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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The House on Fifth Avenue

By DURBIN LEE HORNER

*Who were these grisly guests, who sat around the table in that  
strange house like ghastly specters?*

HEAVEN knows it was a simple enough beginning. Helen and I were strolling up Fifth Avenue. It was terribly hot, and now that I recall, I was puzzled as to why we were remaining in town. It occurred to me that we had accepted an invitation to spend the week-end on Commodore Fowler's yacht, and here we were foolishly spending the hot evening in town. I wondered who had sent our regrets to the Commodore, and what our excuse was for not going. As a matter of fact, the more I thought about it the more confused I became. I could have sworn that we had actually started out for the Fowlers' Long Island estate; but here we were, suddenly, in the center of a sweltering city. I couldn't make it out.

As I say, we were making our way up Fifth Avenue. We had just crossed Forty-Second street, and were traveling uptown, on the west side of the street. Here, of course, the tall office buildings stand wall to wall without a break, and there is no private residence for blocks.

I was therefore completely thunder-struck when Helen stopped and informed me that we had reached our destination. In the first place, I had no idea that we had a destination; and in the second place, my senses were paralyzed at the realization that we had stopped before an old-fashioned Avenue residence of red brick

and brown stone with high front steps and large lace-curtained windows.

I brushed my forehead. Perhaps the heat had played a trick on me. If so, I must have been walking by Helen's side in a state of trance for some time, for a quick glance around me showed that I was in a neighborhood totally strange to me.

Helen had suddenly acquired an uneasy restlessness. She impatiently tugged at my arm, and pointed upward to the heavy double doors which gave entrance to the unfamiliar house. I obeyed her gesture and followed her up the steps. Climbing, I received still another shock of surprize when I noticed that two panes of a front window were broken, and that others were covered with thick accumulations of dust.

Arriving at the top of the steps, I received another jolt of surprize. Helen did not ring, but walked right in. The doors had noiselessly opened as we approached them, and together Helen and I entered. I looked in vain for a servant who should receive us.

Then it was made plain to me that Helen had conducted me to some home where she was accepted as a member of the family; for she walked on without hesitation, straight ahead through a wide hall, and this despite the fact that the windowless hall, unlit, was so dark that

I must have stumbled over chairs and tables if I had not followed closely in Helen's steps. My passing glances to right and left showed me only indistinctly the faces that looked down out of the frames of old portraits on the walls.

At this point in the proceedings, however, I began to get a glimmer of light, and my feelings of oppression and anxiety began to give way to a sense of fun and adventure.

I HAD met and loved Helen during a hectic summer in Newport, which I was spending in the company of a group of wealthy idlers. I was an outsider in this company myself, being a laboring writer with questionable success, submitting to the patronage I cynically guessed gave my friends diversion, if not outright amusement. So it had been with real fear that I yielded to the fascination I had felt from the moment I first met Helen. I supposed that she was one of the sort in whose company I had found her. To my delight, she showed herself to be as much an alien in this social sphere as I myself, though not, like me, a penniless intruder. She was, in short, a child of that little tradition-bound circle of well-bred New Yorkers, fussy in their exclusiveness, which counts breeding a greater asset than wealth.

Helen was as powerfully drawn to me as I was to her. And her first avowal of love was followed by fears that her marriage to a penniless writer, with no family background, would be opposed by her people.

"But let me manage it, dear," she had told me. "I'll bring them around, somehow, even though it takes a little handling. Only I won't present you to them until the stage is all set."

So, entering the musty old mansion, I now came to the conclusion that Helen planned to present me to some of the

most hide-bound and cloistered of the relatives she had often amusingly described to me. I ascribed her mysterious manner to some little plan she had concocted to make the incident a surprize, and I decided to be on my best behavior.

In this lightened frame of mind, I followed mute Helen up a broad staircase to the second floor, not failing to make mental note in passing, that these people, though they might boast Colonial forebears, could not boast of their house-keeping, which was shocking. There was a cushion of dust on every object I touched.

As soon as we put foot on the second landing, I was aware of sounds of revelry coming from a room which I correctly judged to be the dining-room of the house. The heavy oaken doors of this chamber were slightly ajar, and through the aperture was cast a strong beam of light that fell full upon an object that startled me for an instant. It was a headless human figure!

I tried to cry out and draw Helen away from the gruesome sight, but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and I seemed powerless to raise my arms to restrain her. Helen, on the other hand, seemed not to notice anything untoward. My heart was pounding like a trip-hammer, and perspiration bathed my face. All my old feelings of fear and oppression returned to me; and even when I saw, at closer range, that the figure was nothing but a suit of old armor, I did not breathe any easier.

As we approached the doors, I heard laughter and the clinking of glasses. In another moment, I found myself in the large and brilliantly lighted festive room. If the rest of the mansion was dark, there certainly was no lack of illumination here. I was fairly dazzled by the numerous lights, thrown by candles arranged in clusters, not only in the regiment of hold-

ers on the tables and sideboards, but in the cut-glass sconces and the enormous crystal chandelier overhead. It struck me as odd that our hosts should have elected this outmoded arrangement for lighting. But then, everything about this dusty old mansion was odd.

