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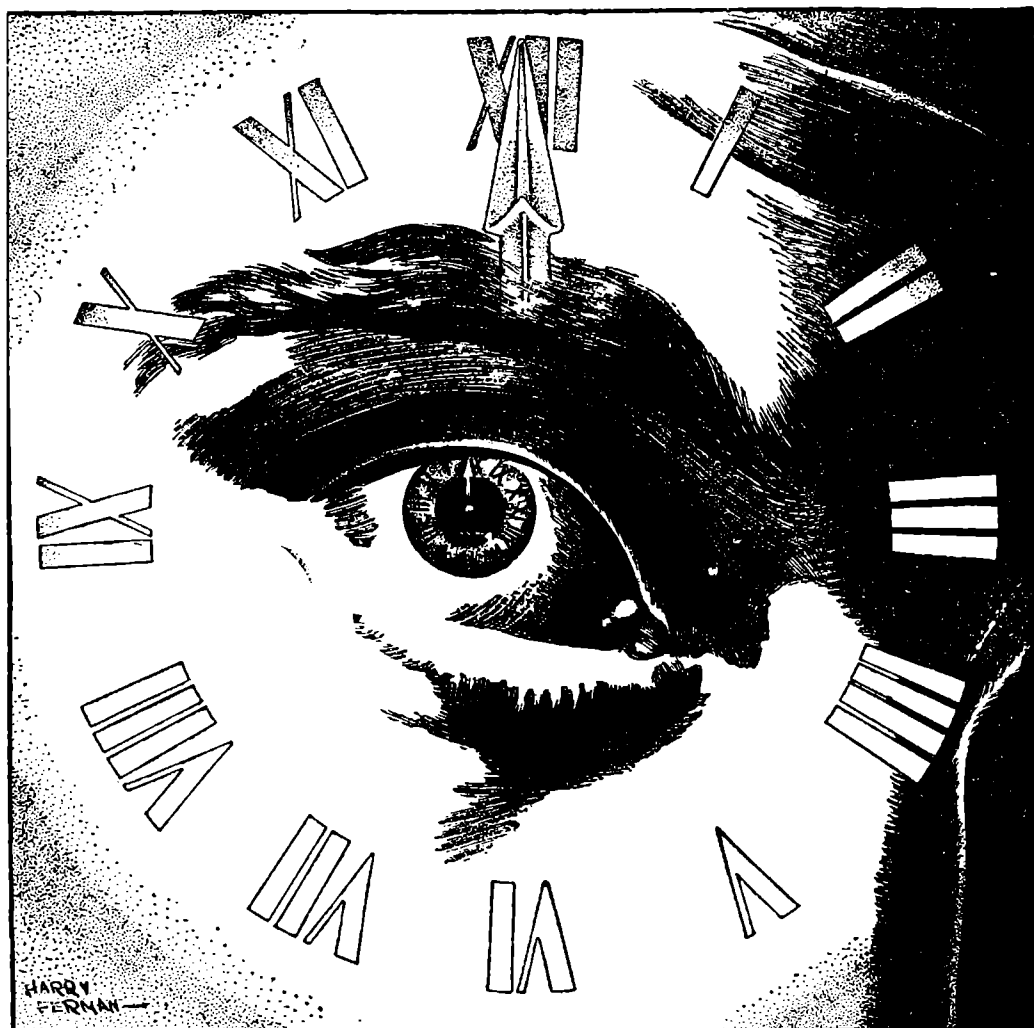
CONTENTS FOR JUNE-JULY, 1939

