

For answer, he sprang out of bed and grasped her by the shoulders.

"Go!" he screamed. "I can't explain. I mustn't explain. Go, for God's sake, before—before—"

He broke off suddenly and burst into sobs, his face hidden in his hands. They were tumultuous, terrified sobs of weakness. The door opened, and Mrs. Murdock peered in.

Mary motioned to her, and, with bowed head, left the room and the house.

## IV

A WEEK later John Bamber, recovered from the effects of his fall, sent for Mrs. Murdock. He had not communicated with Mary Lane, since her hasty leave-taking. He could not know that she had received news of him each morning from the housekeeper at the front door, then had quietly gone again.

"Sit down, Mrs. Murdock."

She complied, perching on the edge of a stiff-backed chair—herself very stiff and prim and inscrutable.

He was visibly nervous. His eyes searched her face.

"Have you, by any chance, gone into my uncle's room since—since the funeral?"

"Every day, sir," she replied, composedly.

"Every day!"

"The dusting, Mr. Bamber, is something I never overlook. In a mill town, such as this, it's the one thing that has to be done. Let the other work go, I say, if one must, but not the dusting."

He nodded.

"Have you—disturbed things very much?"

"I've left everything just as it was, sir."

"The chairs?"

"Yes, sir. Even the one before the fireplace is just as I found him in it."

John Bamber seemed inclined to ask something else, but changed his mind and dismissed her with a grave "Thank you."

As she left, he tiptoed to the door and listened to her retreating footsteps. It was ironing day. She had come up from the laundry to answer his call. He followed the sound of her heavy tread until sure she had returned thither. Then he opened his own door wide, and stepped out. His face was pale. He set his lips and clenched his fists.

The sitting-room of the old-fashioned house adjoined his own apartment; then the library with its leaded window above the bookcases, through which the light of the steel works came on gloomy days; then the hall and the stairs. Young John Bamber paused at the foot of the stairs. He seemed to be listening.

When he began the ascent, it was with extreme deliberation. On each step he waited, grasping the baluster to steady himself. His eyes were steadily fixed upward on the closed door of the room at the top of the stairs.

At last, he reached the top, and there hesitated for a long interval, with his hand on the doorknob. Finally he turned the knob impetuously, and flung the door open.

V

QUIVERING and shuddering, he was back on the staircase, feeling his way down like a blind man, with his hand before his eyes, when he heard a soft knock at the front door.

The sound steadied him. Just then, perhaps, nothing else could have done so. This came from without, from the commonplace world at the other side of the door, the world of people who were dead when they were dead. His mind formulated that thought, but dared not dwell on it. He squared his shoulders, and walked firmly downstairs to answer the knock.

Old Jarvins stood at the threshold—bowed, wrinkled, his eyes gleaming with the expression of everlasting, elfish merriment which was peculiarly his. Young John drew back; he had always instinctively drawn back from Jarvins, without considering why. But the old man's kindly words shamed him into an attitude of welcome.

"Well enough to be up and around, my boy? I'm glad. You know, I promised your uncle to keep an eye on you. He had a long talk with me about you, only a few days before the end."

Once he was inside, with hat and cane deposited in their accustomed places, Jarvins bent his quizzical, uncomfortably keen eyes on the young man.

"You are not yourself, yet; and your trouble is mental, rather than physical. Am I correct?"

John Bamber nodded. He neither welcomed nor resented the suggestion.

"Then I have the right to offer my services," the old man continued.

"There is nothing that anyone can do," John returned, curtly.

"You are sure? I have had mental trouble in my time."

"Not this sort."

They were still standing. That was another of Jarvins' peculiarities; he seldom sat in a chair. Instead, he paced back and forth, incessantly, hands behind his back, hunched shoulders swinging to his stride, head sunk forward and bright eyes glancing up under veiled lids. He stopped, suddenly. His voice took on an odd pathos, which, somehow, stirred unaccustomed sympathy in John Bamber's heart.

"I've had trouble; one doesn't come to my age without it. Your uncle, too, my boy, had much in his time. And all trouble is much the same in the end. Your sort or my sort, or his—there is little difference. You will find that I can help you."

