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DEATH ASKS THE QUESTION

A Novelette of

Ticking Doom

By **JOHN**

RUSSELL

FARN

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A Novelette of
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Title: Death Asks the Question

Date of first publication: 1937

Author: John Russell Fearn (1908-1960)

Date first posted: Mar. 1, 2021

Date last updated: Mar. 1, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210301

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

DEATH ASKS the QUESTION

By
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

Illustrated By Wynne W. Davies

*Author of "The Stain That Grew," "Brain of
Venus," etc.*

A Complete Novelette of Ticking Doom
The Tortured Beat of a Palpitating Heart Tolls the Tocsin of Disaster!

First published in *Thrilling Mystery Stories*,
July 1937.



“You filthy, murdering fiend!”



The knife carved into flesh.

CHAPTER I

Fiend Incarnate

The home of Abner Hilton was situated in a none too populous region several miles from Philadelphia. It stood in solitary magnificence in its own grounds—a passably prosperous looking place, its nearest neighbors being a dozen similar homes at regular distances. To back and front there was nothing but wild, open country—the former looking over rugged moorland to a distant hill; the latter towards the smoky line on the horizon that denoted Philadelphia itself.

Within the dilapidated, depressing interior of the Hilton home, Abner Hilton sat scowling at his broken, dirty nails. The internal surroundings were as filthy as he was. Weak daylight filtering through the half drawn Venetian blind glanced on faded, rotting wallpaper. It touched the spare furniture of the place, the most substantial article being an unusually long deal table provided with sloping wooden runnels on either side.

In the room beyond, turned by the poor, half insane Hilton into a bedroom, the same drab daylight fell on muddy grey tangled sheets and dust caked floorboards.

Gloom, depression—subhuman morbidity. All these things stalked the jetty shadows of the horrible place and filled both the rooms and Abner with a certain hellish meaning.

He was waiting—waiting for his young niece to visit him. He had not seen her since her childhood. She was worth a fortune in money and he wasn't worth a dime.

The thing to do then was to kill her, very skilfully, and throw the blame onto her fiance Courtney Wayne, a young Philadelphian engineer. Once it was done he could have the money for himself under the will of his dead brother, the girl's father.

For months he had brooded over the idea in his rotting little retreat. She would come, surely. The outside of the house looked quite prepossessing. The neighborhood was fairly select and quiet. Finally he had written a letter. His one time culture had enabled him to write it very convincingly, expressing the urgent wish to see her and convey a confidential message which had been left in his keeping by her dead father.

Yes, it had been a very clever letter. . . . And now he sat, a tattered, unshaven figure, eyes glowing with the unholy light of murder-lust—waiting, waiting. She would be here any time, now. For an instant his gaze shuttled to the battered alarm clock on the mantel; it was just three o'clock, the time appointed. That meant . . .

He jumped to his feet abruptly with a sharp and triumphant intake of breath. There was a knock on the front door. The tap of a woman's hand, beyond doubt. Just the sort of tap Mary would give, he reflected. Dear, sweet child. . . . He chuckled viciously to himself as he moved along the dusty hall, then flinging back the massive bolts he wrenched the door open.

His hungry little eyes flashed over a young woman modestly attired in a warm winter overcoat, golden hair peeping from beneath her hat. She was just as pretty as she'd been as a child, he decided. Not quite so luxurious in clothes as he had expected; there wasn't even a car visible in the drive. Evidently she had come by train to the local station. . . . All these thoughts took perhaps two seconds as he surveyed her, then she started to speak—but he interrupted her with a raised, skinny hand, motioned inside the drab hall.

“Come in, my dear,” he invited gently, but to his irritation she drew away nervously.

“No—no, thank you. I only just wanted to know if—”

“Yes, yes, of course—I’m your Uncle Abner. Come along in.”

“But I—”

Hilton’s lean jaws snapped together. There was no time for argument. Reaching forward suddenly he clutched the girl round the waist and flung his free hand over her mouth to stifle her cries of fright.

“You darned little fool!” he panted, dragging her within and slamming the door. “Do you want the whole damned place to hear you? Why can’t you do as your Uncle asks and—?”

He stopped, momentarily surprised. The girl had fainted in his arms. For a moment he stood glaring down into her ashen face, then staggering beneath her weight he carried her into the living room and laid her on the long deal table.

Rubbing his skinny hands together he looked at her closely, puzzled for a while over the apparent cheapness of her clothing as he wrenched the overcoat from her unconscious form. For a girl worth a fortune she wasn’t dressing half as well as he would have expected.