Number 1

Cover Design . . . . .	Virgil Finlay	5
Giants of Anarchy . . . . .	Eando Binder	5
<i>An amazing glimpse into the future—a world without laws</i>		
Far Below . . . . .	Robert Barbour Johnson	27
<i>Horror in the New York subway</i>		
They Run Again . . . . .	Leah Bodine Drake	36
<i>Verse</i>		
Lens-Shy . . . . .	W. M. Clayton	37
<i>An odd and curious tale about a photographer of the dead</i>		
The Sitter in the Mound . . . . .	Bruce Bryan	40
<i>Fearful was the archeologist's discovery in an Indian mound</i>		
The Hills of Kandahar . . . . .	Robert E. Howard	47
<i>Verse</i>		
The Man Who Came Back . . . . .	Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr.	48
<i>The genius of a great scientist resurrects fallen soldiers—to what end?</i>		
The Stroke of Twelve . . . . .	Earl Peirce, Jr.	57
<i>A weird thread linked old Calvert's life with the antique clock</i>		
The Howler . . . . .	H. P. Lovecraft	66
<i>Verse</i>		
Mansions in the Sky . . . . .	Seabury Quinn	67
<i>A tale of Jules de Grandin, occult detective and ghost-breaker</i>		
Circe . . . . .	Edgar Daniel Kramer	85
<i>Verse</i>		
The Phantom Werewolf . . . . .		86
<i>An alleged true incident—a perfect weird tale</i>		
The Willow Landscape . . . . .	Clark Ashton Smith	87
<i>An intriguing Chinese fantasy</i>		
Almuric (Part 2) . . . . .	Robert E. Howard	91
<i>An amazing novel of the demon-haunted world Almuric</i>		
Headache . . . . .	Paul Ernst	113
<i>An odd little tale about a strange power given to Augustus Taylor</i>		
The Death Watch . . . . .	Hugh B. Cave	119
<i>What ghastly thing came clumping into the big house?</i>		
"We are no other than a moving row" . . . . .	Virgil Finlay	128
<i>Pictorial interpretation of a quatrain by Omar Khayyam</i>		
Celephais . . . . .	H. P. Lovecraft	129
<i>A posthumous weird fantasy by a late great master of eerie fiction</i>		
<b>Weird Story Reprint:</b>		
Imprisoned with the Pharaohs . . . . .	Houdini	133
<i>The great magician tells an uncanny tale of immemorial Egypt</i>		
The Eyrie . . . . .		151
<i>The readers interchange opinions</i>		

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Philip's eyes jerked up. "Look! the clock—it's still going!"

# The Stroke of Twelve

By EARL PEIRCE, JR.

*Weird was the thread that linked old Calvert's life with the antique clock, and strange was the fate of him who dared to challenge destiny*

**T**HE thick black hands of the grandfather clock pointed to fifteen minutes of midnight. Light from the chandelier, striking the face of the clock obliquely, formed a wedge-shaped shadow between the minute-hand and the hour-hand. The shadow became increasingly smaller. . . .

The three men in the room instinctively watched the clock, each of them silent and intent. The man on the bed scarcely breathed. He supported himself upright by one scrawny elbow, while his rheumy eyes, fixed upon that shadow, bulged out like agates. The man standing between the bed and the clock nervously fingered his stethoscope. Anxiety was written across his face; his eyes were narrow, almost challenging. The last man, gripping the bedpost with a slim white hand that revealed taut tendons, smoked a cigarette jerkily. His face was pale and strained. His eyes, too, were challenging—almost defiant.

For fifteen solid minutes the silence in the room was unbroken by any human voice. Once or twice the man with the stethoscope threw a quick, furtive glance at the man on the bed, but he did not speak. Wind howled shrilly outside, and rats, excited by the storm, scampered noisily back and forth in the walls of the old house. But all of these sounds were faint, disturbing whispers within the room. They simply added to that oppressive, mounting tension.

Suddenly, clearly, the single chime of the hour rang from the old clock. There was a moment of breathlessness. Both standing men turned abruptly to the figure on the bed.

The invalid, removing his eyes from the clock, smiled faintly.

"You see?" His words were a gasp. "The hour has struck. God has granted me another reprieve. I shall live twelve more hours at least."

He sank back on the bed with a sigh. His breathing became more strenuous in his relief. Faint drops of perspiration shone on his jaundiced brow.

