

Shadow at the Door

Excerpt from "Harbinger"

It was the Corpse's plan that we would approach Authority the following morning to somehow impress upon them the implicit danger that his theory suggested. He had no illusions about convincing anyone, since all of his evidence was based upon the eye witness testimony of a single person, and that a dead one, but he felt that alerting them to his investigation could serve to prepare them, in the event he could bring more profound evidence to light, as was usually the result when Ryerson Stone got upon the case.

He suggested that he would spend his sleepless night refining his theory, narrowing his focus so to speak while keeping watch upon our stalker. When the night was passed we would take our findings to both the Living and Dead Authority precincts. The Dead Authority was made up of fallen inspectors and enforcers from the living ranks. These were given the job of policing the lower levels of the City where one could find the densest population of dead. I was to sleep if possible, because as the Corpse said, he felt we would both need all our energies in the days to come. I could scarcely contain my tired humor at the idea of catching a wink of restful sleep with such revelations hanging overhead. However, as the night drew on, and my clever application of spirits began to take effect the entire interlude took on the proportion of a half-remembered dream. I was finally blessed with a blackness that no cryptic comments could interrupt.

I awoke to movement or the suggestion of action or sound. Through slit eyelids, from beneath a pile of sheltering quilts, I peered at my door and saw a shadow of activity obscure the light that came around it. I knew that at my request the Corpse would leave some illumination in the outer apartment—though he would often while away the midnight hours in the dark. As I was about to accept this as nothing more than the watchful perambulations of my employer and attempt a deeper form of sleep, a second and a third shadow obscured the light.

Every nerve in my body became instantly livid with adrenaline light as another and another set of feet cast their shadows in the hall outside my door. Right along its lowermost panel the darkness crept, distorted and strange. What had happened? Where was the Corpse? Every inch of me prayed it was nothing; that my employer had invited others to protect us. But there was nothing in the situation that would induce me to call out to him for reassurance. Too many years of living in fear had taught me the protective measure of silence and obscurity.

Instead, I reached slowly from beneath my blankets to slide open the drawer that contained my .38 caliber revolver. I was halfway through this action when I heard the first voice, moaning and low. I could make nothing of its meaning—no words, no particular emotion, its dimensions barely articulate, but I knew there was nothing approaching decency in the throat from which it issued.

I silently pulled back my covers, and slid into my slippers. How I wished I had dressed in anything other than nightshirt and immediately pondered the imbalance of my mind the night before. I did not wish to risk undermining the motility of my arms by climbing into the warmth and relative comfort of my heavy dressing gown and so the decision left me approaching the doorway to my room with the marked appearance of a homicidal manifestation of Ebenezer Scrooge. Listening intently at the door, I sensed the lack of movement directly outside of it, so I gingerly turned the knob and opened it a crack. The light came from right, the drawing room where the Corpse and I kept our fire and held council. Opening on that was a small kitchen with stove and icebox and a large window that led to the fire escape. At the opposite end of the hall to my left was the cloakroom that opened directly to the stairs that led three floors down to Butcher Street. At right angles to that aperture was the door to the Corpse's laboratory where he practiced the scientific elements of his detection work.

I did catch a movement then, in the drawing room, and then another. Two ragged shadows were joined by a third lurching across

the wallpaper like ghosts. The inconsistent light from the fireplace gave them an otherworldly look. The silhouetted heads bobbed along the wall, casting this way and that—the gait of the shadows was inconsistent and terrifying. I was unsure of my next step. Surely, I could not let my fear get the better of me and open fire. For all I knew the shapes were those of the Corpse or the shadows thrown by assistance he had summoned.

My mind was made up for me when out of the shadow on my left staggered the worst looking dead man I had ever seen. He snarled insanely with splintered teeth. I could tell by the vacant expression of his wrinkled black eyes that nothing more than a murderous presence lurked behind them. A hole in his forehead issued long dollops of black mucous and a thick white worm. He was clothed in rags and grime and in many places his flesh had degenerated to the bone. “You’ve gone too far!” he moaned in a ragged dead voice that rattled with phlegm and disease. I could tell by the way he had hooked his bony fingers that he meant me only ill.

I fired point blank into his face. So decrepit was his state that the .38 caliber bullet acted as an explosive projectile entirely ripping his face away in shiny black gobbets and strings of gore. Regardless, his dead body foundered forward a step closer and his now directionless hands flailed, catching in the folds of my flannel nightshirt.

I pushed the thing as it pulsed goutts of black slime all over me, and it toppled against the wall, slid to the floor and lay kicking. I turned toward the drawing room then, gun barrel gleaming and fired a round into the face of the first of four attackers. Groaning they came, repetitively calling my employer’s name, and terrifyingly, my own.

The derelict attackers, living dead all, fell upon me in a fury. One held a stout baseball bat in a mangled fist and another something that resembled a lawnmower blade. I fired my pistol empty, removing at least one head in the process; then began whipping the chunk of iron at my attackers like a cudgel. This was never the way to combat the dead though, and I was quickly overwhelmed. I remember a moment or two in which I struggled against their ropey strength, as their heavy stench grew tight about my face, and rancid liquid poured over me from their many mortal wounds. Then a blow fell upon my head and I slipped into a blackness that was neither restful nor numb.