Still, that didn’t matter—evidently the countryside was no place for finery. Besides, what did clothes matter anyhow? His main object was to be rid of her and put his predetermined plan into action.

Working with the swiftness of movements long rehearsed he tightly bound her wrists and ankles to the underside of the table legs. A piece of filthy rag thrust between her teeth and tied securely into position effectually gagged her. Another length of rope secured across her neck held her head tightly.

“A fortune, eh?” Hilton muttered, surveying her helplessly trussed form. “We shall see, Mary, my dear . . . We shall see!”

Turning, he strode through the dimming daylight to the rickety sideboard and pulled a long carving knife and a saw from the left drawer. Gently he laid them down beside the girl, rubbed his palms softly together in ghoulish anticipation. Grunting impatiently he lighted an oil lamp and placed it on the hook over the table.

His actions were deliberate—the brutal, inhuman actions of a fiend.

First he sliced the knife down the girl’s clothes, tore them away from her body then bedded them down in the empty fire gate. His cruel eyes rested for a while on her lissom nakedness under the dull lamp glow. Broken teeth glinted in a ghoulish smile as he found she had recovered consciousness and was trying desperately to raise her pinioned head.

“Oh, no, my dear,” he said gently, glaring into her terror stricken face. “It is of little use trying to scream now—the gag will take care of that. It’s my turn! Not a trace will remain by the time I’m finished with you. Mary Lillian Digby will vanish off the face of the earth!”

The girl struggled again, threshed and twisted as far as the ropes would permit, pulled her head upwards until the constriction of the cord set the veins bulging in her forehead. Then again she relaxed, dumb, staring blue eyes fixed on Hilton’s grinning face. Suddenly he turned away and went into the adjoining kitchen, brought forth two large buckets and placed them at the ends of the table runnels.

Complacently he nodded, picked up the wickedly painted knife—then drove it with all his strength between the girl’s heaving breasts, gave it a left hand twist that struck clean through her heart.

There was a faint moan from behind the gag, then her struggles ceased. Blood began to well from the knife wound in her breast. Unmoved, Hilton smiled. With a steady hand he

withdrew the blade and began to cut swiftly, hacked and carved until at last he had removed the heart itself. Eyes bright with madness he laid the bluish organ gently to one side, sucked breath over his broken teeth in sadistic glee.

Again he returned to the mangled thing that had been a young woman. He worked ceaselessly until perspiration drenched him from head to foot, worked to the sound of blood dripping from the runnels into the buckets. Time and time again he traveled with them into the filthy kitchen and emptied them into a tub.

So, little by little, he dismembered the body, cut away the legs, arms and head, left only a bleeding torso with a gaping ragged hole where the heart had been torn out. Panting hard from his exertions he stared at the dismembered organ.

“At least you can never beat again!” he muttered. “Not even in a dead body! It is safer with the heart removed—detached. . . .”

He brooded over that, then suddenly looked up with a start as there came a heavy pounding on the front door. For an instant he hesitated, staring at the pulped mess on the table. Then quickly wiping his hands on a filthy rag he sped through the crawling shadows of the hall and opened the door gently. The dying light fell on a young, well-dressed man with a clean shaven face and determined blue eyes.

“Well, what do you want?” Hilton demanded irritably.

“You Abner Hilton, sir?”

“Certainly I am. What of it?”

“I believe Mary came along to see you this afternoon? I saw her come in as a matter of fact, a little while ago. I thought I might as well join her. I’m Courtney Wayne, her fiancee.”

“Oh, I see!” Hilton’s face lighted with sudden understanding. In the gloom the young man failed to notice the subtle craftiness that crept into it. “Pray come in, young man—I’ve rather been expecting you. You must excuse the dim light but unhappily the current is off—a fuse, you know. I’m an old man and don’t know much about these things.”

“Maybe I can fix it for you, sir,” Wayne remarked, and stepped into the shadows.

The instant he did so fear crawled through him. The damp, odorous air was heavy with the reek of human blood; the whole place stank like an offal dump. Abner Hilton felt his powerful young hand close on his arm.

“Where is Mary, sir?” his voice demanded from the dark.

“Right ahead,” the old man chuckled. “We were talking in the lamplight, owing to the fuse. Go on—right ahead down the passage to that door there. You can see the light.”

Wayne hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. In a few moments he gained the open doorway and started into the dreary surroundings. Instantly his eyes alighted on that ghastly horror on the table. The room was like a charnel house; the glow of the softly swinging oil lamp in the hall draft cast its dimness on things that sent his appalled mind tumbling madly in the depths of hell.

