

The Fearsome Touch of Death

by Robert Ervin Howard, 1906-1936

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*As long as midnight cloaks the earth
With shadows grim and stark,
God save us from the Judas kiss
Of a dead man in the dark.*

OLD ADAM FARREL lay dead in the house wherein he had lived alone for the last twenty years. A silent, churlish recluse, in his life he had known no friends, and only two men had watched his passing.

Dr. Stein rose and glanced out the window into the gathering dusk.

„You think you can spend the night here, then?“ he asked his companion.

This man, Falred by name, assented.

„Yes, certainly. I guess it's up to me.“

„Rather a useless and primitive custom, sitting up with the dead,“ commented the doctor, preparing to depart, „but I suppose in common decency we will have to bow to precedence. Maybe I can find someone who'll come over here and help you with your vigil.“

Falred shrugged his shoulders. „I doubt it. Farrel wasn't liked—wasn't known by many people. I scarcely knew him myself, but I don't mind sitting up with the corpse.“

Dr. Stein was removing his rubber gloves and Falred watched the process with an interest that almost amounted to fascination. A slight, involuntary shudder shook him at the memory of touching these gloves—slick, cold, clammy things, like the touch of death.

„You may get lonely tonight, if I don't find anyone,“ the doctor remarked as he opened the door. „Not superstitious, are you?“

Falred laughed. „Scarcely. To tell the truth, from what I hear of Farrel's disposition, I'd rather be watching his corpse than have been his guest in life.“

The door closed and Falred took up his vigil. He seated himself in the only chair the room boasted, glanced casually at the formless, sheeted bulk on the bed opposite him, and began to read by the light of the dim lamp which stood on the rough table.

Outside, the darkness gathered swiftly, and finally Falred laid down his magazine to rest his eyes. He looked again at the shape which had, in life, been the form of Adam Farrel, wondering what quirk in the human nature made the sight of a corpse not so unpleasant, but such an object of fear to man. Unthinking ignorance, seeing in dead things a reminder of death to come, he decided lazily, and began idly contemplating as to what life had held for this grim and crabbed old man, who had neither relatives nor friends, and who had seldom left the house wherein he had died. The usual tales of miser-hoarded wealth had accumulated, but Falred felt so little interest in the whole matter that it was not even necessary for him to overcome any temptation to prey about the house for possible hidden treasure.

He returned to his reading with a shrug. The task was more boresome than he had thought for. After a while he was aware that every time he looked up from his magazine and his eyes fell upon the bed with its grim occupant, he started involuntarily as if he had, for an instant, forgotten the presence of the dead man and was unpleasantly reminded of the fact. The start was slight and instinctive, but he felt almost angered at himself. He realized, for the first time, the utter and deadening silence which enwrapped the house—a silence apparently shared by the night, for no sound came through the window. Adam Farrel lived as far apart from his neighbors as possible, and there was no other house within hearing distance.

Falred shook himself as if to rid his mind of unsavory speculations, and went back to his reading. A sudden vagrant gust of wind whipped through the window, in which the light in the lamp flickered and went out suddenly. Falred, cursing softly, groped in the darkness for matches, burning his fingers on the lamp chimney. He struck a match, relighted the lamp, and glancing over at the bed, got a horrible mental jolt. Adam Farrel's face stared blindly at him, the dead eyes wide and blank, framed in the gnarled gray features. Even as Falred instinctively shuddered, his reason explained the apparent phenomenon: the sheet that covered the corpse had been carelessly thrown across the face and the sudden puff of wind had disarranged and flung it aside.

Yet there was something grisly about the thing, something fearsomely suggestive—as if, in the cloaking dark, a dead hand had flung aside the sheet, just as if the corpse were about to rise...

Falred, an imaginative man, shrugged his shoulders at these ghastly thoughts and crossed the room to replace the sheet. The dead eyes seemed to stare malevolently, with an evilness that transcended the dead man's churlishness in life. The workings of a vivid imagination, Falred knew, and he re-covered the gray face, shrinking as his hand chanced to touch the cold flesh—slick and clammy, the touch of death. He shuddered with the natural revulsion of the living for the dead, and went back to his chair and magazine.

At last, growing sleepy, he lay down upon a couch which, by some strange whim of the original owner, formed part of the room's scant furnishings, and composed himself for slumber. He decided to leave the light burning, telling himself that it was in accordance with the usual custom of leaving lights burning for the dead; for he was not willing to admit to himself that already he was conscious of a dislike for lying in the darkness with the corpse. He dozed, awoke with a start and looked at the sheeted form of the bed. Silence reigned over the house, and outside it was very dark.

