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STORIES

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ISSUE!

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Hellhound Terror
By **JOHN CLEMONS**

FEATURING

**THE HUNCHBACK
OF HANOVER**

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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Title: Time to Kill

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: Feb. 4, 2021

Date last updated: Feb. 4, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210236

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TIME TO KILL

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "The Citadel of Darkness," "The Hunt," etc.

First published in *Strange Stories*, June 1940.

Harmon's Mind Received the Thundering Torrent of Wave-Impulses that Flowed from the Brain of a Killer!



My hands tightened on the old man's throat

he city waited, in anxiety and terror, for the next bombardment. Already air-fleets and giant guns had brought flaming ruin; streets were littered with broken masonry and glass, though all corpses had been speedily removed. Perfect organization took no risk of plague. Day after day we looked up and saw planes hovering against the blue, watching, watching. Far away the cannon thundered and men with fixed bayonets battled by the light of star-shells and were shot and stabbed and caught on the wire.

For us, behind the lines, in the waiting city, it was far worse. Our nerves jolted, our minds cried out silently in rebellion against the madness of war. Insanity was in the tense air that brought to us the sound of bellowing repercussions and the crash of toppling buildings.



Each night we had a blackout. In the day we crept through the streets fearfully, visiting our razed homes and once-familiar landmarks, wondering when the war would end. Those of us who remembered 1918 felt it might not end till mankind had been destroyed.

But it is not of the war I am writing—that still goes on, very dreadfully—it is of Rudolph Harmon that I wish to speak. Of Harmon, and his strange telepathic power.

I met him first in the partly destroyed office building which some of the homeless had made their headquarters. The first floor was nearly undamaged, and part of the second; the rest was ruin. Families lived in some of the offices, amid salvaged bed-clothing, and, for the lucky ones, army cots. There were pitiful attempts to make the ratholes homelike—a mirror, a carpet, a picture or two on the walls. For the most part, however, we used the building only as a place to sleep and hide. One looks for little more when at any moment the devastating shells may rush down out of the skies.

I was alone, my wife and child dead in the first air-raid. And the office in which I had bestowed my blankets was already occupied by Harmon, a lean, gaunt, nervous fellow of thirty or so with rather bulging eyes and a scrubby mustache. We made an odd pair, for I was short-set, stocky and clean shaven, built more like a wrestler than the physician I had been before our world ended with the undeclared war.

Crises exclude formalities. I entered with my blankets, there was a question, a grunt, and a nod, and after that the two of us lived together amicably enough, though with some disinterest. Now the office had belonged, I think, to an importer, and what happened to him I cannot say. He was probably dead. His desk was still there, and his stenographer's, with a useless lamp on each and a typewriter broken on the floor.

A dictaphone and a transcriber were in the corner, and Harmon, who was a mechanic of sorts, amused himself by trying to repair these. Very luckily, the building had its own power plant in the cellar, and so we could cook and use electric lights whenever we found an unbroken bulb, which was not often. No illumination could be displayed at night, of course. The soldiers were strict about that, at least at first before they were all called to the front. But by that time we had learned the theory of the blackout.

I had little to do with Harmon for a time. Conversation is difficult when nervous strain is so intense and unremitting. We smoked a good deal, drank surprisingly little, and thought entirely too much. Meanwhile the war went on unceasingly.

And day or night we could hear the far, faint rumbling of the guns, and after dark their flashes beating like heat lightning over the horizon.

It is difficult to describe the atmosphere of the city during those days, which have not yet ended. One's skin becomes unendurably sensitive, as though all the nerve-endings were exposed. One's brain winces from sudden discordant sounds, and there is always the feeling of expectancy, the momentary dread of hearing the shrill scream of displaced air that precedes the explosion. Though we certainly, at last, would have welcomed a shell to end the unendurable eternity of waiting, not knowing what to do, seeing no solution and no hope. The mind, balked of the outlet of action, turns inward and devours itself. Spleen, jaundice, ennui—none of us was quite normal.

In fact, such an atmosphere might be calculated to upset or suspend normal laws, not only of habit and thought, but those rooted in unchanging stability. The very earth seemed unfamiliar beneath our feet; it assumed an aspect of alienage, and seemed as though at any time it might change and shudder and disintegrate into chaos. Faces seemed different, and eyes. One had time to analyze them, to realize the mystery in the simplest things, the articulation of a muscle, the ability of the optic nerve, and of all the other senses. I must stress this point, for it is significant in view of what followed.

