

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*One "Creepy" Night in a
House of Death*

The Living Nightmare

By ANTON M. OLIVER

YOU mean to tell me," demanded Jim Brown, "that those people left town and expect you to stay in that house alone tonight?"

"Why, yes," said MacMillen, preparing to leave. "They've gone to Virginia and will be back Thursday, when the funeral will take place."

"And they left the body lying in the living-room?"

"Of course. Where did you expect them to leave it—on the porch?"

"And you are going to sleep in that house alone—with the corpse?"

"Yes. What of it? There's nothing to be afraid of."

Taking his hat and coat, MacMillen departed.

"Pleasant dreams!" called Brown, as the door slammed behind him.

The night was cold and the atmosphere was clear and "hard." The snow crackled under his feet as he walked.

"Silly idea," he muttered; but he couldn't help wondering why the Mitchells, with whom he made his home, had left the house on the same day that Mrs. Mitchell's grandmother had passed away.

In his mind he went over Mrs. Mitchell's explanation. She had told him that they were going to WHEELING, the deceased lady's old home, where a sister lived, and would remain there until the funeral. And she had asked,

"You are not afraid to stay here alone, are you?"

No, of course, he was not afraid; but it was strange that they should leave the corpse in his charge and depart.

Then it came to him. Funny he hadn't thought of it before. The Mitchells must be superstitious. They probably had some silly notion about a house being haunted while a corpse was in it, or something of that sort. That must be it. But how ridiculous!

Still, the Mitchells were a little queer anyway, reflected Mac, as he turned up the ice-covered path of the Mitchell residence.

It stood, surrounded by high buildings and stores, in a section of town which in days gone by had been the very heart of the city's social life. It was one of the largest and oldest homes in the city. And now it was an outcast, so to say, among the monuments to industry and progress. Built years ago by the husband of the woman who now lay dead within its walls, it was in a style of architecture long since abandoned. Everything about it was high and narrow—the building itself, the windows and doors, the porch columns, and the roof high up among the tree branches.

Mac walked unhesitatingly toward the big dark house. But, somehow, the formidable brick walls that always looked so inviting seemed cold and

inhospitable tonight. Strange shadows were playing in the windows.

He looked up at his own window. He didn't exactly fancy the idea of going past the room where lay the dead woman, he admitted to himself, but he certainly was not afraid. Not he!

With grim resolution, he thrust the key, which he had taken from his pocket while coming up the walk, into the lock of the front door. The huge, glass-paneled door squeaked as he did so, and he was almost startled by his own reflection in the shining glass. He turned the key in its lock and threw the door wide open with unnecessary vigor.

A hot wave of air greeted him. The house was warm, surprisingly so, considering that it had been unoccupied all day. His heart, for some unexplainable reason, was beating rather fast as he entered the dark hall.

He turned sharply to the left and reached for the electric light switch. His hand had often turned that switch, had often found it instantly in the dark; but tonight he had to feel for it. He turned it once, twice—three times—but the hall remained dark.

The dark suddenly seemed to give him almost physical pain. Listening acutely, he tried to account for this. Why were the lights out? The street lights were on, and there was light in several of the homes he had passed. He stood motionless. There was no sound. The dark house was buried in deathlike silence.

Then, with nerve-shattering suddenness, came a sound as real as that of his heart, which was beating so that the blood was throbbing in his ears. He whirled to face it, but, as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. With clenched teeth and damp forehead, Mac stood motionless. Then it came again—a sound like the distant scream of a siren.

Gradually he collected his senses, and reason took the place of bewilderment. He reached for his matches, and, striking one, he stepped over to the gas chandelier, turned the valve, and presently a blue flame leaped high from the lamp, which had not been adjusted for months.

With somewhat trembling hands, he turned the air adjustment, then the gas, until finally the familiar yellow light illuminated the hallway. Then he again heard the noise—this time a little louder and nearer.

His decision to investigate suddenly left him. He stood motionless, unable to move, for he not only heard—he also *felt*! Then, with a sudden resolve, he stepped swiftly to his room, which was on the same floor and adjoined the library.

