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*Who knows what mysteries lie behind
the shell? What long-forgotten sights
and sounds leap to secret meaning?
One can find out only by entering . . .*

THE HOUSE

By FREDERIC BROWN

HE HESITATED upon the porch and looked a last long look upon the road behind him and the green trees that grew beside it and the yellow fields and the distant hill and the bright sunlight. Then he opened the door and entered and the door swung shut behind him.

He turned as it clicked and saw only blank wall. There was no knob and no keyhole, and the edges of the door, if there were edges, were so cunningly fitted into the carved paneling that he could not discern its outline.

Before him lay the cobwebbed hallway. The floor was thick with dust and through the dust wound two so slender curving

trails as might have been made by two very small snakes or two very large caterpillars. They were very faint trails and he did not notice them until he was opposite the first doorway to the right, upon which was the inscription "Semper Fidelis" in old English lettering.

Beyond this door he found himself in a small red room, no larger than a large closet. A single chair in this room lay on its side, one leg broken and dangling by a thin splinter. On the nearest wall the only picture was a framed portrait of Benjamin Franklin. It hung askew and the glass covering it was cracked. There was no dust upon the floor

and the room appeared to have been recently cleaned. In the center of the floor lay a bright curved scimitar. There were red stains upon its hilt, and upon the edge of the blade was a thick coating of green ooze. Aside from these things the room was empty.

After he had stood in this room for a long time, he crossed the hallway and entered the room opposite. It was large, the size of a small auditorium, but the bare black walls made it seem smaller at first glance. There was row upon row of purple plush theater seats, but there was no stage or platform and the rows of seats started only a few inches from the blank wall they faced. There was nothing else in the room, but upon the nearest seat lay a neat pile of programs. One of these he took and found it blank save for two advertisements on the back cover, one for Prophylactic toothbrushes and the other for choice building lots in the Sub Rosa Subdivision. Upon a page near the front of the program he saw that someone had written with a lead pencil the word or name "Garfinkle."

He thrust the program into his pocket and returned to the hallway, along which he walked in search of the stairs.

Behind one closed door which he passed he heard someone, ob-

viously amateur, picking out tunes on what sounded like a Hawaiian guitar. He knocked upon this door but a scurrying of footsteps and silence was the only answer. When he opened the door and peered within he saw only a decaying corpse hanging from the chandelier, and an odor hurled itself upon him so nauseating that he closed the door hastily, and walked on to the stairway.

The stairway was narrow and winding. There was no banister, and he clung close to the wall as he ascended. He saw that the first seven steps from the bottom had been scrubbed clean but in the dust above the seventh step he saw again the two winding trails. Upon the third step from the top they converged, and vanished.

He entered the first door to his right and found himself in a spacious bedroom, lavishly furnished. He crossed immediately to the carved poster-bed and pulled aside the curtains. The bed was neatly made, and he saw a slip of paper pinned to the smoothed pillow. Upon it was written hastily in a woman's handwriting, "Denver, 1909." Upon the reverse side, neatly written in ink in another handwriting was an algebraic equation.

He left this room quietly and stopped short just outside the

door to listen to a sound that came from behind a black doorway across the hall.

It was the deep voice of a man chanting in a strange and unfamiliar tongue. It rose and fell in a monotonous cadence like a Buddhist hymn, yet over and over recurred the word "Ragnarok." The word seemed vaguely familiar, and the voice sounded like his own voice, but muffled by many things.

With bowed head he stood until the voice died away into a blue trembling silence and twilight crept into the hallway with the stealthiness of a practiced thief.

Then as though awakening, he walked along the now-silent hallway until he came to the third and last door and he saw that they had printed his name upon the upper panel in tiny letters of gold. Perhaps radium had been mixed with the gold for the letters glowed in the hallway's dimness.

He stood for a long moment with his hand upon the knob, and then at last he entered and closed the door behind him. He heard the click of the latch and knew that it would never open again, yet he felt no fear with this realization.

The darkness was a black tangible thing that sprang back from him when he struck a match. He saw then that the

room was a counterpart of the east bedroom of his father's house near Wilmington, the room in which he had been born. He knew, now, just where to look for candles. There were two in the drawer, and the stump of a third, and he knew that, burned one at a time, they would last for almost ten hours. He lighted the first and stood it in the brass bracket on the wall, from whence it cast dancing shadows from each chair, from the bed, and from the small waiting cradle that stood beside the bed.

Upon the table beside his mother's sewing basket lay the March, 1887, issue of *Harper's Magazine*, and he took it up and glanced idly through its pages.

At length he dropped it to the floor and thought tenderly of his wife who had died many years ago, and a faint smile trembled upon his lips as he remembered a dozen little incidents of the years of days and nights they had spent together. He thought, too, of many other things as the minutes went by.

It was not until the ninth hour when but half an inch of candle remained and darkness began to gather in the farther corners of the room and to creep closer, that he screamed, and beat and clawed at the door until his hands were a raw and bloody pulp.

THE END