Young John met his eye; and abruptly with the desperation of a man driven

to seek the most unlikely aid, his resolve was taken.

"If you will, then, you can help me at this minute, Mr. Jarvins," he said, quietly. "I have just come from the room that was my uncle's. I should like you to go there with me."

"A little thing to do!" Jarvins smiled. "Will you lead or follow?"

"I think—if you will—you may lead."

"Quite so. You don't care to explain your reasons, before we start? Perhaps I could help more intelligently if I knew."

"I don't care to explain."

Jarvins shrugged his shoulders, and, still smiling, led the way. He strode easily, without hesitation, into the hallway and up the stairs. In contrast to him, the young man, just behind, walked with long jerky steps, like one drawn onward against his will.

The door at the head of the stairs was half open. Jarvins pushed it wide, and stepped into the room. There he turned, with an expression of inquiry.

Young John stopped at the threshold. He was breathing heavily.

"How can I serve you now?" the old man inquired.

His companion spoke, in a thick, unnatural voice.

"Tell me what you see."

"What I see?" Jarvins pivoted on his heel, and swept the place with his glance. "I see—the room; it has never had much furniture, but what there was is still here. It seems you are making no changes—very properly, my boy, I should say. There is the little bookcase with his favorite volumes; the chess board on the table; his chair before the fireplace. Notice how the light of the converter shines on the fireplace! You would almost swear a fire was in it!"

Young John interrupted him, in a loud, harsh voice:

"You see nothing else?"

"The furniture—?"

"Damn the furniture. There—*there* in 'the chair!'"

With raised eyebrows, Jarvins walked to the chair and looked at it, narrowly. He turned about, inquiringly.

"There is nothing in the chair, my boy, What—?"

But, with a sharp cry, young John Bamber turned and fled down the stairs. Hunted by something invisible, he ran through the hall, the library, the sitting-room and so to his own apartment. He slammed the door behind him, and flung himself, sobbing, face downward across the bed.

VI

WHILE he lay there, with the thickness of night descending around him, John Bamber was conscious that someone rapped at his locked door. Following the knock, he heard Jarvins' voice calling, offering help. He remained silent, and at last Jarvins left. The heavy front door slammed behind him.

Later Mrs. Murdock tapped and inquired whether he wanted anything. He replied with a curt negative, and she bade him good-night.

The night wore on. He sat on the edge of his bed, not caring to undress. The lurid flare of the converter slanted across the foot of the bed, and just touched, at its bottom, the door that led into the sitting-room—the door at which Jarvins and Mrs. Murdock had knocked.

Calmness coming with the long vigil, John Bamber reasoned with himself. In most matters he was prosaic and matter-of-fact; not, he felt, easily unbalanced; certainly not superstitious. When he had taken the oath at his uncle's knee, he had had no thought but that it was an obligation he would be rid of soon. That night, death had come; then he had been sure of his deliverance. Now he was not so sure.

He would not admit squarely to himself what it was that he had seen. To do so would be disastrous. His mind could not stand it. He must keep his thoughts away from what was upstairs—sitting there in the darkness. . . .

But Jarvins had not seen it; nor had Mrs. Murdock. It could not really be there. . . .

Something crackled in the wainscoting—one of the multitudinous, tiny voices of the night. He listened, acutely. The blackness seemed full of murmuring, insistent sound—the ghosts of whispers, tenuous shreds of movement. Once, he was sure he heard some distinct taps. They seemed to be on the ceiling; as if something upstairs sought to attract attention.

He laughed, suddenly, and railed at himself. Any man who sat alone at night, listening, could hear very much what he expected. He must undress and go to bed.

But he made no move to undress. Instead, he listened again. He held his breath. He tried to bend all his faculties to the intense task of concentration, so as to make no mistake.

Presently, he heard something. It was distinct and different from previous sounds. It was the soft swish of creeping footsteps.

They seemed to be in the library—shuffling steps, very slow, like something des-

perately hurt dragging itself across the floor. They would stop, then resume. Once they paused for a longer interval, as if whatever it was that crept across the floor in that blind, dumb fashion were itself listening. When they came again, John Bamber rose to his feet. Change of position might make a difference—he had been sitting too long in the one place. He must not let imagination go too far. He stood near the door, and listened again.