Harmon repaired his dictaphone and amused himself by dictating into the machine, keeping an audible diary of the days as they went by. There was little enough to record. By day a skeleton army cleared away the corpses and patrolled the city. At night the army was scarcely a squadron, without lights, for the beam even of an electric torch was dangerous. The stratosphere planes and balloons had powerful telescopes, and one by one our own protecting air-force was ordered to the front.

So we waited, doing trivial and foolish things because we needed an outlet for our emotions and thoughts and energies. The nervous strain poured unceasingly into our brains and men and women found various methods of relieving it.

Liquor, sensuality, sudden outbreaks of violence—all these outlets, and others, were undammed.

Week after week went by; still Harmon and I occupied the same room. We grew to hate it. But we never became really friendly; it was not dislike, but indifference. The food supply began to fail, and we shared whatever we could forage. This, too, was merely a matter of convenience and foresight. One day I came in with a few cans of soup, meat, and one of tuna—I remember the latter especially, for it turned out to be bad—and found Harmon seated before the dictaphone transcriber staring at it intently, the earphones clamped over his head. He started when he saw me and hastily turned off the machine.

“Well,” I said, throwing down my booty, “we’ll eat for a time, anyway. I’m worried about water, though. A guardsman told me the reservoir was bombed.”

The news did not affect Harmon perceptibly. He scratched his mustache nervously, and his bulging eyes watched me with an unreadable expression. I went to the window and looked out.

“Two planes,” I said. “At the front they’re being shot down in droves. There’s a new kind of incendiary magnetized bullet—”

“Stanley,” Harmon said abruptly, “I wish you’d listen to this record.”

“Eh? What—”

“I’m—afraid, a bit,” he told me. “It’s a dream, a hallucination, or madness. I don’t know which. Last night, you see, I dictated something while I was in a trance. At least I wasn’t fully conscious, though I wasn’t asleep either. You’ve heard of automatic writing. It was rather like that—automatic speech. Except that I seemed to be dreaming too. I was”—he coughed and looked away—“committing a murder. It wasn’t me, though. My mind, my perception, seemed to be in someone else’s body. And my voice was giving my thoughts as they went through my brain. It was, well, horrible enough.”

“Nerves, perhaps,” I said. “Let’s hear it.”

Harmon gave me the headpiece. I adjusted the phones over my ears, and moved the needle to the beginning of the record. The wax cylinder rotated. I slowed it down a trifle and listened.

At first I heard only an indistinguishable muttering. This changed to disconnected words, and then to a coherent monologue. Harmon watched me closely. His face was rather pale. And, after a time, I understood why.

For on the record were the thoughts of a killer, confused, chaotic, in the beginning:

“Shadows . . . building shadows . . . jagged . . . thrown by the moon. Stay in shadow. They protect. One can hide from the sky . . . the sky presses down, a pall, smothering, crouching. Death ready to leap out of it. But death doesn’t leap. If it would, God, if it would . . . no, just waiting. Unendurable. Bombs, shells, bloody rain. Something to tear away the blanket on my brain . . . hot, oppressive. I’m calm outwardly. In my brain is seething, raging turmoil. The thoughts beat, beat, in uneven tides . . . this away below the threshold. To break the broken silence. I dare not scream. Don’t. Don’t. That would rip off the blanket and leave the brain exposed, palpitating . . . stay in the shadows. Slink along the street, dodging the moonlit patches.”

For a space, silence, and the scratching of the record. Then the voice resumed:

“My brain moves, turns sickeningly in my skull. Too full of thoughts and fear. Hate. Sorrow. Emotions. What can I do? The front . . . is certain death. Why do I cling to life? The war may end tomorrow. But we can never leave the city. It isn’t on earth any more. The air even is changed. It pulses with vibrations of dehumanized emotion. Like electricity beating at the brain. Supercharged brains. Some outlet, some escape.

