

A Case of Conscience...

FOR WEEKS, NOW, TOM REASE HAS MADE UN-ACCOUNTED FOR NIGHTLY VISITS TO THIS DERELICT MANSION. ALWAYS, HE FINDS HIMSELF STANDING IN THE MOONLIT LIVING ROOM... BEWILDERED. AS HE STANDS IN THE ROOM'S CENTER, MOONLIGHT SHINING WANLY ON THE BROKEN, DUST COVERED FURNITURE, HE ASKS HIMSELF:

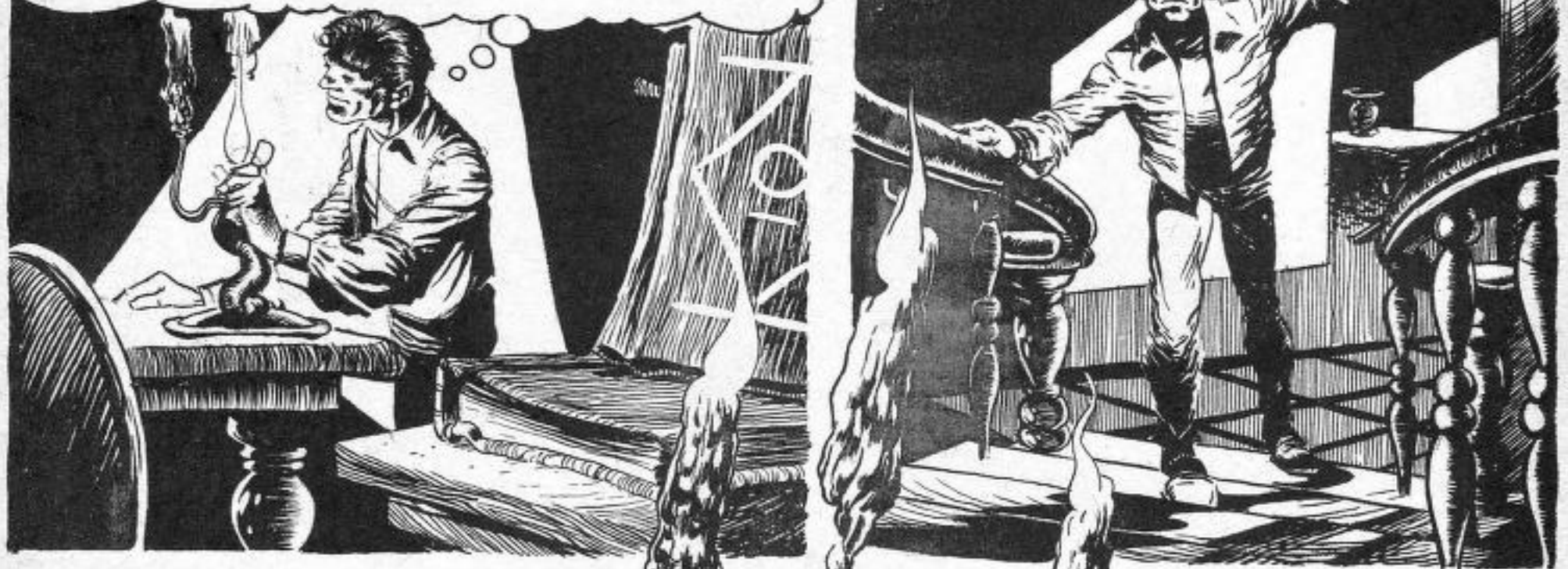
WHY AM I HERE? WHAT MAKES ME LEAVE A WARM HOUSE AND SOFT BED FOR THIS?!



THIS IS THE QUESTION HE ASKS EVERY NIGHT. FOR SEEMINGLY NO REASON AT ALL, HE LEAVES HIS PLUSH DOWNTOWN APARTMENT AND FINDS HIMSELF HERE, SERIOUSLY DOUBTING HIS SANITY.

...NEVER BEEN UP-STAIRS BEFORE...
...MAY BE SOMETHING UP THERE TO EXPLAIN THIS MADNESS.

...DARK IN HERE... NEED SOME LIGHT...



... JUST A HALL.
DUSTY, MOLDY SMELLING...
IT'S BEEN SOME TIME
SINCE ANYONE LIVED HERE.
FUNNY... ONLY ONE ROOM
ON THIS LEVEL...

HE WALKS TO THE END OF THE HALL... TOWARDS THE HUGE, CARVED, DOUBLE PANELLED DOOR...