The man at the bedside—the physician—ran a distracted hand through his gray-ing hair. He shook his head; his blunt features were hard with incredulity.

"I simply can't believe it," he muttered hoarsely.

A sound greatly like a chuckle came from the man on the bed. "Am I dead or alive?" he asked quietly.

The physician smiled wanly, almost sheepishly.

"I'm as bad a prophet as I am a doctor," he grumbled. "Your case is out of my hands. A greater physician than I is looking after you now, Calvert."

Calvert's head moved slightly in a nod.

"A great Physician: in His covenant with the Calverts He will not fail. . . . You see, Doctor, there are certain things beyond the physical laws. Faith is one of them."

"Then you call this faith?"

Calvert nodded again, still smiling. His pale blue eyes lifted to the clock in a glance of reverential trust.

"Faith," he repeated solemnly.

The doctor, too, looked at the serene old clock. In these last few days he had come to regard it with a very special kind of awe.

The hands pointed to two minutes after twelve.

"Eleven hours and fifty-eight minutes to go," he said. "I'm damned if I don't believe it!"

"Of course you believe it," put in Calvert. "Has it ever failed? I tell you, Doctor, I shall not die until those hands cease to move, and they have never yet stopped excepting upon the stroke of twelve."

"It'll fool you one of these days," said the other dryly.

"Never," affirmed Calvert. "When you sign that death certificate you're carrying around it will be *after* twelve, not before. That's right, isn't it, Philip?"

The man at the foot of the bed, a much younger man, spoke for the first time in over twenty minutes. His voice was adolescently uneven.

"It would seem so, Uncle. Yes; it would seem so."

"Ah," sighed the old man. "The boy is learning to believe in the Calvert covenant with the Almighty. You'll not forget this clock, Philip. One day it will prolong your life as it's prolonging mine."

**P**HILIP winced, but he did not speak. His face was feverishly warm and moist. He threw a damning glance at the old clock.

The physician also was appraising this strange timepiece. He ran an exploring finger over its smooth cherry and mahogany woodwork; he frowned at its prodigious bulk and its large flat face, encircled with Latin numerals, and the cumbersome metal hands that pointed to five minutes after the hour. It was a weight-driven clock, a relic of the early 1800's; and its maker's name, inscribed upon the face, was barely legible: ZACHARY CALVERT, BOSTON.

"It's a dust-catcher," said the doctor with a shake of his head. "I confess, Calvert, that for a man of wealth you certainly live in an infested shack. I bet this clock—the whole house, for that matter—hasn't had a thorough cleaning since your great-grandfather built it. I'd be curious to expose a petri dish in here and see just what kind of deadly germs I could pick up."

"Germs! Petri dishes!" snorted Calvert. "Get out of here and let me rest. You too, Philip. Leave me with my eleven hours and fifty-five minutes in peace."

The doctor dropped his stethoscope into his satchel. He seemed to regard the instrument with some contempt.

"I wish you would change your mind about having a nurse. You really need hospitalization, y'know. This clock may be all you say it is, but a good, competent R. N. will give better service. . . ." He hesitated at the door, reluctant to leave a patient as deathly ill as Calvert. "I suppose you think you're going to outlive the

night," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Well, more power to you. But it's borrowed time, old fellow—borrowed time."

"Borrowed from God," said Calvert. "Now be off, you two! Philip, awaken me at eleven-thirty in case I over-sleep."

"In case you drop into another coma," put in the doctor. "Come along, Philip. Turn down the light and leave him in peace."

The doctor waved a cheery hand and departed. But Philip lingered for a moment; his eyes rested apprehensively on the pallid face of his uncle.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Yes, boy! Don't you see that clock? No power but God's own can stop those hands from reaching twelve again. And then we'll see." He dismissed his nephew with a faint flutter of his thin hand.

Philip confronted the doctor down in the hall.