“Mary!” he screamed insanely. “Oh, God! I’m mad! That can’t be Mary there—”

“That *is* Mary,” Hilton reassured him, closing the door softly and moving towards the fireplace. “Mary—or what remains of her! You didn’t expect it, did you? Thanks for coming like this—it’s saved me the trouble of sending for you.”

Wayne’s voice cracked in hysterical horror and fury over the words ripped from his lips.

“You fiend! You filthy, murdering devil! You’ve killed her—even dismembered her body—mutilated her face! Oh, God, why didn’t I get here sooner—”

“That is Mary, but *you* killed her!” Hilton said tonelessly. “I will arrange that later—”

He broke off as Wayne made a sudden violent leap towards him. It was the very action he had been expecting. Instantly his hand came up from behind his back and was revealed as clutching the heavy iron poker from the grate.

Wayne never realized clearly what happened, as he pitched senseless to the filthy, blood spattered floorboards. . . .

CHAPTER II

Heartbeats of the Slain

Wayne returned to his senses with the realization that he was firmly bound to the heavy old-fashioned fire grate. His eyes, blurred with the pain from his damaged head, stared drunkenly at the dancing, leering face of Abner Hilton in the lamp glow.

With a low snarling laugh the old man came forward, shook his skinny fist malevolently.

“I waited until you recovered, young man,” he said throatily. “I wanted you to see everything right through to the end! You might as well—the police will want to accuse you.” He went closer, hot fetid breath blowing in Wayne’s face.

“Do you realize what I’m going to do to you, Courtney? I intend to break your will—turn you by slow degrees into an imbecile! By torture—by mental anguish, by whatever means I can and as soon as I can! Clever, isn’t it? And well worth it!

“You see, with you and Mary both out of the way—you as her murderer, in a fit of insanity, it leaves only me to collect. So good of you to follow Mary here. Now watch!”

Wayne didn’t answer. He felt already that his mind was on the verge of cracking under physical pain and the added horror of gazing. Yet gaze he did, with fascinated nausea, as the inhuman Hilton continued his work.

The knife carved flabbily into the resistless flesh of the thing that had been a woman; the saw grated viciously over bone. Every sound of it went through Wayne’s body and brain as though he were the victim.

By slow degrees through what seemed endless hours he saw the corpse carefully cut into pieces and thrust into a heavy sack. Then Hilton became fiercely active. Lifting the buckets of blood he vanished into the kitchen and there came the sound of running tap water. When he returned he was rubbing his hands complacently.

“So easy to dilute the blood to the consistency of weak dye and pour it down the sink,” he breathed venomously. “That is what the police will find you did! I will tell them that. You cut the body into sections and made it unrecognizable, hoping for the perfect crime. The remains will be buried in the garden. Remember that!”

So saying he seized the sack and pulled it along the floorboards to the back door, leaving behind him a smear of blood that deeply stained the boards. Wayne watched glassily, stunned with horror. He would not, could not believe that he was seeing all that remained of Mary being carried away in that sack.

He screamed at the thought—raved and cursed with impotent, helpless fury, wrenched and tore at his ropes with the ferocity of a madman but all to no purpose.

Thirty minutes later Hilton returned, the sweat of exertion dewing his lean, brutal face.

“Hard work, digging,” he said ominously. “She’s well bedded down—a good four feet. And when she went down my chances of inheritance went up. Understand? Say something, you idiot—say something!” He struck him savagely in the face with the flat of his hand, but Wayne remained silent. His mind was utterly numbed.

In a daze he watched the old man complete the details—watched him clean the table and floorboards with caustic, swab out the pails, and then set fire to the clothes in the grate. Turning at last from the glowing ashes he indicated the bloodstained knife and saw laid carefully on one side.

“Evidence!” he breathed maliciously. “Evidence when the police come—evidence that you did it! You killed Mary Lillian Digby!”

Wayne remained mute; his head drooped between his shoulders with the heaviness of unconsciousness. Hilton went forward and examined him closely, convinced himself it was not a trick. Only then did he loosen the ropes, seize the young man by the shoulders and drag him into the filthy, dark apartment that had once been a second drawing room.

Working swiftly he rebound his ankles and wrists—spread-eagled him on the barren floor. Skipping back into the kitchen he brought hammer and massive curved staples, fastened the ropes around them then drove them deep into the boards.

“Guess that’ll hold you,” he muttered, reflecting—then again he went to the kitchen and presently returned with a large can of water, slightly punctured in the base to permit of the water dripping through drop by drop.

With fiendish ingenuity he fastened it to the old electric light fixture above, carefully arranged it so that the drops fell steadily on the forehead of the pinioned, unconscious man.

