

FANCIFUL TALES

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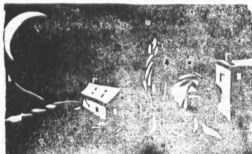
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THE FORBIDDEN ROOM



by DUANE W. RIMEL

Bony foot-prints in the earth—

It is said that an old pirate once dwelt in Hampdon; but why he chose that secluded and decadent village no one ever knew, for the place is many miles from the sea, hidden among the back hills. His motive has been interpreted in numerous ways. Some have

said it was to escape the sight of the ocean which had been his home, while others have suggested that certain seamen might want to reckon with the aged pirate, were he to inhabit the haunts of a sailor. His name was Exer Jones: that name symbolized wealth; enormous, hidden fortunes, which, though none had ever seen them, formed part of the varied legend. When Jones is mentioned natives will point to a tall, three-story dwelling which, with one other, rises from amidst a mouldering group of hovels, and will explain to travelers who happen to stop at the decrepit hotel, that such was his house. But unless they know the visitor well, they will tell no more, for the people of Hampdon do not like to have their stories ridiculed—as would certainly happen were they to tell all they know of Exer Jones.

The edifice has been deserted for many years—no one knows the exact number—and strangers who are attracted to the quaint but sinister place are warned against renting it. Beside the ancient, gabled dwelling is another house of enormous proportions, brick-made and ivy crested, where once lived another man of strange and evil character. The second person—one Hiram Shell—had also been rich, but his existence covered a later span of years than that of Exer Jones, and the which people knew more about. The source of his wealth seemed questionable as well.

Before the arrival of Shell in Hampdon, and following a rapid decline in Jones' health, the latter was ever seen to have a lamp burning in the upper story of his dwelling. It gleamed into the small hours, as the legend goes, and people passing by the forbidding house thought they heard the muffled clink of coins and queer mumbling noises, as if Pirate Jones were counting again and again his ill-gotten wealth. This went on indefinitely, till at last, one winter morning the old fellow was found, quite stiff and cold at the bottom of the long flight of steps which leads to the upper rooms.

They buried him back of the queer dwelling in which he had died, and when the will was read it was discovered that he had

given the property to the township; but of his money not one word was said. At the close of the brief document they found a warning—and to this day it is a whispered tale, surviving the fleeting years. It ran thus:

*Pass not beyond the stairway door;
My cursed wealth has left me poor.*

Ordinarily, such a fatuous couplet would have provoked a hearty laugh from Hampden townspeople, but when they remembered that the 'stairway door' was the one opening on the room from whence the strange noises had come, there were none who wished to venture so far within the house. And too, some argued, the position of Jones' body when discovered was not a pleasant one. For though no marks of violence were found on the corpse, it was possible that instead of falling from the stairs, as was generally supposed, the deceased had leaped purposely to the landing below. But such rumors were not encouraged.

The property then lawfully became a part of the township; but though repeated efforts were made by the council to dispose of it at a ridiculously low price, no buyer was ever found. That is, until the advent of Hiram Shell.

When this individual settled in Hampden he chanced to secure a lot adjoining that of the forbidding house, where he plied a meagre trade of cobbling. However, his fiery tongue and irascible temperament soon drove away most of the slim clientele which he had begun to secure, till he was reduced to miserable poverty. As the years passed, he began to assimilate portions of the neighborhood gossip. Just how much or how little he picked up no one could say, but at night he was often seen prowling about in the vicinity of the ancient Pirate house. Age, too, was creeping rapidly upon the man.

Then one day Hampden was surprised to see Hiram Shell displaying signs of uncommon wealth. He bought the best span of horses available, dressed in stylish clothes and to crown it all, built

an enormous brick mansion on the lot—the house which is there today, if Hampdon still lives. Accompanying this paradox came another burst of whispered gossip, for it was learned that his purchases were paid for with strange-looking gold coins. And still another incentive for talking was raised when it was revealed that he had bought the ancient and mouldy Pirate house on Beacon Street. Whether he knew of the warning against the upper room was a question no one could answer — n o r did anyone care to enlighten him either, for Hiram had become even more captious and litigious, and people shunned him as they might some poisonous reptile.

About a year later Sam Perkins, in passing the deserted house one night at 12, saw a light burning in the topmost story of the dwelling. And when he perceived that it shone from a window of the forbidden room, and heard strange clinking sounds which he remembered f r o m years gone by, he ran trembling from the place and spread the news.

It was early morning before the gossip got about, and several o f the townspeople strolled by the place to see if anything had gone a-miss. Noticing no object out of the ordinary, they moved on, not caring to loiter about the house any longer than was necessary. When the day had passed and no Hiram put in an appearance and no smoke was seen to rise from his chimneys, people again began their whispering.

Here the legend becomes disjointed and varied, and the listener is warned against asking too many questions concerning Hiram Shell. But of what remains, a partial conclusion may be drawn. The man was never found after that, though a diligent search was instituted. Only one place in town was not explored—for local authorities were loath to enter that stairway door. But it was reasoned that if he had died in the forbidden room, the neighbors would soon become aware of his presence; so the door was never opened.

The last bit of evidence as to Shell's disappearance was a messy trail which some of the people noticed. It led down the

steps away from the locked room and around to the back of the house; being formed, some said, of peculiar foot prints and bits of debris as if something heavy had been dragged behind the marks, partly obliterating them. The path went straight to the grave of Exer Jones, and abruptly stopped; while the sod about the marker seemed recently disturbed. These facts were kept from the authorities however, for people did not want Jones' grave uncovered. . . .

Of the fragments of tracks which were yet half-visible, the old men will say little. But some have hinted that they were unlike ordinary footprints in that the outline had the appearance of being formed by bones pressing upon the ground instead of flesh.

The Pirate house still stands beside the great ivy-covered mansion, and to this day natives of Hampdon say that at midnight queer lights gleam from the third story window and strange clinking sounds are heard, as if Exer Jones were once again mumbling and counting his money.