"It's got me," he cried angrily. "Either the old man is sheer crazy or his damned superstition is true. Last week you told me he would be dead within twenty-four hours. Now look at him! How the devil can you explain it?"

The doctor shrugged.

"I can't. I'm beyond my depth. By every medical precedent your uncle should be in his grave. I simply can't understand where he gets his strength. It's uncanny."

"That clock——" began Philip. "You certainly can't believe that rot about the clock!"

"Humph! What can I believe? He's got a thrombosis. He should have been buried a week ago. If it isn't his faith in the clock that keeps him alive, then what in thunder is it?"

"How should I know? I'm no doctor. But I can't stomach that stuff about the Calverts' covenant with the Almighty."

"Covenant with the devil!" snorted the doctor. "It's a shame for a man to hang

on like that." He batted a hat down on his head and stepped to the door. "But, as I said, more power to him. Let the good God work His wonders as He will. And don't scoff, boy. That clock will be yours some day."

Philip laughed unpleasantly.

"When I inherit that clock I'll chuck it into the nearest trash barrel. It grates on my nerves."

"If you inherit it, you mean. From the looks of it your uncle will outlive us both." The doctor grinned maliciously, yanked open the door, and vanished into the rainy blackness outside. The door slammed behind him.

PHILIP stood in the hall staring thoughtfully after the physician's retreat. His parting words echoed annoyingly in his ears. It would be just like his uncle to outlive him—to cheat him of his inheritance.

"It all comes back to that clock," thought Philip. "Damn! If I could only *believe* that superstition. . . ."

His reflections broke up incoherently as they had always done on that subject. He went into the living-room and opened the liquor cabinet. Bourbon, tonight. It would be the fourth consecutive night that his uncle had escaped the clutch of death.

Upstairs in the sick-room the tall case-clock silently measured the minutes, and Calvert lay confidently at rest in its shadow, as if it were the shadow of some beneficent being. . . .

When the physician returned the next day, only a few minutes before noon, he found Calvert in a deep coma. The old man's pulse was hardly perceptible; his face was white and dry; his breathing was a mere inconsequential murmur. It was amazing how he clung to these last paltry moments of life.

"It's the end, Philip," said the doctor after a cursory examination. "No human

heart can carry a strain like this. His pulse is weaker than any I've ever seen." He gently extended Calvert's arms lengthwise at his sides and drew the blankets over them. "I'm afraid it's a matter of minutes now, maybe seconds."

The relief in Philip's face was unmistakable. This event had been so long in coming that he could not hide his true emotions. He threw a defiant glance at the clock. It was one minute of twelve.

"He's sinking," whispered the doctor.

Philip did not trust himself to speak. He held his breath; his eyes wavered watchfully between the clock and the sleeper. They would die together—both of these things which he hated above all things on earth. Maybe he would entomb the clock with his uncle. There was poetic irony in the idea.

The doctor stiffened over the bed. He lifted one of Calvert's eyelids with the ball of his thumb. Letting it drop again he met Philip's tense stare.

"Your uncle is dead, Philip."

It was as simple as that. Without any histrionics Philip had come into millions. At last!

Then—as if in mocking celebration—the old clock solemnly struck the hour of twelve.

Philip's eyes jerked up. His lips parted wordlessly; all of an instant he was pale. Finally the words came out:

"Look! The clock—it's still going!"

The physician turned around with a start. He, too, experienced a vague cold feeling as he saw the minute hand creep slowly past the hour. Involuntarily he looked back at his patient. The old man certainly *looked* dead. But one could never tell. Hurriedly the doctor applied his stethoscope to Calvert's chest.

"Good God!" he cried. "His heart's beating!"

Philip grasped the bedpost.

"But you said——"

"I could have sworn," rapped out the doctor. "He *was* dead! Just before the hour struck."

Philip and the doctor exchanged a long glance.

There was a moment of desperate silence between them. The suspicion that impinged upon their minds was too fantastic to be believed. And yet . . .