The light from the hall cast a long, distorted shadow on the floor before him. It was so still now that the silence surged in his ears. Lighting his own gas lamp, he locked and bolted his door. His pipe lay on the dresser, and he lit it nervously. Then he looked at himself in the mirror.

"How ridiculous!" he said, half aloud, with a forced laugh. Then he began slowly to undress.

All was quiet and peaceful here in his own room. How foolish to let himself get so excited. The lights had probably gone out all over the city since he had entered the house, and, as for that noise, it was probably outdoors somewhere and in his mind he had associated it with the perfectly harmless corpse lying in the next room.

"Darn Brown!" he murmured. "He got me all wrought up over nothing with his kidding."

And, having finished undressing he retired, leaving his light on full, however. In spite of the fact that his own explanation of the origin of the strange sounds had, in a measure, satisfied him, he lay awake for a considerable length of time.

He was drifting off on the first soft currents of sleep when he suddenly sat up with a jerk. He had heard a noise!

His lamp was flickering weirdly and he could hear its faint singing—barely audible—yet it seemed to his ears like the mighty rush of steam from a boiler, for his ears were strained to hear a different sound, a sound he must hear again, the source of which he must locate.

His body began to ache from sitting rigidly in one position. Still all was silent.

Suddenly, with a sense of being jerked to consciousness, he again heard the noise, like the shriek of a siren. It seemed distant, yet close. His heart labored so hard that he could feel its beat all through his body. The shriek continued for several moments, and then all was silent again.

He wanted to rise, but he could not.

He was not afraid, he told himself, —and yet . . .

Suddenly he heard the sound of footsteps—steps that seemed to come from the interior of the wall, pass through his room and die away gradually. Holding his breath, he listened.

The big clock in the front room struck the hour of midnight. He counted each beat as it rang through the house. He was wide awake now. The white curtains seemed to glimmer like sunlit snow, and the clock chimes, in the deathly silence, sounded like those of a mighty tower clock.

As the last note died away, Mac suddenly remembered that the clock had been stopped by Mrs. Mitchell as a mark of respect to her, who, in the adjoining room, was awaiting burial.

A SUDDEN feeling of relief came over Mac. It was clear now; somebody had come back, Mr. Mitchell perhaps. That explained everything.

Confidently, Mac got out of bed and, unlocking his door, stepped into the hall. How different everything looked, how natural and homelike! The light that had had such a ghost-like appearance, a short time ago, seemed friendly and quite natural now. At the foot of the stair Mac stopped and called. He called louder and louder, but all remained silent. Suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, he approached the door of the room next to his, seized the doorknob resolutely and, with a sudden push, swung the door open. The rays of the gas light in the hall fell directly into the room, and what they revealed sent a cold shudder of horror through him. Before him stood two *empty pedestals*. The body had disappeared!

Turning violently, he almost ran to the front door and pulled it open. An icy gust of wind hit his thinly clad body. For several moments he stood breathing the cold night air, then, with a sudden determination, he slammed the big oak door shut.

As the door slammed, there came a sharp report, like the snapping of a wire, followed by a thunder and crashing and wailing. The electric light came on, and the same footsteps that had sounded through the house before came closer and closer. He felt a sharp pain, like the thrust of a knife, between his shoulder blades . . . And then he fell in a swoon.

WEEKS passed before Mac was well again. Excessive exposure had brought on pneumonia. As soon as he recovered he summoned me to the hospital and begged me to find a new lodging for him and remove his belongings from the Mitchell home.

I tried in vain to explain that he had misunderstood Mrs. Mitchell regarding the disposal of the corpse, for they had taken the body with them for burial in Wheeling, and it was not in the house at any time after their departure. But Mac was resolute. He

listened indulgently, patiently, then, laying his white, hot hand upon my shoulder, he looked earnestly into my eyes, and with a voice that carried conviction he said:

"I know what I felt in that room that night. It had a *hold* on me, and

it is waiting for me, and I am not going back!"

Mac is well again now, and one can see him at the club most any night. But whenever anybody starts to speak of the Hereafter he rises and hurriedly leaves the room.