

Four O'Clock

by
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with
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About two in the morning I knew it was coming. The great black silences of night's depth told me, and a monstrous cricket, chirping with a persistence too hideous to be unmeaning, made it certain. It is to be at four o'clock—at four in the dusk before dawn, just as he said it would be. I had not fully believed it previously, because the prophecies of vindictive madmen are seldom to be taken with seriousness. Besides, I was not justly to be blamed for what had befallen him at four o'clock on that other morning; that terrible morning whose memory will never leave me. And when, at length, he had died and was buried in the ancient cemetery just across the road from my east windows, I was certain that his curse could not harm me. Had I not seen his lifeless clay securely pinned down by huge shovelfuls of mould? Might I not feel assured that his crumbling bones would be powerless to bring me the doom at a day and an hour so precisely stated? Such, indeed, had been my thoughts until this shocking night itself; this night of incredible chaos, of shattered certainties, and of nameless portents.

I had retired early, hoping fatuously to snatch a few hours of sleep despite the prophecy which haunted me. Now that the time was so close at hand, I found it harder and harder to dismiss the vague fears which had always lain beneath my conscious thoughts. As the cooling sheets soothed my fevered body, I could find nothing to soothe my still more fevered mind; but lay tossing and uneasily awake, trying first one position and then another in a desperate effort to banish with slumber that one damnably insistent notion—*that it is to occur at four o'clock*.

Was this frightful unrest due to my surroundings; to the fateful locality in which I was sojourning after so many years? Why, I now asked myself bitterly, had I permitted circumstance to place me on this night of all nights, in that well-remembered house and that well-remembered room whose east windows overlook the lonely road and the ancient country cemetery beyond? In my mind's eye every detail of that unpretentious necropolis rose before me—its white fence, its ghost-like granite shafts, and the hovering auras of those on whom the worms fed. Finally the force of the conception led my vision to depths more remote and more forbidden, and I saw under the neglected grass the silent shapes of the things from which the auras came—the calm sleepers, the rotting things, the things which had twisted frantically in their coffins before sleep came, and the peaceful bones in every stage of disintegration from the complete and coherent skeleton to the huddled handful of dust. Most of all I envied the dust. Then new terror came as my fancy encountered *his* grave. Into that sepulcher I dared not let my thought stray, and I should have screamed had not something forestalled the malign power that pulled my mental sight. That something was a sudden gust of wind, sprung from nowhere amidst the calm night, which unfastened the shutter of the nearest window, throwing it back with a shivery slam and uncovering to my actual waking glance the antique cemetery itself, brooding spectrally beneath an early morning moon.

I speak of this gust as something merciful, yet know now that it was only transiently and mockingly so. For no sooner had my eyes compassed the moonlight scene than I became aware of a fresh omen, this time too unmistakable to be classed as an empty phantasm, which arose from among the gleaming tombs across the road. Having glanced with instinctive apprehension toward the spot where *he* lay mouldering—a spot cut off from my gaze by the window-frame—I perceived with trepidation the approach of an indescribable something which

flowed menacingly from that very direction; a vague, vaporous, formless mass of greyish- white substance or spirit, dull and tenuous as yet, but every moment increasing in awesome and cataclysmic potentiality. Try as I might to dismiss it as a natural meteorological phenomenon, its fearsomely portentous and *deliberate* character grew upon me amidst new thrills of horror and apprehension; so that I was scarcely unprepared for the definitely purposeful and malevolent culmination which soon occurred. That culmination, bringing with it a hideous symbolic foreshadowing of the end, was equally simple and threatening. The vapor each moment thickened and piled up, assuming at last a half tangible aspect; while the surface toward me gradually became circular in outline, and markedly concave; as it slowly ceased its advance and stood spectrally at the end of the road. And as it stood there, faintly quivering in the damp night air under that unwholesome moon, I saw that its aspect was that of the pallid and gigantic dial of a distorted *clock*.

