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*A Blood-chilling Tale Is This*

# THRICE DEAD

By ALSTON LOVEJOY

**W**HEN Scurtin told me that only three people would attend the funeral, I did not consider it an uncommon event. I had been accustomed to viewing the dead for some years, since I am a physician, so I went without any amplified sense of sorrow, repugnance, or terror.

The corpse had been a distant relative of Scurtin's. I had not intimately known him; in fact I had met him only twice at social events of no special importance.

He had died, I think, of some form of liver disease, the exact character of which I am not fully aware. I had not been informed of any remarkably distinguishable traits accompanying the death, and I believe that none of us regarded the then coming funeral as one of distinction. But certainly, there came events that appeared to me

not only horrible, but seemed at that time inexplicable. I am often haunted in my dreams by the unforgettable terrors that confronted me that night, and funerals unnerve me whenever it is my duty to attend them.

The time set for the funeral was the unreasonable hour of seven p. m., according to the wishes set forth in the will of the deceased. I had often noticed that people who had seemed in no way mentally unbalanced during their lives, sometimes left their last wishes in a nowise sensible fashion. However, I had become used to this sort of thing and I saw no reason to be unduly startled. I had indeed attended two funerals, which were otherwise uneventful, at the unearthly hour of midnight.

So it was that after a rather strenuous day I went wearily to the under-

taking parlors, which were located on the west side of town. It seemed to me at the time that it had been foolish to have the corpse embalmed there, because the burial was not to take place in the cemetery adjoining the west side, but was to be on the directly opposite, or east side, which was four miles from the place chosen. On top of all this the dead man had left another wish: That his body should be transported to the cemetery by coach and that the horses should proceed not faster than a walk the full distance.

I had become angry when I had waited at the parlors for over half an hour, for I was tired and irritable and sorely in need of sleep. Finally, when I had begun to wonder if I had mistaken the date of the funeral, I heard footsteps approaching and my friend Scurtin appeared with the other member of the trio—a negro minister.

He was to recite the services, which had been composed by the deceased, for exactly twenty-one minutes. At that time he was to stop upon whichever part of the paragraph, sentence, or word he happened to be uttering at that moment. I was rather startled when Scurtin informed me that this highly intelligent negro gentleman was directly related to himself and to the deceased through their late uncle. At this point my interest was aroused and I forgot my ennui in my anticipation of an unusual event.

**I**T WAS eight-thirty o'clock when we entered the small room in which the corpse lay. The evening was becoming quite dark, and to my utter amazement there was but one light in the room: a small, dim light attached to the altar for the minister to read by. The corpse lay with its feet toward the pulpit, the light striking the soles; and to this day I can not interpret my feeling at the sight of those feet pointing skyward and just a bit awry.

The dim light fell unevenly through the room, making the corpse's face appear exceptionally white, and lined in prominent planes of flesh and bone, stiff with death. The hands, by some unfortunate turn of destiny, had become black!

The coffin was plain, except that the entire top was composed of glass. The room was small and reeking with the odor of stale flowers. These things, and the blankly exposed corpse, gave one an ugly impression of stark death.

The room was so small that Scurtin and I were compelled to sit within two feet of the coffin. As he sat near the head, I followed suit and sat just opposite him. He looked rather badly shaken. I had a very drawn feeling mingled with an indefinable emotion closely resembling a terrible loneliness. It seemed unendurably quiet; but now that time has passed, I remember having heard passing automobiles, feet pattering on the sidewalk, the sound of children's voices and laughter in the distance.

I became extremely impatient while the tall negro minister stood unmoving for fully five minutes before his voice broke the silence. He looked huge and distorted in the dim light.

When he at last spoke, his voice startled me. It was deep and vibrant. He chanted, rather than recited. His slow voice, half singing, half droning, echoed ominously through the small room.