The hour was approaching midnight, with its accompanying eerie domination over the human mind. Falred glanced again at the bed where the body lay and found the sight of the sheeted object most repellent. A fantastic idea had birth in his mind, and grew, that beneath the sheet, the mere lifeless body had become a strange, monstrous thing, a hideous, conscious being, that watched him with eyes which burned through the fabric of the cloth. This thought—a mere fantasy, of course—he explained to himself by the legends of vampires, undead ghosts and such like—the fearsome attributes with which the living have cloaked the dead for countless ages, since primitive man first recognized in death something horrid and apart from life. Man feared death, thought Falred, and some of this fear of death took hold on the dead so that they, too, were feared. And the sight of the dead engendered grisly thoughts, gave rise to dim fears of hereditary memory, lurking back in the dark corners of the brain.

At any rate, that silent, hidden thing was getting on his nerves. He thought of uncovering the face, on the principle that familiarity breeds contempt. The sight of the features, calm and still in death, would banish, he thought, all such wild conjectures as were haunting him in spite of himself. But the thought of those dead eyes staring in the lamplight was intolerable; so at last he blew out the light and lay down. This fear had been stealing upon him so insidiously and gradually that he had not been aware of its growth.

With the extinguishing of the light, however, and the blotting out of the sight of the corpse, things assumed their true character and proportions, and Falred fell asleep almost instantly, on his lips a faint smile for his previous folly.

He awakened suddenly. How long he had been asleep he did not know. He sat up, his pulse pounding frantically, the cold sweat beading his forehead. He knew instantly where he was, remembered the other occupant of the room. But what had awakened him? A dream—yes, now he remembered—a hideous dream in which the dead man had risen from the bed and stalked stiffly across the room with eyes of fire and a horrid leer frozen on his gray lips. Falred had seemed to lie motionless, helpless; then as the corpses reached a gnarled and horrible hand, he had awakened.

He strove to pierce the gloom, but the room was all blackness and all without was so dark that no gleam of light came through the window. He reached a shaking hand toward the lamp, then recoiled as if from a hidden serpent. Sitting here in the dark with a fiendish corpse was bad enough, but he dared

not light the lamp, for fear that his reason would be snuffed out like a candle at what he might see. Horror, stark and unreasoning, had full possession of his soul; he no longer questioned the instinctive fears that rose in him. All those legends he had heard came back to him and brought a belief in them. Death was a hideous thing, a brain-shattering horror, imbuing lifeless men with a horrid malevolence. Adam Farrel in his life had been simply a churlish but harmless man; now he was a terror, a monster, a fiend lurking in the shadows of fear, ready to leap on mankind with talons dipped deep in death and insanity.

Falred sat there, his blood freezing, and fought out his silent battle. Faint glimmerings of reason had begun to touch his fright when a soft, stealthy sound again froze him. He did not recognize it as the whisper of the night wind across the windowsill. His frenzied fancy knew it only as the tread of death and horror. He sprang from the couch, then stood undecided. Escape was in his mind but he was too dazed to even try to formulate a plan of escape. Even his sense of direction was gone. Fear had so stultified his mind that he was not able to think consciously. The blackness spread in long waves about him and its darkness and void entered into his brain. His motions, such as they were, were instinctive. He seemed shackled with mighty chains and his limbs responded sluggishly, like an imbecile's.

A terrible horror grew up in him and reared its grisly shape, that the dead man was behind him, was stealing upon him from the rear. He no longer thought of lighting the lamp; he no longer thought of anything. Fear filled his whole being; there was room for nothing else.

He backed slowly away in the darkness, hands behind him, instinctively feeling the way. With a terrific effort he partly shook the clinging mists of horror from him, and, the cold sweat clammy upon his body, strove to orient himself. He could see nothing, but the bed was across the room, in front of him. He was backing away from it. There was where the dead man was lying, according to all rules of nature; if the thing were, as he felt, behind him, then the old tales were true: death did implant in lifeless bodies an unearthly animation, and dead men did roam the shadows to work their ghastly and evil will upon the sons of men. Then—great God!—what was man but a wailing infant, lost in the night and beset by frightful things from the black abysses and the terrible unknown voids of space and time? These conclusions he did not reach by any reasoning process; they leaped full-grown into his terror-dazed brain. He worked his way slowly backward, groping, clinging to the thought that the dead man must be in front of him.

Then his back-flung hands encountered something—something slick, cold and clammy—like the touch of death. A scream shook the echoes, followed by the crash of a falling body.

The next morning they who came to the house of death found two corpses in the room. Adam Farrel's sheeted body lay motionless upon the bed, and across the room lay the body of Falred, beneath the shelf where Dr. Stein had absent-mindedly left his gloves—rubber gloves, slick and clammy to the touch of a hand groping in the dark—a hand of one fleeing his own fear—rubber gloves, slick and clammy and cold, like the touch of death.