"The Calverts' covenant," whispered the doctor. "Oh, good heavens! It's mad!"

Philip was tongue-tied. Not once but a dozen times this same thing had happened, and each time the Calvert fortune was snatched from his fingertips by some weird twist of fate. Mad? It was damnable! And as if to taunt him the old clock ticked maddeningly on. . . .

A visible improvement came over the sick man. His breathing became stronger. His fingers twitched; his mouth opened, and then his eyes. One could almost feel the vibrant coagulating of his strength.

He looked up into the doctor's face.

"What—time?" he gasped.

"It's just struck twelve, Calvert." The doctor laid a comforting hand on Calvert's own. "You've been sleeping. But don't talk. You must conserve your energy."

"After twelve!" Calvert's voice rose sibilantly. "You see, Philip! You see! . . . The covenant—I shall live twelve more hours!"

Philip managed to get the words out; they were metallic: "Yes, Uncle."

Calvert sighed. He closed his eyes. He sank back into that death-like slumber. An infuriating trace of a smile remained on his pale lips.

THE doctor took Philip's arm and led him from the room. Neither of them spoke until they were down the stairs.

"It's nothing less than miraculous, Philip. His heart had actually stopped beating. And just as that clock struck——"

Philip threw off the doctor's arm.

"Do you believe that rot? Good Lord, man! It's barbaric!"

"You've got to admit it's a damned odd coincidence."

"Rot!" cried Philip again. "Coincidence, maybe. But the clock hadn't anything to do with it."

"Maybe not." The doctor was warily non-committal. "We'll wait until it stops before we know about that. *If it stops!*"

He went out, and his words remained behind like omens.

During the early evening Calvert regained consciousness and asked for nourishment. Philip grudgingly passed the request on to the butler, for he could not bring himself to prepare the broth with his own hands. Nor could he bear to watch the old man drink it. He stood with his back to the bed, staring moodily out upon the snow-laden trees outside, while behind him Calvert noisily sipped the beverage which kept him alive. To Philip there was something hateful and repugnant in that greedy, toothless sucking. It reminded him of an animal.

His uncle was deceived by Philip's silence.

"You mustn't worry about me, my boy," he advised feelingly. "I'll be with you for a long while yet. With every swing of the pendulum I can feel my health returning."

A wince came into Philip's face which Calvert could not see.

"Have the faith that I have," continued Calvert earnestly. "I'll not leave you alone in the world. We'll have many long years together, Philip."

Philip clenched his teeth in unutterable wrath. "Couldn't the old fool *see?*" he thought bitterly. He could hardly keep the words unspoken.

"And now, my boy, I must rest. Take my tray. . . . You'll be in tonight, won't you? I should hate to be left alone on a night like this. The—rats sound unusually restless tonight. . . ."

"I'll be in, Uncle."

Stone-facedly Philip walked to the bed and lifted the tray. He avoided his uncle's eyes. And if his silence was incriminating he couldn't help it. He carried the loathsome soiled plates to the door.

"Philip!"

"Yes, Uncle?"

"Look in at me later, will you? Sometimes I unconsciously throw the covers off. It—it's such a cold night."

"I'll look in at you, Uncle. Is that all—now?"

"Thank you, boy. That's all."

But it was not all. Time and again Calvert rang; and each time Philip climbed to his room, bringing him hot cocoa, milk-toast, fresh water. Calvert was unusually restless. He couldn't sleep. He began to perspire; his sheets had to be changed, his frail limbs had to be gently dried with a towel. Philip performed these ministrations with a face more brittle than glass: he dared not frown or grimace, as his soul cried for him to do, for fear his steeled self-control would smash to fragments.

The old man was not ungrateful.

"You're a good boy, Philip. You're worthy of the Calvert name—the Calvert covenant."

Philip stoically closed his eyes and felt the blood pound in his temples. A cold, tingling, futile wrath raced through his nerves.

"What time is it, Philip?"

Philip spoke without looking at the clock: "It's eleven-thirty, Uncle."