Then he was sure. There could be no further doubt. He heard them.

Sometimes, in moments of crisis, when reason is strained almost to the breaking point, swift, desperate action is the only hope. The overwrought mind must face its terror. If it flees, madness lies in wait.

John Bamber found the knob of the spring lock under his hand. He turned it, and opened the door. He had a terrible moment when he felt that some power on the other side of the door was suggesting the action to his soul, and forcing him to open. But there was only darkness at that side of the door; darkness in the sitting-room, and, within the library, the dull light of the converter, which threw into relief its broad entrance.

He stood at the doorway of his room, and listened. There was no sound. Yet he had the impression that something nearby was listening, too; something with gaze fixed on him; something in the darkness of the library.

The impression became more definite. His eyes, straining feverishly through the darkness, perceived a blacker portion of it, a part more palpable than the rest. There was no movement; only growing distinctness. The thing in that darker corner of the library began to assume shape.

John Bamber became aware that his feet were moving. He had taken a step toward the library. At the sheer horror of that fact, he tried to scream aloud, but his voice would not respond. He was being dragged on against his will.

It was in this room that his uncle had lain dead.

A step at a time, pulled forward by the fascination of the thing that seemed to be there, he entered. He felt that he had been traversing miles of space. Years ago, he had left the security of his own room. He was not awake; he was in a nightmare. Yet he sensed with a thrill of reality the familiar, warm atmosphere of the library, odorous of musty leather bindings and old books. His feet sank into its yielding rugs. The easy chairs,

well known to his leisure, welcomed him. But there was an alien presence.

The slender path of light from the converter slanted downward, as always, through the narrow window. It was not the usual straight beam. It was broken, interrupted in its course.

Unwillingly, he took another step into the room; and, suddenly, he comprehended.

The beam of light was broken because it shone upon his uncle's coffin.

## VII

"TELL me what you saw, John," urged Mary Lane.

He had called on her the next day, in the little cottage where she lived with her mother. His eyes were staring. He continually looked behind him. But slowly her quiet, soothing personality calmed his troubled spirit, until he was able, after a fashion, to return her smile.

"I guess it's madness," he said moodily. "I didn't see anything. My mind is going—that's all."

"That must be it. You loved your uncle so much that his death turned your brain."

He started, and looked at her sharply. Her face was perfectly sober. But she hastened to soften her irony.

"I don't mean that just as it sounds, John. Of course, you loved him. Still, I can't believe that his death would drive you insane."

"But I *must* be insane—or else—"

"Or else you saw something. You haven't said so, but I know. Now, be fair to me. You've come to me for advice. Tell me what it was—or what you *thought* it was."

He passed his hand slowly over his forehead. Her calmness was having its effect. He seemed a little less reluctant to discuss the cause of his nervousness.

"I can't remember how much I've told you," he began, haltingly. "Did I say that he had made me promise not to have anything to do with you, as long as he remained in the house?"

She nodded.

"I knew him to be a dying man, so I swore readily enough. Maybe I took advantage of him. Perhaps this is a judgment on me."

"Very well. We'll grant that. Now—what have you seen?"

After a moment's hesitancy, he looked squarely into her eyes; and, picking his words deliberately, he told her.

"I have seen him three times," he concluded; "once, when the shock of it made me fall downstairs; again, last night; the third time with Jarvins—who saw nothing. He was in his chair, look-

ing into the fireplace, just as he used to sit. Last of all, I saw his coffin in the library—but it was not there this morning. I don't know how I got back to my room last night."

She caught her breath with a little gasp, but instantly steadied herself again.

"The figure in his room—was it distinct?" she suggested.

"As distinct as you are now. I saw him by the light of the converter, shining through the window."

"Did he speak to you, John?"

"No. He did not look up."

They sat facing each other. She leaned forward, and placed her hand on his arm.

"Tell me, John. Do you really think you saw him—or was it your mind?"

He hesitated; but at last answered her with deliberate words:

"I really think—I saw him."