Torture—absolute and vicious—torture calculated to break a man’s mind, not from pain but from the agonizing anticipation of each icy drop through endless hours.

The intense gratification at the thing he had done did not abate in Abner Hilton the next day. After a few hours of sleep—remarkably peaceful considering the inhuman brutality of his crime—he entered the second drawing room to survey his prisoner, dimly visible in the light drifting through the chinks in the drawn Venetian blind.

He found Wayne conscious again, still tightly bound on the floor, face drawn into tight, weary lines of suffering, water dripping down it from the almost empty can over his head.

“You—you inhuman fiend!” He muttered the words thickly. “You devil! Do you think you can get away with this?”

“I know I can,” Hilton replied affably, rubbing his hands. “I’m sorry I can’t make the room warmer—unfortunately there is no fireplace in here. Nor can I offer to release you.”

Wayne glared at him dully. His body was already numbed and stiff from his immovable position and the icy draft blowing under the door. Only his head seemed to have feeling, felt near the bursting point with the leaden dropping of the icy cold water, more searing than molten metal. His jagged nerves were keyed into intense agony of expectancy for every drop.

“Sorry, too, that I can’t offer you anything to eat just yet,” Hilton went on sardonically. “I have little to spare, but I’ll see you get enough to keep you alive until the police come. Water, though, you can have in plenty,” he added grimly. With that he went out and refilled the can, put it back in place, and left the tortured man to himself again.

So, throughout the day, Wayne suffered exquisite tortures, he felt his mind slipping little by little under the terrible strain. Abner Hilton waited in fiendish expectancy for something to happen—but nothing did.

He had expected inquiries for both Wayne and Mary, but neither came. Instead a host of invisible presences seemed to watch him silently in dire and horrible reproach for the sin on his soul. Most of the fears he dismissed with a sneering grin on his feral lips.

Once he glanced through the rear kitchen window towards the spot where he had buried Mary’s remains, and beheld it untouched. Then he returned to commune with himself in the shadows.

Late in the afternoon he moved into the second drawing room, cut Wayne's limbs free from the staples but none the less kept him securely bound.

"I'm going to be merciful to you," he said thickly, delivering a kick in his aching ribs. "I'm giving you a respite; tomorrow I'll resume the treatment. In the end I'll break you!

"When the police come I'll say it was you who attacked both Mary and me. Understand!" His bitter little eyes glared in the flickering light of the lamp in his gnarled hand, hurled mental suggestions into the torture-weary mind of the man sprawling on the floor. . . . All ideas of escape were still-born in Wayne's brain. He could hardly even think, so overcome was he by exhaustion.

Hilton left him at last and so, for two more days, the ghastly business went on. Wayne was alternately tortured and released, given only enough meager food and water to keep him alive in order that he would be able to speak when the law finally caught up.

And, just as Hilton had hoped, he was hardly master of his own will any longer—almost did believe by the endless hours of implacable hypnotism the old man indulged in that he *had* killed Mary. The horror of her death and the continued torture had become a crushing obsession slowly warping his mind.

Only at times was he aware of himself, realizing with leaden helplessness that nobody would be concerned about his disappearance. He had been on a vacation from his normal work in any case and only Mary knew. Mary! Merciful God!

It was on these occasions of self-assertion however that he tried with pained weariness to work free of the ropes holding his wrists. The staples holding them were fairly rough; in time he might break through his bonds. But it would take days.

On the third night, puzzled by the continued absence of action, Hilton went to bed early, lay awake gazing at the darkened, chilly room. Then at last he turned on his side amidst the dirty sheets and closed his eyes.

The silence was still disturbing him—even Wayne in the adjoining room was curiously quiet, working silently and laboriously in the dark on the ropes that held him, fraying away the tough thickness little by little with muscles that were cracked and aching.

Then, as he lay silent, Hilton heard something. There crept into his senses a dull, ticking sound, heavy with apparent distance.

Tick—tick—tick. With the measured beat of a metronome, gradually becoming louder. Very slowly creeping up by imperceptible degrees, until at last the faded walls of the entire room groaned with the pulsating mystery.

Thud—thud. Thud—thud. Rhythmic, insistent, inhuman.

At last Hilton sat bolt upright in the bed. One skinny hand clutched the dirty tattered shirt that served as night attire. Staring wildly into the gloom he listened with twitching face muscles to the still resolute beating, for all the world like a gigantic human heart.

Heart? That thought knifed into his rotten brain. Instantly his memory was transferred to the heart he had cut out of the girl. He had cut it out to be sure life could never return, and now—

Clammy sweat drenched him as he listened. His breath rasped over his stumpy teeth. There was no way of telling exactly where that awful sound was coming from. It might be to one side, above or below—he could not determine. It seemed to fill all space.

