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*Forty Nights of Terror Brought Dire  
Consequences to James Blake*

# The HOUR of DEATH

By GROVER BRINKMAN

THE telephone on Dr. Thorn-  
dyke's littered desk shrieked  
a single jerked-out ring, as if  
the party on the other end of the line  
was nervous for a connection to be  
made. Laying aside his book, he casu-  
ally reached for the receiver.

"Hello!" he said. "Yes, this is  
Thorndyke speaking. Who did you  
say? Blake? Oh yes, I recognize  
your voice now, old man—didn't at  
first, it seemed so strained and un-  
natural. Yes, if you say it's urgent  
I'll be over right away."

Thorndyke hung up the receiver,  
donned his hat and coat and went out  
the front way of his bachelor apart-  
ment, telling his servant he need not  
stay up. A minute later he was  
speeding down the deserted street in  
his own roadster.

"Now I wonder what in the  
dickens is the matter?" Thorndyke  
reflected as he sped along, recalling  
the strained, terrified voice of his old  
colleague over the wire.

He was soon to find out. As he  
parked his car in Blake's driveway,  
he had a vague premonition that  
something was wrong—seriously  
wrong. A servant met him at the  
door of Blake's residence, an old,  
slightly bent man who led him with-  
out prelude to Blake's den, where his  
friend lived alone.

But what a different Blake! In  
the strained, horror-filled face, Thorn-  
dyke could hardly recognize the man  
who from youth and college days he

always called his closest friend.  
Blake was a strong man, both men-  
tally and physically, his only weak-  
ness a belief in superstition, and as  
Thorndyke looked at this mere phan-  
tom of the former football star, the  
frown deepened on his brow.

"Thank God—I'm glad you  
came!" said Blake unnaturally. "It  
was so late when I called up that I  
was afraid you might have retired."

"No, I most always stay up till  
after midnight, reading. But you  
look as if you've seen a ghost—what  
in the world is wrong?"

For answer Blake pointed to a  
library table in the center of the  
room, on which was a scattered pile  
of letters. He seemed stupefied; his  
eyes were glassy and wandering.

"Read one of those," he said  
queerly, "and don't take it as a joke.  
For the last six weeks one of those  
letters has been coming—at 1 o'clock  
in the morning each time."

Thorndyke, his face incredulous,  
picked up the foremost letter and un-  
folded the single sheet it contained.  
As he read, the blood slowly left his  
face, and laughing queerly, he read  
for the second time the brief note:

Mr. James Blake:

Two more nights from tonight—at ex-  
actly 1 o'clock—and your life will be  
snuffed out like the breaking of a thread.

There was no signature—nothing  
at all—nothing but that sinister  
message without a clue of any kind.

Blake gave a hollow laugh. "What do you make of it?" he asked slowly, hopelessly.

Thorndyke shook his head; then presently his face broke into the image of a smile. "No doubt some friend of yours trying to put a scare into you," he said, though his voice lacked conviction.

"I've thought of that. At first I almost believed it, but I don't any more. Why, man, look—more than forty of them! Every night for forty nights—at *exactly 1 o'clock!*"

Thorndyke was looking through the letters, trying to conjure some vague reason for their being there. "Can't you get a clue from the post-marks?" he asked presently.

"No use to try," Blake returned. "Each is mailed within the city, though not always at the same station, and each has a special delivery stamp attached. We can't find a clue that way."

**S**UDDENLY, as Thorndyke started to speak, the tall clock in the hall-way chimed out the hour—1 o'clock! With the sound, Blake seemed to pale even more—until his face was the color of dead ashes. He slumped down in his chair, trembling in every limb, his eyes in a fixed stare on the doorway. Thorndyke realized with a pang of regret that the sinister letters were proving too much for his old friend. Blake was a wreck, physically and mentally, and to all indications on the verge of losing his mind.

"Buck up, old man," he said solicitously.

"But my God, Jim!" almost shrieked Blake, his outward calm suddenly deserting him; "place yourself in my position. For more than forty nights I've stayed up and waited—waited—for this! I can't sleep—all day and night this thing haunts me like a bad dream. My mind is about

ready to snap. Thank God it's almost over—either we find out who's doing this tomorrow night or I——"

He broke off abruptly. At that moment the aged servant noiselessly opened the door, and without further ceremony handed Blake a letter.

"Special delivery letter for you, sir," he said obediently, his face an impassive mask, and turned for the door.