“Ah, God, something is moving near me, something spawned here where normal laws are transcended, materializing . . . a dog. Small. Leg broken. Its fur is soft. Fur about its throat. . . . My hands are white in the moonlight against black, silken hair. My hands . . . tighten . . . softly, tenderly . . . my fingers are strong; see the tendons stand out. My brain . . . tides of thought are bursting through the blanket that smothers it. There’s cold air blowing on my brain. The shadows are jumping toward me. Swooping. Shutting out the horrible sky. I’m in a cave. The shadows guard me. A cold brain, and my fingers filled with ecstatic aching. My hands are releasing the energy that was bottled up in my brain. The dog’s dead.”

Again the needle scratched softly, rhythmically.

I glanced at Harmon. He made a peremptory gesture. I heard the voice once more:

“Not enough. Not enough energy released. Brain turning, rocking . . . this is the right way, though. But not a dog. Not enough energy released. Not enough. . . . Light on brass buttons. Khaki uniforms. Asleep. A soldier, leaning against a wall, his gun nearly out of reach. He doesn’t hear me. His collar is unbuttoned; it’s a warm night. The pulse beats under the skin; a blue vein throbs. Can I approach silently? Yes, he doesn’t hear. I move the rifle a few feet further away. Now I stand directly in front of the man. My arms lift. The energy is draining out of my brain into my arms. The throbbing in my skull isn’t as sickening . . . perhaps this is enough. No. The energy will rush back unless I . . .

“The shadows poise to leap. Softly, tenderly, my hands tighten about the soldier’s throat. Now, now, leap, shadows, guard me, swiftly, volcanically. A thundering torrent floods from my brain, through my arms, into my hands, down to the fingers that release the power. . . . He is dead. His spine cracked almost inaudibly. Let him lie there. Calm, quiet. The sky isn’t pressing down any more. A wind blows cool and refreshing on my bare brain. . . .”

I had reached the end of the record. I turned off the dictaphone, removed the earphones, and swung to face Harmon. He tugged at his mustache, his lips quivering.

“Well?” he asked.

"Subjective," I said. "You're not mad. Nervous hysteria may cause somnambulism. You walked in your sleep, that's all."

"Yes," he said. "But a soldier was found this morning strangled on the street down by the river."

I fingered the stubble on my chin. "So? There have been coincidences before."

"I went down to see the body," Harmon said, "but it had been taken away. Then I walked around a bit till I saw a dead dog. A black spaniel with a broken leg, I—I—" His eyes protruded even more than usual; he wet his dry lips. "Could I have—"

I grinned and touched Harmon's thin arm. "Could you have strangled a husky soldier? Broken his neck? What do you think?"

He looked relieved for a moment, but immediately his brows drew together. "Insanity is supposed to give you abnormal strength."

"Perhaps. But I strongly doubt whether you could strangle a man thus. I was a general practitioner, not a psychiatrist, but I know something about such matters. Besides, how could you go out and kill a soldier while you were dictating a cylinder full?"

"I thought of that," Harmon said. "But I might have been dictating from memory."

"Did you go out last night?"

"I don't remember going out. I went to sleep about nine-thirty. Then suddenly I found myself at the dictaphone, in a sort of trance. When I'd finished talking, everything seemed to go black. I don't know how much later, I woke up completely. I looked at my watch. It was a little after two. You were asleep, but I almost woke you—I needed to talk to someone."

"I'm sorry you didn't," I said.

I went to the window once more, staring unseeingly at a gutted skyscraper across the deserted street, hearing the low drone of a plane high above.

"Can't you figure out any sort of explanation?" Harmon asked.

"I don't know. It isn't in materia medica. It's just an idea, a pretty fantastic one. If what you dictated was true—"

"Yes?"

"Then you read someone's mind. Telepathy hasn't been proved so far, though experiments have pointed rather conclusively to its possibility. The brain is a mysterious organ, Harmon. There's little really known about it. The pineal gland, for example, is something of an enigma. And the nature of thought itself—well!"

I lit half a cigarette. "Matter and thought are vibration. Vibrations are wave-impulses and can be transmitted under favorable conditions. The conditions here are extraordinary. Mentally we're all rather haywire. It's in the air. Your mind isn't normal, under this strain, and therefore it may be sensitive enough to get in telepathic rapport with some other mind."

Harmon pondered. "But why don't I have this rapport all the time, then? Why just for ten minutes or so last night?"