I DON'T KNOW WHY, BUT THIS DOOR LOOKS FAMILIAR... WONDER WHAT'S INSIDE...



TOM!

WHA...! ON THE BED... IT CAN'T BE... ANNIE!

OH, TOM... IT'S BEEN SO LONG

YEAH, ANNIE, SURE... WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON HERE, ANYWAY?



YOU DON'T REMEMBER?

NO. FOR SOME STRANGE REASON, I COME TO THIS HOUSE I DON'T KNOW WHY... I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF I KNOW YOU... I... AW, I MUST BE NUTS!





I'LL TELL YOU WHY YOU
COME HERE, TOM. YOU
LOVED ME, ONCE, LONG AGO...



"BUT, YOU WEREN'T THE ONLY ONE.
AT LEAST A HALF DOZEN OTHER MEN
WERE RIVALLING FOR ME..."



"...MY FAMILY TURNED YOU AWAY
WHEN YOU ASKED FOR MY HAND... SAID
YOU WEREN'T GOOD ENOUGH...
... SO, PLANS WERE MADE THAT
I MARRY ONE OF MY OTHER SUITORS..."



...THE DATE WAS SET,
BUT YOU...

WAIT!!
WHAT'S THAT?!

...FROM THE HALL, CAME
A FAINT GURGLING SOUND...



TOM?!...

YOU WAIT THERE...
I'LL BE RIGHT BACK.



CAUTIOUSLY, HE MAKES HIS WAY
DOWN THE HALL, STRAINING HIS EYES IN
THE DIRECTION OF THE NOISE.

HE REACHES THE
HEAD OF THE STAIRS,
WHERE HE SEES...

OH, MY GOD!!

HIS SCREAMS ARE UNHEARD,
FROZEN IN HIS THROAT, AS
THE GHOULISH HORDE AD-
VANCES UP THE STAIRCASE,
GRAY CLOUDS OF GRAVE MUD
AND ROTTED FLESH
DROPPING IN ITS WAKE...



...CHOKED WITH HORROR AND GASPING
IN DISGUST, HE BACKS AWAY, BUT TAKES
ONLY TWO STEPS BEFORE BEING TRIPPED BY
LONG BONY FINGERS...



...IN A MOMENT, THEY'RE ALL
ABOUT HIM... PARALYZED WITH TERROR,
HE CAN DO NOTHING BUT WATCH
AS THEY PULL AND CLUTCH, SLOWLY
SUBDUING HIM BY STRENGTH OF
NUMBERS... COLD BLACK CLAWS SINK
INTO HIS FLESH...



... SUDDENLY, HIS HORROR LEAVES
HIM, REPLACED BY RAGE AND ANGER,
ENABLING HIM TO FIGHT BACK!