"And you think your promise has something to do with it?"

"I believe this explains it. He intended to come back. So he made me take that oath."

"If that's so, John, you are breaking your oath now."

"I know it."

She wrinkled her brow, and slowly shook her head.

"No, I don't believe you are. He was thinking of me as your fiancée. You've come to see me today just as an adviser. And I'm going to advise you."

He waited, in silence.

"My advice is that you go up to his room again tonight. Have someone else with you—someone more in sympathy with your mind than Mr. Jarvins is. If we can solve the secret of that room, we may be able to explain the coffin you saw, too."

She went on, still working out his plan for him.

"Mrs. Murdock won't do. Mr. Jarvins failed. John, it will have to be—"

He looked up into her face. She was smiling at him.

"It will have to be—Mary Lane!"

"I can't ask you to do that."

"No—you can't. It wouldn't be the thing, at all. I am coming without being asked."

He glared at her; then betrayed the nervous tension under which he labored by a sudden and complete surrender.

"Come on, then."

But she shook her head.

"Not yet. I've always heard that the best time for—for such things—is at night. Suppose I come this evening, while Mrs. Murdock is busy in the kitchen?"

He agreed, moodily; as he would have acquiesced, just then, in almost anything of her proposing. Shortly, he left, still constrained and silent.

## VIII

THE library where old John Bamber had lain was dark, save for the converter's lurid light, but no alien presence was within, when young John crossed it to answer the faint summons at the door. Her knock had been barely audible in competition with the clatter of dishes which came from the kitchen—Mrs. Murdock was a lusty housekeeper—but the young man had been waiting anxiously.

"Does Mrs. Murdock know I'm coming?" was her first question.

He shook his head.

"That's just as well."

His desire was to go straight to the intolerable task before them. He could scarcely allow himself time to take her hat and coat and hang them in the darkened hallway.

"Shall we go up?" he demanded, breathlessly.

"I think so. We can't make it any easier by putting it off."

He led the way to the rear of the hall. Unconsciously, they tiptoed, though Mrs. Murdock was noisy in the kitchen. A single gas jet, turned low, disclosed the broad stairs, rising to the door at the top. The glare of the converter, reflecting from some bookcase door in the library to right of them, shone on the lower part of the polished baluster. Mary grasped his arm.

"The door is shut, isn't it, John?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Shall I go up and look in, while you wait down here?"

He stiffened at that; perhaps she had expected him to do so.

"I'll go," he said.

"You mean you will go by yourself?"

"Yes."

"That may be best, if you really can do it. It—whatever it is—may not show itself to me. If you feel able to open the door, I'll wait here. The instant you look in, I will come. Can you do it, John?"

"I will do it," he answered, slowly.

With pale face, he started up the stairs. As she waited below, in the yellow pool of gas light, her upturned countenance seemed drawn and haggard. Her eyes followed each step he took. When at last his hand was on the door knob, she could not suppress a low sob of excitement.

He turned the knob slowly, then, with a sudden jerk, wrenched the door open.

"Mary!"

She was by his side.

"Can you see him?" he demanded, almost inaudibly.

"I see your uncle," she whispered.

They both saw him.

The livid, dead figure sat in its accustomed arm chair, gazing down into the cold fireplace.

As they looked, the glare from outside flared into a weird semblance of daylight. For a moment the ghastly figure was distinct—as clear-cut and as still as the chair it sat in.

In that moment Mary uttered a little cry. Pushing past young John Bamber, she rushed across the room to the figure in the chair. She touched its livid face.

She stepped back, gasping. Then, in spite of a shudder she could not overcome, she struck the figure suddenly with all her strength.

It fell to the floor and broke into pieces!

## IX

IN THE period that followed, the "spirit" of old John Bamber was exorcised in a practical way. He had not believed in such new-fangled devices as electric fixtures; now the house was wired throughout. It had been a gloomy place, with ponderous furniture and dark hangings on the walls. Much of that was changed. Bright pictures appeared, in place of certain saturnine ancestors, done in oil. Even the converter's ghostly glare, through the windows over the bookcases, was softened by the judicious use of prism glass. At last, all was ready for the wedding.