Blake turned the letter over in his hands like a man in a daze. Without opening it, he handed it to Thorndyke. "You read it," he requested, and buried his face in his hands.

Thorndyke took it without a word of protest and tore it open. This time the message was even more brief:

Twenty-four more hours—and then the breaking of the thread.

As he put the letter on the table, the expression of Thorndyke's face suddenly changed; his countenance hardened, his lips drew into a thin line that barely showed the whiteness of his teeth, and his eyes seemed to be visioning something far away.

"Blake," he said determinedly, "we're going to find out who is doing this—and don't think about tomorrow night. Have you any idea what the motive of sending these crazy letters could be?"

"No, I haven't," said Blake hopelessly. "I'm pretty well provided for financially, but not rich—it's not a scheme to blackmail me for money, I'm sure of that—and I don't know of any enemies here in New York."

"How about your servant?" suddenly asked Thorndyke.

Blake laughed. "Nothing suspicious about him—I've had him for the last ten years. He thinks the letters are from my factory superintendent out of town—a daily report of the work."

"All right," said Thorndyke, "I suppose in that case you can trust him. I think I'll be going now—there's nothing to be gained by your sitting up and racking your brain about it. You go to bed and sleep and forget all about this. I'll come tomorrow night—before 1 o'clock—and we'll see what happens."

Leaving a sleeping potion, he left, advising the old servant to see that Blake had every care.

ALL that day Thorndyke thought about the coming night. Toward evening he had a visitor in the form of Inspector Carson, who though ten years his senior, was one of his closest friends, and also an intimate friend of Blake. Acting on an impulse, he told Carson all about the threats Blake had received, his condition, and asked him to go along that night. Carson accepted, and he promised to call for him at midnight.

At 11 o'clock that night Thorndyke had a call. One of his convalescing suburban patients had grown suddenly worse; they asked him to come immediately. After telephoning Carson, telling him he might be a few minutes late, Thorndyke left without delay.

Although he worked with all possible haste over his patient, and left the sickroom as soon as he dared, it was fifteen minutes of 1 when he drew up in front of Carson's apartment.

"We'll have to hurry," he said nervously, as Carson took his seat beside him. "I'm sure the letters and threats are a fake, but nevertheless I'd like to be there a minute before 1 o'clock—Blake's the next thing to being insane now, and you can't tell what some little scare might do."

It was only a few minutes later when they slowed up for Blake's residence. As they turned into the dark

driveway that wound serpentlike to the house situated far back from the street, Carson suddenly gave a warning cry as a fleeing figure jumped directly into the path of the car.

Thorndyke jammed on the brakes, but it was too late to avoid striking the man. With a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach, he climbed out of the machine. Carson was already bending over the prostrate form, and it was with a profound shock that he recognized the bent form as that of Blake's servant.

It was obvious that the man's condition was critical, though he still retained consciousness, and as he bent over him, Thorndyke saw the pale lips move as if he wanted to speak. A sip of brandy from his first-aid kit seemed to revive him for a moment, and he began to talk.

"Listen," he began brokenly, just above a whisper. "I'm about gone—so it'll be just as well if I tell you something." He stopped a minute, as if gathering strength to go on. Then: "I — was the one — who — wrote those letters to—to Blake. I wanted to make him suffer. Years ago Blake was the cause of my—daughter's disgrace. I promised her I would make him pay—and I did. He's been in hell for the last six weeks. I—never—intended to—kill him. Wanted to make him suffer. Better go up to the—house—"

The voice ceased; the aged servant lapsed into unconsciousness. Shuddering slightly, Thorndyke gently laid back the tousled head, and with Carson at his side started for the house.

As he pushed open the front door, the clock in the hallway struck the hour—1 o'clock! The deep chime seemed to send an icy shiver through his body, and he saw that Carson was pale also. With the chime also was a sound that he could not fathom—

something like a low, deep moan. The next moment he pushed open the library door, Carson at his back.

**T**HORNDYKE gave a gasp at what he saw, and he felt the blood suddenly chill in his veins. Blake was crumpled in a heap on the floor, where he had fallen face forward out

of his chair! Springing forward, Thorndyke quickly felt the stricken man's pulse, then placed his ear over his heart. The next moment he looked up with a tragic face to encounter the troubled gaze of Carson.

"We were a minute too late," said Thorndyke slowly, brokenly. "He's dead. Died of fright."