"So late? I must get some rest." Calvert looked askance at the timepiece, smiling. "When I wake up it will be after twelve again. Ah! That sound does my old heart good! . . . Now leave me, Philip. Don't close the door; I may want something else later when I wake up. Good-night, my boy."

"Good-night, Uncle."

The old man did not notice the ice in his

nephew's voice. He sank contentedly into sleep.

PHILIP did not leave. He stood silently, rigidly, at the foot of the bed, and his eyes at rest upon the sleeper were dull with sober thought. He had discovered a plan—a desperate plan, yet a plan so childishly simple that it brought a faint mirthless smile to the corners of his mouth. But would it work? Was the old fool's heart really weak enough? . . . For twenty long minutes he pondered these questions, and then he consigned them to the lap of fate.

Quietly, and with the deliberate unerringness with which a surgeon walks to the operating-table, Philip walked to the clock. It was just three minutes of midnight.

"Uncle," he said. "Uncle, wake up!"

The outspoken words sounded like thunder in the room. Calvert squirmed on the bed. He frowned in his disturbed sleep.

"Wake up, you fool!" shouted Philip. He gave the bed a vicious kick with his foot.

Spluttering, dazed, Calvert opened his eyes and glared about the room. When he saw Philip he blinked convulsively.

"Wh—what?"

Philip broke into a laugh.

"Having a nightmare, Uncle? . . . No? You will now. Watch!"

Turning his back upon the invalid, Philip stood on tiptoe and reached to the hood of the clock. Heedless of his uncle's startled cry he pried open the glass, turned it back, and with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand he grasped the two hands of the clock and squeezed them together. Then, leering over his shoulder, he began ruthlessly to twist the hands loose.

For a stunned moment Calvert was speechless. His face went ghastly white. His eyes stared incredulously, fearfully, stupidly.

Finally, as the realization of this brutal

deed struck his senses, he managed a hoarse cry:

"Philip! *Philip*—"

He made a desperate attempt to grab Philip's arm, but his strength failed him; he crumpled up on the bed with a gasp of anguish. Philip could hear the shuddering convulsion of his heart.

"Look, Uncle!" he cried. With a final tug he tore the hands from the face of the clock. "Look!" he shouted. He thrust the twisted bits of metal into Calvert's face.

It was a grandiose gesture, and futile. That disease-weakened heart had constricted and stopped. Calvert was dead. He lay motionless on the bed, his face contorted and stiff, his eyes staring out like balls of glass.

There was a long moment of silence as Philip looked down at him; and then, abortively, hollowly, the grandfather clock struck the hour of twelve.

## 2

IT WAS heart-disease, of course. The doctor had long ago warned Philip that any shock to his uncle might prove fatal. And so it had. There was certainly no question of foul play; Philip had been grossly careless in destroying the clock in such a cruel manner, but . . .

That was precisely how the doctor viewed the event. To him it was a closed case, and if he had any suspicions of Philip's motives he kept them scrupulously to himself. The old man was dead of a natural cause. His nephew had come into the Calvert millions. That was all.

A few days later, attended by friends and his one remaining relative, Calvert was entombed with all proper solemnity and respect.

Philip was amused by the rumors that spread about regarding the Calvert "covenant." There was a childish naïveté in

other people's awe of the supernatural that appealed to his sense of superiority. But he disdained the rumors and passed them off as unimportant, time-wasting gossip. Still, he was anxious for the talk to die out; recurrent anecdotes of the Calvert superstition irritated him.

He was less amused to read, in a national weekly, this succinct comment:

*"Coincidence.* In Manhattan last week lay at death's door Anthony Calvert, famed septuagenarian and financier. Boasting he would not die excepting upon the stroke of twelve, he amazed doctors by clinging to life long after they gave him up. Finally, in an attack of angina, his heart stopped beating: time, exactly midnight. Remarked his nephew skeptically, 'Odd Coincidence.'"