"The thoughts you got were conceived under tremendous emotional strain. If my theory is correct, this murderer is mad. Superficially he may not show it, I should be surprised if he did. Iron, rigid self-control denied him a more normal mental outlet. He forced himself to restrain the avalanche piling up in his brain. If he'd have got drunk, for example, he'd have been safe. But inhibitions prisoned him till the flood burst into a channel that would normally have been blocked up.

“I have seen murderers psychoanalyzed, Harmon. They didn’t want to kill, as a rule. But they were denied other sources of emotional release, or thought they were. Jack the Ripper was such a case. His fear complex led him to butcher women instead of—marrying, for example. If normal channels are blocked, the flood entered abnormal channels.”

Harmon held the wax cylinder in his hand. Suddenly he threw it down violently on the floor, where it cracked and shattered.

“You may be right enough,” he said, “but there’s still something wrong with my mind, eh?”

“I wouldn’t say wrong. Nothing that relief from strain can’t cure.”

“That’s easy to get,” Harmon said with heavy irony.

We were silent, listening to the low thunder of the great cannon at the front.

The slow days passed wearily. Some left the city, but not many, for starvation waited in the ravaged countryside. In the metropolis one could hope to find food and water, by dint of diligent searching. We were trapped here, bound by invisible fetters. We were the damned. And Harmon suffered and grew haggard under the strain. His eyes were unnaturally bright, his cheeks red and feverish, his lips cracked. A week later there was a recurrence of his telepathic visitation.

I came in one night, bearing a meager supply of food, to find Harmon crouching above the dictaphone waiting for me. His whole gaunt body was trembling, and his face was a white, bearded mask.

“It’s happened again,” he said. “An hour ago.”

Silently I put down my booty and adjusted the earphones. Vague moonlight filtered through the cracked windows now grimy and dirt-smearred. Harmon was a vague shadow as he leaned against the wall, half-hidden amid the gloom.

Once more I heard the eerie voice:

“Walk, walk, walk. Faster. Expend the energy in my brain. But walk warily. Not in the moonlight. Not under the crushing sky, lest it fall. Hear the guns. Each sound adds a charge to the already overcharged currents in my brain. Killing the dog and the soldier wasn’t enough. The potential keeps building up again. I need another release. The shadows won’t protect me; they flee, slide away, shrink from me, leaving me exposed to the hammer of the sky. I must kill again.

“This building I am passing . . . people sleep here, refugees. And no doors are locked these days. The hall is very dark. In the corner . . . what is it? A black, shapeless bundle. Someone, wrapped in quilts, asleep. An old man. My eyes are accustoming themselves to the gloom. I seem to see very clearly. It’s the energy in my brain; light is energy, of course . . . the guns keep hammering. There’s a plane going past, I can hear it.

“And here are the shadows following me. They tell me to kill. They’ll protect me, guard me . . . the old man wheezes and groans in his sleep. His neck is withered and scrawny. Its texture is scaly with the wrinkles of age, a webwork of tiny wrinkles. I drop on one knee beside him. Silence, vague moonlight from the open door, and the rhythmic movement of breath stirring parchment-yellow skin. And now the energy drains from my brain, and the pounding grows less violent.

“The shadows lean above me, poised to leap. Softly, tenderly, my hands tighten about the old man’s throat. Storm of ecstasy! Of relief, flooding, bursting gates that crumble under the onslaught, leaving my brain cold and quite motionless . . . there is only the slight ache in my

fingers, sunk in livid flesh. And it is over. He is dead. My brain is free, at peace. The sky is no longer terrifying. The noise of the guns no longer shakes the citadel of my mind. I am relaxed, utterly, joyously. . . .”

The record ended.

“I know what you’ll say,” Harmon said nervously. “Telepathy. But that doesn’t make it any more pleasant for me. There’s a mad killer somewhere in the city, and—and—God knows where it may end!”

“Harmon,” I said, “Why don’t you go into the country? Anywhere. It’s not important. A change of atmosphere is the thing.”

“Where can I go?” he asked. “We’re in hell here. We can’t get out of it. The whole land—the entire world, for that matter. . . .” Harmon was silent, brooding. “It’s the end. Man’s committing suicide. We can’t escape. All my relationships, all my ties with life, were cut during the first raid. There’s nothing left. I don’t know. . . .”

He dropped his head in his hands and massaged his temples. I stood wordlessly contemplating him.

“Why not smash the dictaphone?” I said finally.

Perhaps Harmon thought I intended irony.