Throb, throb, throb. . . .

"No!" he shouted hoarsely, leaping out of the bed. "No! *Stop!*"

And instantly the sound ceased!

The whole house seemed to become mute, horribly silent after the torturing rhythm of the beating.

With dragging footsteps and sweat-drenched face Hilton moved to the adjoining room and twisted the door key with trembling fingers. All was quiet within. Wayne lay like a log in the dim gloom, stirred only slightly as a match flared in Hilton's quaking hand. The old man's hoarse voice came to him.

"Courtney, you heard it?" he demanded thickly. "You heard that beating?"

"I heard nothing," Wayne muttered dully, and relaxed again.

For a moment the old man stood gazing at him, then he went out. Wayne lay silent for a while after he had gone, wondering what he had been talking about. He certainly had heard nothing. Then once more he set to work on the laborious task of fraying through his ropes.

In the meantime Hilton returned to his room and waited a long time in the shadowed gloom, but the mysterious sound was not repeated. At last recovering some of his courage he climbed into bed, nerves tensed for a recurrence of the sound.

Presently he heard it, very soft and low, that measured beat sweeping up from nowhere.

Louder and louder became the ticking, mad, nerve cracking tempo. Hilton shot out of bed once more, again screamed for it to stop—and as before it obeyed. Weakly he staggered to the front hall door and opened it, stared out toward the dimness of the drive.

Slowly he crept outside and looked about him, down past the many rear out-houses with their sloping roofs. There was nothing unusual visible—only a quiet, dark immensity.

He knew not how long he stood shivering in the night breeze. His next clear remembrance was of being back in his bedroom. He crawled back onto the bed at last and lay in frigid horror for the return of the beating—but the night passed quietly and he awoke again to the grey glimmerings of an ashy dawn.

CHAPTER III

“Why Did You Kill Me?”

Shaken by the experience of the night Abner Hilton felt like a trapped animal. Though he did not believe in the supernatural, though he inwardly boasted that he had no conscience, he could not altogether rid himself of the remembrance of his crime. Time and time again the vision of the slain girl rose up before him.

In his mind he could again hear the sloughing of the knife as it carved her flesh, the grate of the saw against her bones.

He scraped together a scanty meal and then went in to his prisoner with a few crusts and some water. Wayne looked at him dully, but behind his back his hands were slowly pulling away the remainders of his frayed rope. A night of rubbing on the floor staple nearest to him had cut them through. They gave way just as Hilton was bending towards him.

Instantly his fingers closed round the old man’s skinny throat, sent the meager meal hurtling through the air. Hilton was pulled down to the floor with Wayne’s fingers crushing hard into his leathery neck.

Wayne wished desperately he could get to his feet, but his bound ankles prevented it. His only hope lay in strangling the old man where he was—but in that he was doomed to failure. With a sudden vicious twist Hilton wriggled sideways, brought round his foot with all his strength and kicked Wayne violently in the ribs.

He gasped with the sudden pain, desisted in his effort to get to his feet—and in that moment Hilton acted. He had the advantage in every way. Wayne was bound and weak from his ordeal; Hilton was free and furiously energetic.

“So you thought you’d escape, eh?” he breathed venomously. “You thought you’d fool me, huh? Well you won’t!”

With that he dived away and snatched up the heavy, dirty plate on which he had brought the food. Even as Wayne tried to get up the plate came down on his head with stunning force, edgewise. He sank down mutely, blood streaming from a scalp cut.

“It was you who plotted that heart beating stunt!” Hilton screamed. “You! I don’t know how, but you did it! You’ll not do it again, Courtney. Damn you, no! I’ll kill you first!”

Savagely he rebound his victim’s ropes, spread-eagled him back in his old position. Then he refilled the can and stood looking at the unconscious figure in vicious glee.

“You can stay that way until I want you! Without food and without water—at least to drink! No more leniency—no more leniency!”

And with that he stamped fiercely from the room, slammed and locked the door.



Only once did he return, and that was towards evening. Wayne was half conscious, muttering supplications for release. The old man's feral lips twisted in an unholy smile; his only response was to make sure the water can was refilled then he went into his bedroom to pass the night.

But the instant he entered the gloomy shoddiness—for the oil in his lamp was exhausted—he felt a strange fear clawing at his heart. The memory of the night before returned to him. He sat on the bed edge, listening with one ear half cocked for some sound of the heart, but instead there came something else, something that sent the blood crawling in streams of ice through his withered body.

“Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?”