I have here a copy of the sermon. Perhaps when you have reflected upon what I have said, you will be able to understand my feeling as I listened to this:

*Into the dark chasm. Into the dark chasm. Into death I ride. Slowly. Slowly. Sweetly slow. Into the dark chasm.*

*Out of the light I go. Out of the light. And into the Dark, sweet flowers, I float passionately. Into the Dark, sweet flowers, I float passionately. Into the Dark.*

*Farewell. Farewell. Things that my hands have touched. Things that my lips have touched. Farewell. Things that my eyes have fondled. Things that my tongue has tasted. Farewell. Things that my cheek has brushed. Words that my lips have discarded. Farewell. Farewell. Women my heart has loved. Books that my brain has loved. Farewell. Hope, farewell. Farewell. Farewell.*

*Phantoms have haunted me. Phantoms have taunted me. Phantoms have haunted me. Phantoms, I come to thee, phantoms that haunted me. Deep in the dark night's breast phantoms came unto me. They are to be caressed by my dead memory. Phantoms that taunted me, farewell to all of ye. Devils were some to see. They made life Hell for me. Come, Death, I wait for thee. Ride me upon the sea of all Eternity. Of all Eternity. All of Eternity. . . .*

Scurtin was weeping now without control. I was hypnotized by the negro's voice. I felt as though I were freezing. I reasoned the thing out to myself and was, for a few more moments of that everlasting sermon, pacified. At this point I glanced at the body and I would have sworn that I saw one of the hands move!

I looked away from the body, still with that uncontrollable feeling that it had moved, and I tried to watch the negro. He spoke without apparent emotion. His eyes were almost closed. Still, out of the corner of my eye I seemed to see the shadow behind those hands move weirdly in the dim light. Perhaps I was simply afraid to look; I know that I did not want to. It took every ounce of my will-power to fix my eyes toward the negro. Finally, like a child frightened in a dark bedroom, I closed my eyes. Alas! to no avail. I could hear it move. A rustling sound. A sound of dead hands against glass. With that mysterious sixth sense with which we have been endowed, I could *feel* the presence of another being in the room.

The sermon became more and more the singsong wail of the negro hymnal as it progressed. The minister continued to chant:

*Over my head. Over my head. Over my head there swings a light. There is a light over my head. Under my feet. Under my feet. There is a cloud. There is a cloud under my feet. A heavenly cloud—under my feet—so weary. Oh-h-h-h so weary. Yes—so weary.*

*Though the earth shall not quake as the—as . . .*

Time of all times for a tremor! I thought my imagination must be getting the best of my better reasoning, for I heard the low, faint rumble of the light California earthquake. I opened my eyes and saw the room moving about me. The corpse was shaking about in the coffin, its feet rattling a tattoo against the sides of the casket. Scurtin's eyes were closed tightly; his fists were clenched, but his mouth was grim with a determination to conceal his real emotion. The negro seemed peculiarly unmoved as he continued the sermon. He did not change his voice, expression or poise, but continued that same singsong, nerve-splitting chant.

THE rest of the sermon I did not clearly apprehend. It was a tormenting groan during the events that followed the earthquake. Shades of the invisible world poured icy perspiration over my whole being, while a whirlwind of heinous events sapped my strength and reasoning. I acted by main force, hardly knowing what I was about. Time became a fourth dimension of Hell.

I saw the corpse's knees begin to bend as it drew its feet up like a sleeping man. But unlike a living being it was covered with glass instead of yielding cloth. To my inexpressible horror I saw the glass bending from the slow, diabolical force beneath it. Scurtin leaned forward and peered closely at the rigid face within

the coffin, a face no whiter now than his own. I realized that the glass would soon break. I covered my face with my arms to protect myself from the glass. It broke with a double report, *crack! crack!* like shots from a revolver, louder in the smallness of the room.

I immediately uncovered my face while the pieces of glass fell clattering to the floor. Scurtin's eyes were wide with bewilderment and shock. His mouth hung loosely open. His chin had a long cut across it from the flying glass. He was evidently spell-bound—hypnotized by the thing—for he did not move, but glared with a terrible stillness. The negro was unmoved during this time and continued with his services as though he were addressing an attentive congregation.

I assumed a calm countenance, and arising I went to Scurtin's side to pacify him, but as I approached I joined him in his terror.

The eyes of the corpse were wide open, apparently staring into the eyes of Scurtin. The hands of the corpse were slowly rising. Black hands sprinkled with bits of sparkling glass. Hands that seemed to move by some unseen power rather than any living force.