Hideous events now followed in demoniac succession. There took shape in the lower right-hand part of the vaporous dial a black and formidable creature, shapeless and only half seen, yet having four prominent claws which reached out greedily at me—claws redolent of noxious fatality in their very contour and location; since they formed too plainly the dreaded outlines, and filled too unmistakably the exact position, of the numeral IV on the quivering dial of doom. Presently the monstrosity stepped or wriggled out of the concave surface of the dial, and began to approach me by some unexplained kind of locomotion. The four talons, long, thin, and straight, were now seen to be tipped by disgusting, thread-like tentacles, each with a vile intelligence of its own, which groped about incessantly, slowly at first, but gradually increasing in velocity until I was nearly driven mad by the sheer dizziness of their motion. And as a crowning horror I began to hear all the subtle and cryptical noises that pierced the intensified night silence; a thousand-fold magnified, and in one voice reminding me of the abhorred hour of *four*. In vain I tried to pull up the coverlet to shut them out; in vain I tried to drown them with my screams. I was mute and paralyzed, yet agonizingly aware of every unnatural sight and sound in that devastating, moon-cursed stillness. Once I managed to get my head beneath the covers — once when the cricket's shrieking of that hideous phrase, *four o'clock*, seemed about to shatter my brain—but that only aggravated the terror, making the roars of that detestable creature strike me like the blows of a titanic sledge-hammer.

And now, as I withdrew my tortured head from its fruitless protection, I found augmented diabolism to harass my eyes. Upon the newly painted wall of my apartment, as if called forth by the tentacled monster from the tomb, there danced mockingly before me a myriad company of beings, black, grey, and white, such as only the fancy of the god-stricken might visualize. Some were of infinitesimal smallness; others covered vast areas. In minor details each had a grotesque and horrible individuality, in general outlines they all conformed to the same nightmare pattern despite their vastly varied size. Again I tried to shut out the abnormalities of the night, but vainly as before. The dancing things on the wall waxed and waned in magnitude, approaching and receding as they trod their morbid and menacing measure. And the aspect of each was that of some demon clock-face with one sinister hour always figured thereon—the dreaded, the doom-delivering hour of *four*.

Baffled in every attempt to shake off the circling and relentless delirium, I glanced once more toward the unshuttered window and beheld again the monster which had come from the grave. Horrible it had been before; indescribable it had now become. The creature, formerly of indeterminate substance, was now formed of red and malignant fire; and waved repulsively its four tentacled claws—unspeakable tongues of living flame. It stared and stared at me out of the blackness; sneeringly, mockingly; now advancing, now retiring. Then, in the tenebrous silence, those four writhing talons of fire beckoned invitingly to their demoniacally dancing counterparts on the walls, and seemed to beat time rhythmically to the shocking saraband till the world was one ghoulishly gyrating vortex of leaping, prancing, gliding, leering, taunting, threatening *four o'clocks*.

Somewhere, beginning afar off and advancing slowly over the sphinx like sea and the febrile marshes, I heard the early morning wind come southing; faintly at first, then louder and louder until its unceasing burden flowed as a deluge of whirring, buzzing cacophony bringing always the hideous threat, "*four o'clock, four o'clock, FOUR O'CLOCK.*" Monotonously it grew from a whimper to a deafening roar, as of a giant cataract, but finally reached a climax and began to subside. As it receded into the distance it left upon my sensitive ears such a

vibration as is left by the passing of a swift and ponderous railway train; this, and a stark dread whose intensity gave it something of the tranquility of resignation.

The end is near. All sound and vision have become one vast chaotic maelstrom of lethal, clamorous menace, wherein are fused all the ghastly and unhallowed four o'clocks which have existed since immemorial time began, and all which will exist in eternities to come. The flaming monster is advancing closely now, its charnel tentacles brushing my face and its talons curving hungrily as they grope toward my throat. At last I can see its face through the churning and phosphorescent vapors of the graveyard air, and with devastating pangs I realize that it is in essence an awful, colossal, gargoyle-like caricature of *his* face—the face of him from whose uneasy grave it has issued. Now I know that my doom is indeed sealed; that the wild threats of the madman were in truth the demon maledictions of a potent fiend, and that my innocence will prove no protection against the malign volition which craves a causeless vengeance. He is determined to pay me with interest for what he suffered at that spectral hour; determined to drag me out of the world into realms which only the mad and the devil-ridden know.

And as amidst the seething of hell's flames and the tumult of the damned those fiery claws point murderously at my throat, I hear upon the mantel the faint whirring sound of a timepiece; the whirring which tells me that it is about to strike the hour whose name now flows incessantly from the death-like and cavernous throat of the rattling, jeering, croaking grave-monster before me—the accursed, the infernal hour of *four o'clock*.