The merest whisper, an ice cold question that seemed to creep from the Unknown. It started Hilton's heart racing madly, set crawling fingers of ghastly fear clutching at his vitals.

“Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?”

It was stronger this time—a woman's voice calling softly, mournfully, from an incredible distance. As in the beating of that enigmatic heart it was impossible to guess the exact source of the sound.

“Why did you kill me?” Words dreary with anguished reproach.

He leaped savagely to his feet and stared madly round him in the dimness. Viciously he struck a match, but the flickering light revealed no change. It went out and scorched his fingers.

“Imagination!” he panted hoarsely. “Imagination—or nerves!”

“No, Abner Hilton—neither imagination or nerves, but the voice of the woman you killed,” the voice answered somberly.

“You slew me, carved my body into pieces and buried the remains! You tore out the heart—but in the heart there is not life—only in the mind. The mind lives on. In the end I will destroy you, as you destroyed me!”

With a pallid face he listened to the words, heart racing agonizedly against his skinny ribs. *Her* voice—the voice of Mary Lillian Digby—speaking from hell knew where!

Suddenly he found relief in action. As before he made straight for the second drawing room and stared in palsied fear at the bound figure of Wayne. He certainly was not responsible.

Mad with fright he left him and blundered outside into the half clouded moonlight, glared about the sodden grounds of his home with the eyes of a maniac. Just as on the previous night there was nothing to disturb the aching quiet.

Breathless, shaking with fear, he returned inside at last, bolted the heavy front door with fingers that were oddly brittle. Cold creeping waves of superstitious fear were clawing at his evil heart.

As he tottered uncertainly down the hall, striking match after match to allay the crushing dark, he tried to convince himself that it was all imagination. That he hadn't heard anything. It was some trick of Courtney Wayne's; it *had* to be!

He twisted round and fumbled along to the second drawing room again, passed inside and examined the spread-eagled man closely, was forced to admit as before that he was *not* responsible. He was a silent, stupefied man, water trickling down his ashen face from the slowly dripping can.

Very quietly Hilton withdrew again into the abysmal dark of the hall, nearly wept with rage and fear as he found his matches were exhausted. Weakly, knees like jelly, he clawed his way back into the main living room and stood for a while in the jetty gloom, eyes staring at the hazy grey oblong where the window lay.

Turning he searched for the rickety chair and dropped his leaden limbs into it. Spittle was drooling unheeded from his quivering lips; sweat drenched his skinny body. The complete ghastly fear of a supernatural unknown had him in its grip.

For nearly an hour he sat there and heard nothing. A blank nothing that hemmed him in like a living, avenging presence. The only sound he once detected was a long drawn out groan which he knew came from Courtney Wayne as he returned to consciousness.

A third look at the bound man convinced him; he was still there in the very dim moonlight filtering through the blind. In some odd way he was glad of the man's presence; it did something to alleviate the terrible fear numbing his being.

An hour later quivering, brain numbing reaction set in. With heavy feet he scraped along to his bed and lay face down upon it, trying to muffle his ears to the dreaded sound he was afraid to hear. Softly, gently, came the resumed beating of that heart—and above it the awful, sepulchral voice.

“Abner Hilton, it is dark and cold in the grave you dug for me! I cannot rest. I am returning to life, to the land of mortals, to ask you face to face why you killed me! I am not dead, Abner Hilton. *I am alive!* Listen to the beat of the heart you cut away! Listen to it, gathering power!”

Shaking like an aspen Hilton listened—could not help himself. The voice ceased and the subdued rhythm of the heart became swifter, louder.

Pat, pat, pat, pat. . . .

“You hear, Abner Hilton?” the voice breathed. “I live! I have come back from the grave to ask why you killed me! Look in my grave! Dig down deep and you will find I have gone! Dig! *Dig!*”

CHAPTER IV

The Remains Walk!

Hilton could stand it no longer. With a desperate scream he leaped out of the bed, blundered through the dark to the kitchen, felt round frantically until he encountered the handle of his shovel. Panting hard he wrenched back the outer door and charged madly into the garden outside, plowing heavily through rank soaking weeds and grass to the clear soil space where he had put Mary's butchered remains.

With savage desperate movements born of ghastly fear he drove the blade into the earth, shoveled the soil to one side. He worked with mechanical frenzy until the blood pounded insanely through his veins and drove his heart to erratic spurts of beating.

On and on he shoveled, flinging the loose earth away with the ease of a maniac, until at last his spade plowed through the sack in which he had placed the remains. Shaking with fright and exertion he pulled it free, gazed with stupid eyes as it moved drearily in the night breeze.

It was indeed empty! The remains had gone!