**T**O MY astonishment, not one of the persons gathered around the table seemed to take the slightest notice of our entrance, although we were very late. We seated ourselves at places which apparently had been set for us, although how Helen knew all this was beyond me. I was decidedly ill at ease. Almost immediately we were served with soup.

I hastily sipped a few spoonfuls and noted it was insipid stuff—had indeed no flavor at all. I leaned to whisper to Helen, but she touched her finger to her lips and I understood that I was not to speak.

I put down my spoon and began to study my fellow diners. At once I saw that we had been bidden to a costume dress affair, and again wished to ask Helen why she had not mentioned this beforehand so that we might have come dressed accordingly. However, she seemed unperturbed, so I dismissed the matter. I began to study my companions in more detail.

Opposite me was a veritable caricature of a bedizened old Eighteenth Century beldame, clad in white silk cut alarmingly low in the neck. She also wore camellias in her hair, which I recalled was a fashion of long ago.

She suddenly emitted a high cackle and leaned across the board to scream:

"How's that old skinny shanks, your grandfather? I know him well. I come from Philadelphia, too."

This was a strange leading question from my soon-to-be-in-laws; and I was so astounded that I could not form an

answer. Furthermore, I could only have told the crack-brained old lady that my grandfather had died before I was born.

My glance traveled down the table and found no face that was familiar until it stopped at a handsome, sad-faced young man who reminded me strongly of someone I knew, or had known well. I cudgelled my brain for a clue to his identity and in so doing brought my eyes back to my plate, and then stole a quick glance into Helen's eyes. I let my fork drop in amazement.

"My brother," she said, and swiftly averted her face.

I couldn't figure it out. In discussing her family, Helen had never mentioned a living brother.

My round of inspection ended with our hostess. She was a handsome woman, with a gorgeous figure. Very regal, with dark skin and velvety black eyes, she resembled a Spanish queen. An elderly man of great distinction, obviously a foreigner, sat at her left and engaged her in conversation.

Beyond her beauty, however, there was another quality about our hostess that held me. She seemed to have an understanding, and grave and tolerant wisdom, that was lacking in the rest of the company. They, although courteous enough to each other, seemed curiously distraught, and were all noticeably engaged with their own thoughts. They all seemed to be under some kind of uneasy spell; and, moreover, no one seemed to be quite aware of what exactly constituted the menace that hung over them.

Only our hostess seemed to be the custodian of the secret which was vaguely sensed by the others.

I was about to intrude upon the conversation between the hostess and the foreigner, when a fresh unconventional incident distracted me.

A footman was at my elbow, offering me a telegram on a little tray.

"Are you Mr. Paul Brennan?" he asked.

"My name is Brennan, but not Paul," I answered, and was about to turn away, when a thought stayed me. I knew no one by the name of Paul Brennan, now that my father was dead. But someone who had known our family slightly, and had forgotten that I had been christened "Saul," might have so addressed this telegram, meant for me.

I took it from the tray and opened it. My head reeled as I read:

Dear Paul: Your son, Saul, and Helen Gibson, his fiancée, died this morning.  
FRANK GIBSON.

**M**Y FIRST reaction was pure rage. I turned to Helen and showed her the message.

"I don't know what kind of a practical joke this is, but this carries it too far. Some idiot thinks it's funny to telegraph me in your father's name that you are dead."

To my horror, my words, which had carried around the table, brought forth a burst of cackling laughter which traveled around the table and reverberated in the corners of the rooms. And what mirth it was! Horrible paroxysms of empty, shrill howls and jeers! I pray Heaven I may never hear it again.

I waited until it subsided and then asked as calmly as my rage would permit me:

"May I ask what this means?"

Dead silence was my answer. I felt every eye upon me. Strangely enough, I felt that they were all pitying me. My hair rose. In anguish, I turned to Helen, sought to touch her. But she averted her face and shrank from my hands.

Still that terrible silence. Then, sud-

denly, the old lady with the camellias in her hair broke it with an affected giggle.

"And why, young man, do you think that your Helen isn't dead?" she demanded.

I stared at her. "Are you out of your senses, madam? Why should I think she is dead?"

The old beldame cackled on a scale that was supposed to be musical and retorted:

"Well, ask her yourself whether or not she's dead."

The room was reeling around me. The obscenity of the whole situation bore down on me with deadly weight. My mouth was dry.

"Why, of course, she's dead," put in a gentleman with a red nose. "What would she be doing here if she weren't?"

"Of course—of course. We're all dead," twittered the other guests in chorus.

"This is more than madness!" I exclaimed. "You all seem to have such a rare sense of humor. Perhaps you'd like to go a bit further—and tell me that I myself am dead!"

The jeering laughter that greeted this remark was even more derisive than before. It began with a titter and spread until the whole table was in an uproar. The old beldame threw herself back in her chair and chortled until the tears came.