“It’s easy for you to talk,” he snapped angrily. “You’re so damned cold-blooded you’ve got ice-water in your veins. You can’t understand how I feel. . . .”

I grunted and turned away, conscious of a hot resentment toward Harmon. I, too, had suffered losses as bad as his own. How dared he assume that because I showed little emotion, I felt nothing underneath? There was a scene I hadn’t let myself recall—the ruins of my house, and the sight that told me I was wifeless and childless.

I forced my thoughts to safer ground. Some things are too horrible to remember.

A fortnight later I came home after midnight, empty-handed. In my stomach was a dull, insistent ache of hunger. The specter of starvation brooded over the city, taking the place of the planes that had vanished days before. We were alone in a world of the dead. Only the noise of the guns, intermittent now, yet somehow more frantically murderous than ever, told us that others besides ourselves were alive.

Before I entered the room where Harmon waited I heard his voice. Or, rather, the voice of the dictaphone. I walked in just as the record ended.

“Hello,” Harmon said dully. “It’s happened again. No murder this time, though. Listen.”

He got up and gave me the earphones. I started the record afresh.

It began abruptly:

“Kill, kill, before the energy tears my brain apart. Two weeks now without any release. Tonight I must find relief or die. Trying to fight down the murder impulse is useless and dangerous. Eventually it gets too strong for me. And tonight it’s strong, horribly so. It’s dark, very dark. No moon tonight. And there are no shadows. Just the empty sky pressing down. The guns don’t sound so often now, but when they do my expectant brain rocks under the impact. I must release this frightful energy within my head. But how, where? People live in this cottage, I think. But the door is locked. A window . . . it slides up easily enough. People don’t fear thieves nowadays. Let me light a match. An empty room, I hear the sound of soft breathing.”

The record broke off, then resumed swiftly:

“A bedroom. Another match. Its light shows me a bed, two children asleep in it. Eight or ten years old, perhaps. Their throats are soft, white, waiting. I must kill swiftly. I cannot wait. In my head is a surging, thundering maelstrom. It pounds and shatters against the inside of my skull. No shadows to aid me. But the energy is flowing down into my arms. I must bend over the bed, over the child.

“Softly, tenderly, my hands tighten about his throat. . . . Shut up! Shut up! Damn you . . . the other boy is screaming, he’s scrambled out of bed, yelling at the top of his lungs. I hear men shouting. Hurrying footsteps. No time now, no time to kill the child. The window’s still open. Now I’m in the street. They’re following me, bellowing threats. One more minute and I’d have strangled the boy and released the energy. But there wasn’t time. Here’s an alley. It’s dark. And a side street. The pursuers’ voices are dying away. I’m losing them. . . . I’m safe now. Safe? God, my brain’s ready to explode!”

The record was finished.

I took off the earphones, and turned to face Harmon. In defiance of the air-danger, he had lit an electric lamp screening it with a handkerchief. He was sitting, now, before the dictating machine, rigid, ignoring me. I started to speak, and, suddenly, paused, watching him.

A tremor shook Harmon’s gaunt body. His eyes were dilated. Slowly, automatically, he lifted the speaking-tube of the dictaphone to his lips and pressed the operating button. The needle began to slide over the wax cylinder.

“I can’t stand it,” Harmon said, in a dead, expressionless voice. “I can’t keep the energy pressure under control any longer. My brain is throbbing, pounding, shaking in my skull. I escaped capture, but no risk is too great if it cools my brain. All the energy is back again inside my head. I must kill, swiftly, swiftly!”

There was an outburst of gunfire far away.

But Harmon did not hear it.

“The energy is moving,” he went on. “The tides lift it from my brain, down my arms, into the very tips of my fingers. There it waits, ready to leap forth and escape.”

Again the guns muttered ominously.

“Crouch, shadows, ready to spring! Leap to guard me! Guard me as I kill! Now—now—*now!*”

Suddenly Harmon gave a high-pitched, wordless shriek. The speaking-tube fell clattering from his lips. He swung around to face me, his eyes widely distended, his face yellow and glistening with sweat. A spasm of terror twisted his lips.

The guns roared.

The shadow fell on Harmon as I moved swiftly.

Softly, tenderly, my hands closed and tightened upon his throat. . . .

[The end of *Time to Kill* by Henry Kuttner]