Scurtin and I stood side by side bending horrified over this monster. We were like men adhered to the floor in the dread clutches of nightmare. The room seemed hot and oppressive. Scurtin's face was streaked with perspiration and tears, mingled with blood from the gash on his chin.

The left hand of the corpse came toward him in a painfully slow, steady, puppet-like motion. The right hand lifted skyward with the fingers spreading apart fiendishly. The left hand was spreading out full in Scurtin's face! I was paralyzed as I saw it closing upon his cheeks. Scurtin screamed, "Oh, God!"

The realization of what was happening came to me vaguely. I was dazedly aware that I must do some-

thing. I, a physician, would not be expected to stand stupefied while a man was driven into hysterics, into madness.

I leaped to Scurtin's back, caught him by the shoulders, and pulled him to one side. The corpse did not slacken its inhuman grip. I threw both arms around Scurtin's body and tried to wrest him from the thing. The coffin toppled from its bier! The corpse rolled out, still clinging to the now unconscious Scurtin. It hung by one hand from Scurtin's face. It hung with its feet drawn up, its eyes staring ahead.

My abhorrence was beyond reason as I seized that suspended monstrosity by the wrist and tried to release its grip. It had the strength of a vise. I laid Scurtin on the floor and taking the clutching hand in both of mine I broke every finger of it. Each one popped loudly.

The negro was still chanting as I dragged Scurtin from the room to revive him. As I closed the door behind me I heard the few closing words:

*. . . and Death descends not until the body is in the gra . . .*

The words ceased abruptly as a distant chime struck the closing time. Twenty-one minutes had passed!

**W**HEN Scurtin had been revived I returned to the room where the negro had remained. He was lifting the corpse into the coffin. He completed the job of drawing its arms back into position and placing the lid over it. I noticed that his expression of philosophical calm had not changed. He was about to leave the room when he turned to me.

"Even an earthquake can be a blessing," he said softly.

I was about to answer that I had supposed earthquakes to be a curse rather than a blessing, especially since the most recent one. Before I could find words hot enough for a reply the negro answered his own puzzle.

"The short moments involved in the excitement following the quake," he

said, "were just sufficient to allow me to eliminate one phrase in that accursed sermon. It seems that the man suspected Brother Scurtin, most absurdly to be sure, of some hideous plot against him. What the plot could have been I can not imagine, but the phrase that I omitted prophesied a most gruesome revenge on Brother Scurtin—strangulation!"

"Impossible!" I cried.

"Impossible, according to the phrase, under only one condition," he replied. "It declared that 'only supernatural intervention can save him who has heard this curse'."

Before I could answer he had left the room. I heard him walking about outside, speaking to the horses as he backed the carriage up to the doorway. I glanced quickly about, thrust my hand into my pocket, gripped my jack-knife. I opened it, eyed the long, glittering blade. I had used it in an emergency case once. It was sharp. Down the thin blade I ran my thumb lightly. I winced as a drop of blood leapt to life.

The lid of the dark box had not yet been fastened.

**D**URING the long ride to the cemetery the sky clouded with huge, black shadows. Great drops of rain suddenly pattered on the carriage-top. They brought reality. I was pacified.

When we returned to town we drove directly to Scurtin's house, and

Scurtin immediately went in. The negro remained a moment with me.

"Doctor," he asked, "what would you name as the exact reason for what happened tonight?"

"Simply muscular contraction," I answered, remembering that brevity of speech is a joyously deceptive virtue.

"So I thought," he continued, "but the visible events betrayed higher understanding. I have, no doubt, committed an unforgivable atrocity tonight. Confession to you is the one way that I can unload my soul. Can you keep this secret?"

"Surely," I answered. There was a long pause.

"Well, perhaps one of your profession could hardly understand the feeling that overcame me. I was cut to the soul. I had a sense that there was life—another life—in that room—do you understand? And then you left—left the room. The dead man—how can I put it?—ever explain myself?—I thrust a kni—he is twice—dead." The negro had finally broken under the strain. He turned his face from me and sobbed softly.

"Say no more," I whispered. My hand crept to my pocket and fingered my own knife uneasily.

"Doctor, I am sorry——" he began.

"There is no need to be," I interrupted. He lifted his face and I saw his expression of surprise as I continued. "The man is not twice dead—but *thrice*."