For that occasion, young John Bamber hired the best firm of decorators in the town, and gave them free rein. Wherever a stair post or a chandelier was open to floral improvement, it was made to blossom. The bookcases in the erstwhile somber library had their part in an elaborate nuptial design. Even the dim light became bright. The experienced decorator knew that fresh bulbs of high candle power, suitably hidden, could perform miracles of cheer.

His masterpiece, however, had to do with the ceremony itself; for he perceived that the strategic point of the whole house was the dark corner of the library where old John Bamber had lain dead. In that corner, under a bower of roses, Mary Lane and young John were married.

Two faces were missing at the festivities. Mrs. Murdock and old Jarvins were never seen again in that house.

For the benefit of those wedding guests who did not know why, Mrs. John Bamber, flushed and smiling, seized upon a lull in the conversation to enlighten them. She wished to substitute truth for the wild rumors that had been flying about since Mrs. Murdock's dismissal. In the telling, the smile left her face, and her eyes grew stern. It was a black enough tale; the exposure of an attempt to turn a sensitive but sane man into a madman.

"What I don't understand is the motive," one of the guests confessed, when she paused in the telling. "I thought the property was entailed and had to come to John."

"Most of it was," Mary confirmed. "The rest of it was left equally to Mrs. Murdock and Mr. Jarvins—on condition. I was the condition."

She smiled at John, and proceeded:

"It was left to them to prevent our marriage. The money was not to come to them for five years, and then only if John had not married me. If we did marry before that, their share went to charity."

"So they tried to frighten him out of marrying you?"

"Worse than that, I think. John is sensitive and high-strung—aren't you, dear? I fear they wanted to drive him insane. They thought there was a good chance to turn his mind, if they went about it the right way."

Young John, standing near, nodded emphatic confirmation.

"There was. And the fact that I had been too ill to hear the will read played right into their hands. They were clever."

"Very clever." Mary took up the tale again. "Mr. Jarvins is a fine sculptor, you know, and he and old Mr. Bamber were close friends. The figure was modeled without John's knowledge, of course—that was easy enough to do. Perhaps Mr. Bamber knew how it was to be used, but we'll hope not."

"And the housekeeper put it into the room and took it out again?" another guest surmised.

Mary nodded.

"It wasn't heavy—wax is light. And she may not have moved it any farther than the room across the hall. They counted on John's staying away from upstairs most of the time, since his own room is on the first floor. It really was a clever plan—and yet—"

She wrinkled her brows.

"And yet, they must have feared it would fail, or surely they would never have gone to the trouble of getting a cof-

(Continued on page 84)



## PRISONERS OF THE DEAD

*(Continued from page 56)*

in and carrying it into the library for that one night, then taking it out again before morning. That must have been their last card. I wonder how they knew John would come out of his room before morning?"

Again her husband spoke:

"I've thought of that. Probably they intended to raise an alarm of some kind that would bring me out—some devilish noise, perhaps. Or maybe Mrs. Murdock would have screamed; then pretended she saw nothing—just as Jarvins pretended, when he and I were looking together at the figure. But I heard their footsteps and came out. They must have been standing near me in the darkness at the time. Instead of going crazy on the spot, I fainted."

The doctor, prominent among the guests, nodded gravely.

"Some temperaments go mad when they reach the breaking-point; others faint."

"I'm glad you're the fainting kind, John," Mary smiled into his face, still pale and nervous. "It would have been awfully inconvenient to have you go crazy, just before our wedding day."

"But for you, I might have gone crazy," he assured her; but she laughingly negatived the suggestion.

"I didn't get into it till the excitement was nearly over. Their scheme had failed by that time. In spite of everything, you were still sane. You bore the brunt of it, yourself."

"Still, I don't see how you ever had the courage to go right up to the—the thing," one of the girls objected, admiringly.

Mary Bamber's quiet laugh overflowed into a reminiscent ripple.

"I never should have had it if the converter had not flared up," she admitted, candidly. "I knew then that the 'thing' wasn't a ghost. Ghosts don't throw shadows—at least, I have always heard that they don't. Wax figures do!"

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