There were a few letters from his uncle's friends remarking upon the unexplainable nature of the death, and one letter—from the Calverts' minister—expatiated didactically and at length on the mysterious ways of the Almighty. Philip was irritated by all this attention. He resolved, with that stoic restraint which had marked him in the past, to ignore all these hints and regard his uncle's passing as an act of the most ordinary kind.

It was not easy. There were papers to sign and inventories to take; lawyers bothered him daily; brokers called to go over his uncle's papers; art collectors, anxious to take advantage of Philip's indifference to the Calvert Gallery, plagued him continually. All things conspired to remind him of his uncle's death.

Philip had decided to renovate and modernize the old Calvert house on Seventy-third Street. Among other things which were destined to reach the auctioneer's block was the grandfather clock. It was still a workable piece; with new hands and a re-winding of its weights it would tell time accurately enough. Philip thought that the price brought by the clock ought to pay for his uncle's granite tombstone.

But before he could arrange the sale of



these archaic things the afore-mentioned publicity descended upon him like an avalanche, and he thought it better to wait a respectful interval before molesting his uncle's cherished property. It would "look" better.

So the clock remained beside his uncle's bed, quiet and handless, like a sentient being brooding in the darkness of the room. Philip never went near it. His own rooms, on the first floor, were spacious enough to provide him with all the privacy which he required, and he had his own glass-and-chromium electric clock. To all outward appearances he had preserved his uncle's room intact out of a deep feeling of Christian reverence.

The doctor ceased paying his calls, the embalmers were paid and complimented, and Philip, truly for the first time, began to realize the convenience of his uncle's passing. The house was his own now, to do with as he pleased. The money was his, and the cars, the servants, the yacht. Yet despite his new freedom he could not help but feel shackled to his uncle's memory by an invisible bond which he could not sever.

He decided, once again, to get rid of the clock. Its grim, watchful vigil over the empty bed had become a ghost to him: he felt his uncle's dying scrutiny peering from behind its face. It was a constant reminder that Philip had—in the severest sense of the word—murdered his uncle.

And then—suddenly one night—the clock came to astonishing life.

**I**T WAS just one week after the funeral. The storm was at its height. Philip had been unable to sleep and was roaming about downstairs with a cigarette in his mouth and a highball in his hand. The house was oppressively silent, save for the noises of the wind outside. It was hot too; he perspired freely. He paced restlessly from room to room, his mind dis-

tracted by the fragments of a nightmare which he had suffered a few hours before.

It was just about midnight when he heard the servant on the stairs. For a long while he had been suspecting that the man was spying upon him, and he swung into the hall angrily, prepared to fire him then and there. But the servant's ashen, fearful face silenced him.

"Do you hear it too, sir?" the man asked, his eyes bulging. "I couldn't sleep. I thought if I got a—a glass of milk——"

"Hear *what*?" demanded Philip sharply. "What's the matter with you? You're white as a sheet."

"Those sounds, sir . . . from your uncle's room."

"Sounds?" Philip's hand constricted about the highball glass. He put one slipper-shod foot on the stair. "What the devil are you raving about? I hear nothing."

The servant swallowed uneasily.

"I couldn't be mistaken, sir. I—I've heard it for the past few nights. A kind of scratching noise, sir."

"All right! All right! Go out and get your milk." Philip waved him abruptly aside. "I'll tend to this myself!" He brushed past the servant and rapidly climbed the stairs.

He heard the sound before he reached his uncle's room at the end of the hall. He stopped, gripped the baluster. From down the darkened corridor, dimly from behind the closed door, came the dull sound which the butler had heard. It was a scratching sound. It reminded Philip of a sharp long fingernail scraping on wood. With this vision before his eyes he snatched at the drawstrings of his robe and proceeded ahead.

He snapped on the hall light with a contemptuous brush of his hand. It was probably a branch from one of the trees sweeping against the room; nothing more unnatural than that, surely. He reached his

uncle's room, opened the door, and turned on the floor-lamp.