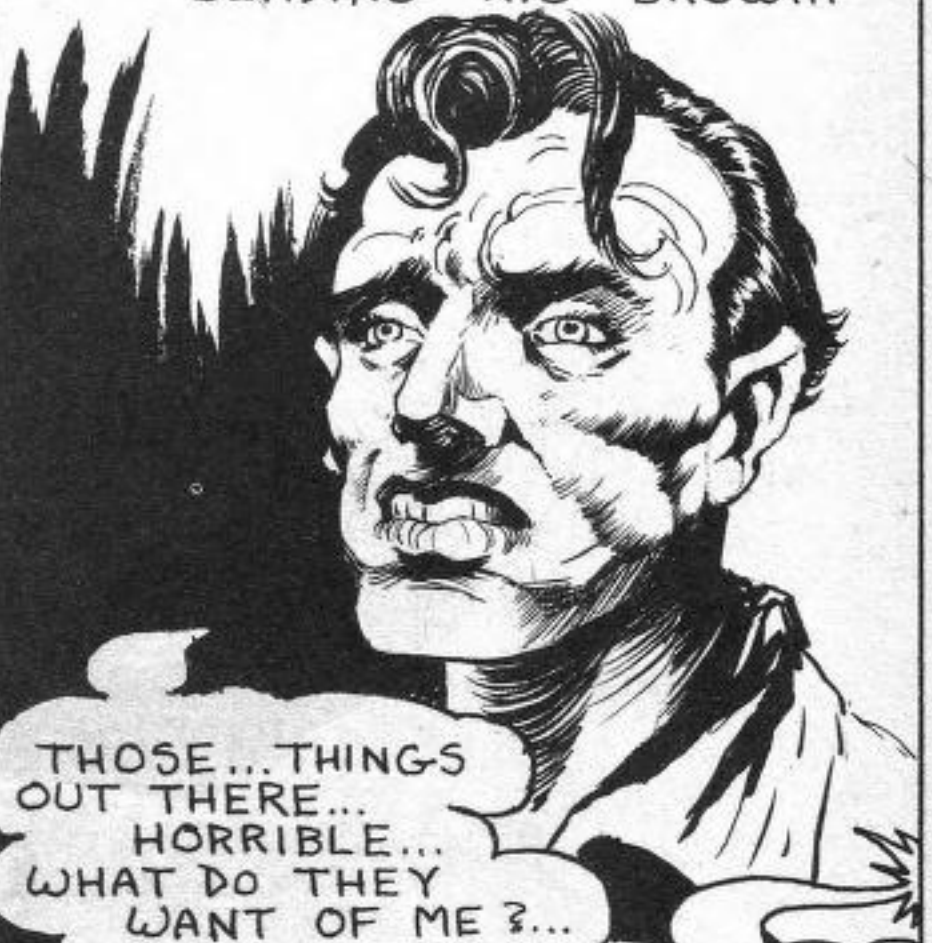


THE FIGHTING BRINGS THEM CLOSE TO THE STAIR-HEAD. WITH A DESPERATE KICK, HE SENDS ONE OF THEM INTO THE PUTRESCENT CROWD ON THE STAIRS, MOMENTARILY SLOWING THEM.



... ONCE INSIDE, HE SLAMS THE DOOR AND LEANS AGAINST IT, COLD SWEAT BEADING HIS BROW...

...HEAD REELING, HE STAGGERS QUICKLY DOWN THE HALL, BACK TO ANNIE'S ROOM...



THOSE... THINGS
OUT THERE...
HORRIBLE...
WHAT DO THEY
WANT OF ME ?...

YOU DON'T KNOW ?...
... I'LL TELL YOU...

HE STARES AT HER, INCREDULOUSLY

WHAT?!... YOU...YOU KNOW ABOUT THEM?... I...

YOU DIDN'T LET ME FINISH MY STORY, AS I WAS SAYING...

... I WAS READY TO BE MARRIED. THE CEREMONIES, INCLUDING THE RECEPTION, WERE HELD IN THIS VERY HOUSE.

THOUGH NOT INVITED, YOU WERE THERE, THE JEALOUSY IN YOU DEMANDING BUT ONE THING... REVENGE ...REVENGE ON THOSE MORE FORTUNATE THAN YOU...



"WHILE THE PARTY WAS IN PROGRESS, YOU SPIKED THE PUNCH, USING ENOUGH ARSENIC TO POISON HALF THE CITY..."





...AS A RESULT, EVERYONE THERE DIED...
...HORRIBLY.

BUT... I...
...I DON'T...

OUTSIDE THE ROOM, HE COULD HEAR THEM LURCHING AND STUMBLING... PAINFULLY MAKING THEIR WAY DOWN THE HALL...



YOU DON'T REMEMBER? OF COURSE NOT!... YOUR DEED WAS SO WRETCHED, SO HORRIBLE, THAT YOU BLOCKED IT FROM YOUR MIND, REFUSED TO ACCEPT IT... INDUCED A STATE OF SELF-AMNESIA SO YOUR CONSCIENCE WOULDN'T DRIVE YOU MAD!!...

THEY WERE RIGHT OUTSIDE, NOW... HE COULD HEAR THEM POUNDING FEEBLY ON THE DOOR...



THEN... THEY...
OUT THERE...
GOOD LORD!!

YES... THE PEOPLE YOU MURDERED MORE THAN TEN YEARS AGO.

...IT ALL BEGAN TO COME BACK NOW — THE HAPPY WEDDING GUESTS...
...THE SMALL BLUE VIAL OF ARSENIC TWO HUNDRED FIFTY CORPSES...

...ALREADY, THE DOOR BEGINS TO BUCKLE BENEATH THE MASSIVE WEIGHT OF THE ONSLAUGHT...



C'MON, ANNIE... LET'S GET OUTTA HERE WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME!



ALRIGHT, TOM...

...YOU KNOW, TOM... TEN YEARS AGO YOU COULDN'T HAVE ME... BUT NOW, I'M ALL YOURS.



JUST THEN, THE DOOR GAVE WAY.