

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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The Closing Hand

A Powerful Short Story

by Farnsworth Wright

SOLITARY and forbidding, the house stared specterlike through scraggly trees that seemed to shrink from its touch.

The green moss of decay lay on its dank roofs, and the windows, set in deep cavities, peered blindly at the world as if through eyeless sockets. So forbidding was its aspect that boys, on approaching its cheerless gables, stopped their whistling and passed on the opposite side of the street.

Across the fields, a few huddled cottages gazed through the falling rain, as if wondering what family could be so bold as to take up its abode within the gloomy walls of that old mansion, whose carpetless floors for two years had not felt the tread of human feet.

In an attic room of the house two sisters lay in bed, but not asleep. The younger sister cringed under the dread inspired by the bleak place. The elder laughed at her childish fears, but the younger felt the spell of the old building and was afraid.

"I suppose there is really nothing to frighten me in this dreary old house," she admitted, without conviction in her voice, "but the very feel of the place is horrible. Mother shouldn't have left us alone in this gruesome place."

"Stupid," her sister scolded, "with all the silverware downstairs, somebody has to be here, for fear of burglars."

"Oh, don't talk about burglars!" pleaded the younger girl. "I am afraid. I keep imagining I hear ghostly footsteps."

Her sister laughed.

"Go to sleep, Goosie," she said.

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"'Haunted' houses are nothing but superstition. They exist only in imagination."

"Why has nobody lived here for two years, then? They tell me that for five years every family moved out after being here just a short time. The whole atmosphere of the house is ghastly. And I can't forget how the older Berkheim girl was found stabbed to death in her bed, and nobody ever knew how it happened. Why, she may have been murdered in this very room!"

"Go to sleep and don't scare yourself with such silly talk. Mother will be with us tomorrow night, and Dad will be back next day. Now go to sleep."

The elder sister soon dropped into slumber, but the younger lay open-eyed, staring into the black room and shuddering at every stifled scream of the wind or distant growl of thunder. She began to count, hoping to hypnotize herself into drawsiness, but at every slight noise she started, and lost her count.

Suddenly she turned and shook her sister by the shoulder.

"Edith, somebody is prowling around downstairs!" she whispered. "Listen! Oh, what shall we do?"

The elder sister struck a match and lit the candle. Then she slipped on her dressing-gown, and drew on her slippers.

"You're not going down there? Edith, tell me you're not going downstairs! It might be that murdered Berkheim girl! Edith, don't—"

Edith shot a glance of withering scorn at her sister, who lay on the bed

with blanched face and wide, terrified eyes.

"There is something moving around downstairs, and I'm going to find out what it is," she said.

Taking the candle, she left the room. Her younger sister lay in the darkness, listening to the patterning of rain on the roof and straining her ears to catch the slightest sound. The noise downstairs ceased, but the wind rose and the rain beat upon the roof in sudden furious blasts that made her heart jump wildly.

Ten minutes passed—twenty minutes—and Edith had not returned.

A door slammed, and the younger sister thought she moving again, but the wind began to sob and drowned out all other noises. Between gusts, she heard the portentous sound, and each time it seemed nearer.

Then—she started as she realized that something was coming up the stairs. Once she thought she heard a cry, to which the wind joined its plaintive voice in a weird duet.

Nearer and nearer the strange noise came. It mounted the stairs, step by step, heard only when the wind and rain softened their voices. It passed the first landing, and moved slowly up the second flight, while the girl fearfully awaited its coming.

The wind howled until the house quaked; it shrilled past the eaves and fled across the fields like a hunted ghost.

And now the girl's pounding pulses drowned out the screaming of the wind, for the presence had invaded her bedroom!

She cowered under the covers, a cold perspiration chilling her body until her teeth chattered. Her imagination conjured up frightful things—a disembodied spirit come to destroy her—a

corpse from the grave, gibbering in terror because it could not tear the cerements from its face—the murdered Berkheim girl, with the knife still sheathed in her heart—or some escaped beast, licking its lips in greedy anticipation of the feast her tremulous body would provide. Or was it a murderer, who, having killed her sister, was now bent on completing his bloody work?

A flash of lightning split the sky, and the thunder bellowed its terrifying warning. The girl threw back the bed-clothes and shrank to the wall, her eyes starting from their sockets, fearful lest another flash reveal some sight too ghastly to contemplate.

Slowly the being dragged itself across the floor, lifted itself onto the bed, and uttered a choking sound of agony.

The girl sat petrified. Then, timidously, she extended a shaky hand, but quickly withdrew it in dread of some hideous contact.

Again she thrust her trembling hand into the gloom, farther, farther, until it touched something shaggy and wet.

A clammy hand closed over hers, and she started to her feet, with a horrified scream.

The icy hand tightened with a sickening tremor, and dragged her down. Then her tortured senses gave way, and she fell back unconscious upon the bed. . . .

WHEN she awoke, it was day. Beside her, on the bed, lay the bleeding body of her sister, Edith, stabbed in the breast by the burglar she had tried to frighten away.

The younger girl was clutching the clotted wisps of hair that had fallen across the breast of her sister, whose cold hand had closed over hers in the last convulsive shudder of death.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT
*Has Written Another
Story For*
WEIRD TALES
 —
"The Snake Fiend"
It Will Appear In The
April Issue