The stale odor of medicine and human habitation greeted him with sickening familiarity. He winced, strode to the window and swept aside the heavy curtains. Out in that frosty blackness he could see no disturbing twig. . . .

He turned around and stared about the room. The noise, louder now, came unmistakably from within these four walls. Philip glared defiantly, tracking the sound to its source. He discovered it at last, and his stern face underwent a sudden, frozen whiteness. The sound came from within the old clock!

Actually the clock had stopped running on the night his uncle had died; it was not running now—but something, in its mahogany case, was writhing to get free.

It was an impatient sound, animal-like in its vigor. An entombed rat probably, thought Philip. The old house was infested with them.

The inner compartment of the clock could be reached by means of a small rectangular door, but the door was locked, and the key had been lost for years. Philip studied the door with a frown. It was flush with the clock casing, difficult to pry open.

He tried it experimentally, breaking off a fingernail. The scratching sound inside grew quiet.

Philip was not a superstitious man. Nothing mattered to him but the dictates of his own pleasure, and he was contemptuous of myths and fables. A less imaginative man might have discovered a disturbing analogy in the fact that those sounds resembled the sounds of scratching *hands*. . . .

"It's a rat," he decided, "and if the damned thing wants to gnaw the clock to shreds it's all right with me!"

He went back downstairs and left his uncle's room to blackness. The servant,

covering beside the newel post, watched him fearfully.

"It's a rat, you fool!" Philip snarled. "Now get back to bed and stop prowling around. And," he added thoughtfully, "if I hear one word about this house being haunted I'll sack the whole lot of you!"

"Y-yes, sir." The butler was not very convincing. He swallowed his phlegm and climbed the stairs to his own room in the attic.

Philip mixed himself another drink and sat down in a comfortable chair to give it his full attention. This was difficult to do. From where he sat he could hear the sounds from his uncle's room; the sharp, incessant scratching, the gnawing and clawing of something entombed within those ancient panels of the clock. They were distracting sounds; but no doubt the rat would gnaw its way out before morning and that would be the end of it.

But when morning came the sounds continued. All day long they continued, driving Philip slowly but surely to anxiety, fear, and eventual madness. They endured throughout the night, went on during the next day, and became louder and more frenzied as evening wore on again.

PHILIP tried hard not to admit to himself that the sounds grated on his nerves, but he had been drinking so steadily of late that he fell into brooding introspection; his fingers twitched, his eyes played deceiving tricks on him, his brain magnified, distorted, symbolized those damnable sounds. . . .

And so, one night, he did something which he should have done sooner: he opened the compartment of the old clock and let the imprisoned rat come out.

He laughed hysterically when he saw it scamper down the inside of the clock and leap through the opening. So it was a rat! But of course it was! What else *could* it have been?

Drunk with relief, he knelt down beside the open compartment and struck a match, the better to study the interior. It was a large compartment. The pendulum hung down still and lifeless from the blackness above. The lower of the two weights— heavy, ponderous things for such a tall clock—was suspended less than a foot off the flooring. The higher weight was drawn so high up in the clock that it did not bother him. He pushed the pendulum and lower weight gently aside as he lowered the match into the clock's depths.

Heavy, sweet odors stung his nostrils—sickening odors of ancient, worm-rotted, seasoned wood. Philip's head, already swimming from spirits, began to throb.

The match fell from his trembling fingers. Vertigo assailed him. Feeling himself becoming suddenly dizzy, he grasped hold of the lower weight-rope for support.

Something snapped and broke in the darkness above him. He hardly had time to lift his head. He heard a scuttling, hissing sound, and then something huge and heavy crashed into his uplifted forehead with the force of a sledge.

A few hours later—just at midnight—he died in a hospital bed without having regained consciousness, his skull broken, his brain pierced with bits of bone, from the blow of the second clock-weight whose rope had been weakened by the insistent, uninterrupted gnawing of a rat. . . .