My reason seemed to snap, and I groped frantically for Helen's hand. This time she surrendered it. Her fingers, normally so pliant and responsive, were stiff and icy in my grasp.

She turned sorrowful eyes to mine and leaned to whisper:

"Don't, Saul—don't suffer too much. I've known it for the last hour. You and I died when we——"

The rest of her speech was lost in a sudden burst of that repulsive hilarity of

the other guests. All about me was bedlam. I looked around for some means of escape, but the noisy cacklers hemmed me in. In desperation, I turned to my hostess.

"Why are we here?" I pleaded. "What does all this mean? Is it true what they say?"

She nodded sympathetically, and as she spoke, the hilarity of the others died down.

"We are here because we all happen to have some social link, remote or near, with the former occupants of this house—this former house, I should say; for this is the ghost of the home of the ghosts of a couple who died years ago."

I stammered: "Then the house—too—is not real?"

The foreigner seated beyond my hostess bent forward and began a grave harangue.

"Call this house real, or call it immaterial. Those phrases mean nothing to us," he expounded. "It frequently happens, of course, that a building is erected on ground previously occupied by some other structure. You must understand that the material parts of a dwelling may be removed at any time, but its astral shell will remain. Thus the ghosts of many houses may remain on a site occupied by a new and substantial structure. They are none the less real for being unseen by living eyes."

This might have gone on and on, but was interrupted by a noisy outburst from the gentleman with the pink nose, whose convivial spirits seemed to have struck a snag. I saw the irritated gentleman, who freely punctured his actions with oaths, pour himself a half a goblet of sherry. He called for brandy, with which he filled the goblet to the brim. Muttering angrily, he seized a caster of red pepper, unscrewed the lid, and dumped the whole

contents into the mixture he had made. He stirred up the mess, closed his eyes, and drank it in one gulp.

I EXPECTED to see him spit and gag. Instead, he paused with eyes tightly closed for a moment and then opened them wide. I have never seen such disappointment. I thought he was about to cry.

"It has no taste, no pep," he mourned. "I'd give my right eye for one good shot of whisky."

My hostess leaned toward me.

"That is the way with pleasures in the afterworld," she said. "They do not exist. Sometimes one of us rebels. It is pathetic—and useless. The trouble is that our old habits survive, but the wisdom of death deprives us of the imagination to enjoy them."

"But you"—I interrupted her—"you do not seem to rebel as do the others——"

She shook her head gravely and explained simply:

"I am more fortunate than most. You see, I was unhappy during my lifetime in the flesh. Here I find contentment." At the dreadful implication of these words, I leaped from my seat.

"But I" — I shouted — "I cannot accept—I will not accept unhappiness. There is one bliss that nothing can take from me!"

I cried my beloved's name. "Helen, come here!"

She walked slowly toward me, almost unwillingly, it seemed to me. I was so wild with grief, terror and desperation, I did not notice the sadness of Helen's eyes—sadness which should have warned me against what I was about to do.

"Kiss me, Helen," I commanded. "Kiss me and defy this madness. We will never accept!"

I opened my arms.

Behind me someone screamed derisively.

"Come here! The lovers are going to kiss!"

They swarmed about us, pressed in on us, leering and cackling. They held their sides in hysterical laughter. I closed my ears to their insane giggling, and drew Helen to me in frantic desperation. Her head was lowered, and she did not wish to respond to my caress. But I was not to be denied. I forced her head back. As my lips neared hers a look of infinite sadness came over her and she closed her eyes.

And then we kissed. A sensation of utter horror shot through me. Instead of feeling her soft, full lips on mine, I felt as if bone were pressed against bone. Our teeth met and scraped together harshly. It was as if our lips were not there.

I felt my senses slipping from me. I had the confused impression that the timbers and rafters were buckling, and roaring in on us. The table rocked; the jeering laughter roared in my ears. The lights in the holders flickered, grew dim, and all was darkness and cold. . . .

**I** WAS revived from our immersion in the waters of Long Island Sound some minutes before Helen opened her eyes. I learned what had happened. Helen

had fallen overboard during our excursion with our yachting friends, and at a moment when the yacht was steaming swiftly on its course. Fortunately, I had seen her fall and had dived to her rescue. But the reversing of the yacht's course and the arrival of aid had taken some time and I, who am not an expert swimmer, went down with my unconscious burden. Now we were back on the yacht's deck, literally returned from the home of the dead. How literally? I wondered. Was the whole of the ghastly experience in the mansion of ghosts which I still remembered in such vivid detail a fantasy spun by my subconscious brain while I struggled in the water?

I had some moments for consecutive thought. Thank God I did. I was in complete command of my faculties when Helen opened her eyes. The first thing they met were mine. I read in them a message of horror—recent horror—and I knew what it was. Instantly I was on my guard for the question I knew would come.

Her whole soul was in the words: "Tell me—did you feel that kiss?"

I hope and am convinced that I betrayed no sign.

"What kiss?" I blankly returned. "Did you dream something, dear?"