"No!" he muttered desperately. "No—no, it can't be! I'm going mad! I know I'm going mad! You couldn't rise from the grave! You were utterly destroyed—dismembered! You—"

He stopped, the sack falling from his nerveless fingers. The moon, which had been shining diffusedly through ragged clouds suddenly emerged from their midst with a pale and leprous glow, cast its pale silver over the unkempt grounds and the hole of the grave.

But it was to none of these things that Hilton's mind was directed—his fixed, incredulous eyes were chained to a figure walking slowly towards him along the uneven ground.

It appeared to be the naked figure of a woman, arms extended towards him! And as she came nearer he could behold quite clearly against the whiteness of her skin the black marks at the joints of her legs and arms where he had cut them from the body! One other, round the base of the neck, held him mute.

Making hardly any sound she quietly advanced, coming nearer and nearer, and still he stood paralyzed with numbing shock.

"Abner Hilton, you killed me!" she said at last, in the same dreary grave-ridden voice he had heard in the house. "I have come back—to ask you why you did it!"

Within six feet of him she stopped, a lovely but forlorn figure, hair moving slightly in the mild wet wind. Clearly he could distinguish the graceful curves of her body, the rounded formations of her breasts—but upon one of them was a dark patch—a hole where he had torn out the heart to make sure she would never come back.

Never come back! That realization burst in his diseased mind like a bolt of living fire. He found action at last in a desperate, piercing scream, turned swiftly and went blundering and gasping over the uneven ground—anything to escape the woman who had risen to question her fate.

Even as he flew over the ground, driven by insane terror, he could hear feet racing after him—not the sound of woman's feet but the heavy clomping of a nightmare creature.

Thud, thud, thud, like the beating heart he had heard.

He threw himself screaming through the front doorway, into the hall. His fingers twisted the key of the second drawing room door and he went flying inwards to hurl himself beside

the silent figure of Wayne.

“Courtney, in God’s name save me!” he screamed frantically. “Save me! She’s come back! Mary’s come back from the grave!” His trembling fingers wrenched a penknife from his pocket, slashed through the ropes holding the tortured man. “Save me, Courtney! Say you will! It’s *Mary!*!”

That jerked something of consciousness into Wayne’s leaden brain. He stared into the dark, down, at the dim, pawing, gulping figure on the floor beside him. Stiffly he tried to move to his feet—then his eyes jerked round at the sound of feet in the hall. A light was bobbing along it.

Cold terror surged through him too as in the doorway he beheld the same naked woman’s figure that Hilton had seen—a woman who stared tensely, wounds on her rejoined limbs clearly visible. Almost at the same moment the owner of the storm lantern became visible, pushed the woman to one side and charged forward, clutched the screaming Hilton round the neck.

In the light of the storm lantern on the floor Wayne dazedly watched what took place, saw a powerful shouldered man with a face of frozen hate clutch Hilton’s skinny throat in sinewy fingers, crush into it with all the strength at his command.

“Kill my daughter, eh?” His bitter voice knifed in the quiet. “Cut her up, would you? My Annie! By God, you filthy butcher, this is where you go to the hell you deserve!”

Hilton tried to speak but the compressing fingers would not let him. His miserable body threshed madly on the floor. Slowly but surely his struggles became weaker and at last ceased altogether.

Only then did the man rise up and kick the corpse violently with his heavy shod foot, turned, then stared at Wayne amazedly.

“You’re alive!” he shouted hoarsely—and with his words the girl in the doorway seemed to arise from her horrific trance and advanced at a run.

Wayne felt convinced in that moment that he was going insane at last—for the girl was Mary! There could be no mistaking her face. Mary, yes—naked, with scars of her hideous death still upon her. Mary!

His lips moved to utter her name then even as her white arms reached towards him he relapsed into darkness and brief rest.

Wayne realized as he came back to consciousness that he could only have been senseless a few minutes. He was lying on his back, all his ropes removed, the face of Mary and her rugged visaged companion bending over him. The only change was that she was now wrapped in an overcoat.

“Courtney, dear—Courtney!” she breathed, gathering him into her arms. “Thank God you’re alive! I thought you were dead—that was why I helped Mr. Craven here.”

Dazedly, weakly, Wayne raised himself on one elbow and stared toward the light of the lantern.

“What—what’s it all about?” he asked helplessly. “I saw you cut in pieces by that fiend, Mary—I saw it! A moment ago you were naked; I saw the marks.”

The girl smiled faintly. “Only tights, Courtney, marked on the joints with black paint. Cold, yes—but the only way to drag this fiendish uncle of mine into the open.”

“Come to think of it, I didn’t see your face when—when Hilton butchered you,” Wayne shuddered. “It was utterly unrecognizable, and—”

“It isn’t really so complicated as it seems, sir,” Craven muttered. “This filthy devil intended to kill Miss Digby here, but instead he killed my girl Annie. She was canvassing this district for radio set orders. We had got a little business together and were doing quite well.”

“Actually, Courtney,” Mary intervened; “although I said in my letter to you that I was coming to see Uncle, I changed my mind at the last moment. It seems that Mr. Craven’s daughter arrived at almost the time for my appointment. Evidently Uncle didn’t give her the chance to speak, and not having seen me for years he mistook poor Annie for me, both of us being fair and young.”

“That must have been it,” Wayne nodded drearily. “As for myself I was afraid for you and came to see if I could help you when you visited your uncle. There wasn’t time to come to your home first, so I came straight here. I saw somebody like you enter the house whilst I was still a distance away; after that I came in and saw.” He stopped, brokenly.

Mary slowly nodded.

“I got worried when I couldn’t get any news of you. All I could find out was that you’d started on a holiday. Closer inquiry, though, revealed that you’d followed me here.

“I decided to come here after all and it was evening when I arrived; that was the evening after I should have come, of course. The first person I ran into was Mr. Craven in the grounds. He had just dug up some remains out of a sack—”

“I’d found that Annie had last been seen at this place,” Craven muttered bitterly. “I found bloodstains on the grass and traced them to that newly dug hole. I identified the remains as those of Annie—there were certain birthmarks on her body which only I knew about. It was her all right.

“Well, I couldn’t see any real motive for the brutality until Miss Digby happened upon me; then I began to see what had happened—how my poor girl had got what was intended for somebody else. It seemed pretty evident that you had probably gone the same way since you had disappeared.

“Both of us wanted vengeance on the old fiend and were prepared to go to any lengths to exact it.”

“And yet you didn’t go to the police?” Wayne asked wonderingly.

“Police!” derided Craven contemptuously. “What could they do? Just give this devil here the hot seat for murder. That wasn’t enough for me—I wanted to torture him as he had tortured my poor girl—I wanted to drive him mad with my own efforts.

“Miss Digby felt pretty much the same way about your disappearance. Of course, we had no guarantee that you really were dead, but we suspected it as the only explanation. The best way to find out was to get Hilton out of the house and look for ourselves—and that demanded something pretty ingenious. We managed it, between us.”

He paused and smiled reminiscently. “Being a radio engineer came in handy,” he went on grimly. “I got a microphone and small loudspeaker and lowered them by wire half way down the main chimney breast.

“I knew that in common with all houses of this type the main fireplace flues would end in one chimney, so the sound would travel to all rooms possessing a fireplace. It was fairly certain Hilton would occupy such a room. It was easy to get to the roof by the out-houses, without much noise either.



“Once that was done Miss Digby and I went to our apparatus, just beyond the range of the back grounds. The microphone in the chimney picked up every sound that Hilton made; with headphones we could visualize his movements. Every time he went to bed the mattress springs squeaked. As to the voice of the woman it was Miss Digby herself speaking into our own microphone, which of course emanated from the loudspeaker in the chimney. The heart effect was simply a ticking alarm clock, made louder or quieter by a volume control on the microphone.”

Wayne nodded slowly. “I begin to see now why Hilton was so frantic. For myself I heard nothing; this room has no fireplace. Besides, I was unconscious most of the time.”

“When he shouted for the beats to stop we naturally obeyed the order, hearing him distinctly,” Craven breathed. “That got him! He really thought the devil was after him. Just the same we didn’t tempt him out the first night; he needed time to think and work himself up into a real frenzy of fright.

“We did that tonight, of course. Miss Digby joined me again after sundown, complete with an outfit that looked like my girl risen from the grave. The rest you know. Of course it was I who took away my poor Annie’s remains.”

“And you?” Wayne asked slowly. “You’ve murdered Hilton. That is against the law, fiend or not.”

Craven shrugged his heavy shoulders and looked down at the corpse.

“I’m going to give myself up and trust to the mercy of the law. With your evidence too and my dead girl’s remains where is the jury which would convict?”

“We’ll back you to the end,” Wayne said quietly, getting to his feet with difficulty.

The girl’s arm went round him supportingly as she helped him from the drab house. As they passed into the cool night air they looked away to the east.

Ragged dawn was already creeping over the misty, saturated countryside. Somewhere amidst it, perhaps, abandoned and alone, was the fiendish soul of Abner Hilton. . . .

[The end of *Death Asks the Question* by John Russell Fearn]