

JACK SNOW

(1907–1956)

Midnight

BETWEEN the hour of eleven and midnight John Ware made ready to perform the ceremony that would climax the years of homage he had paid to the dark powers of evil. Tonight he would become a part of that essence of dread that roams the night hours. At the last stroke of midnight his consciousness would leave his body and unite with that which shuns the light and is all depravity and evil. Then he would roam the world with this midnight elemental and for one hour savor all the evil that this alien being is capable of inspiring in human souls.

John Ware had lived so long among the shadows of evil that his mind had become tainted, and through the channel of his thoughts his soul had been corrupted by the poison of the dark powers with which he consorted.

There was scarcely a forbidden book of shocking ceremonies and nameless teachings that Ware had not consulted and pored over in the long hours of the night. When certain guarded books he desired were unobtainable, he had shown no hesitation in stealing them. Nor had Ware stopped with mere reading and studying these books. He had descended to the ultimate depths and put into practice the ceremonies, rites and black sorceries that stained the pages of the volumes. Often these practices had required human blood and human lives, and here again Ware had not hesitated. He had long ago lost count of the number of innocent persons who had mysteriously vanished from the face of the earth—victims of his insatiable craving for knowledge of the evil that dwells in the dark, furtively, when the powers of light are at their nadir.

John Ware had traveled to all the strange and little known parts of the earth. He had tricked and wormed secrets out of priests and dignitaries of ancient cults and religions of whose existence the world of clean daylight has no inkling. Africa, the

West Indies, Tibet, China, Ware knew them all and they held no secret whose knowledge he had not violated.

By devious means Ware had secured admission to certain private institutions and homes behind whose facades were confined individuals who were not mad in the outright sense of the everyday definition of the word, but who, given their freedom, would loose nightmare horror on the world. Some of these prisoners were so curiously shaped and formed that they had been hidden away since childhood. In a number of instances their vocal organs were so alien that the sounds they uttered could not be considered human. Nevertheless, John Ware had been heard to converse with them.

In John Ware's chamber stood an ancient clock, tall as a human being, and abhorrently fashioned from age-yellowed ivory. Its head was that of a woman in an advanced state of dissolution. Around the skull, from which shreds of ivory flesh hung, were Roman numerals, marked by two death's head beetles, which, engineered by intricate machinery in the clock, crawled slowly around the perimeter of the skull to mark the hours. Nor did this clock tick as does an ordinary clock. Deep within its woman's bosom sounded a dull, regular thud, disturbingly similar to the beating of a human heart.

The malevolent creation of an unknown sorcerer of the dim past, this eerie clock had been the property of a succession of warlocks, alchemists, wizards, Satanists and like devotees of forbidden arts, each of whom had invested the clock with something of his own evil existence, so that a dark and revolting nimbus hung about it and it seemed to exude a loathsome animus from its repellently human form.

It was to this clock that John Ware addressed himself at the first stroke of midnight. The clock did not announce the hour in the fashion of other clocks. During the hour its ticking sounded faint and dull, scarcely distinguishable above ordinary sounds. But at each hour the ticking rose to a muffled thud, sounding like a human heart-beat heard through a stethoscope. With these ominous thuds it marked the hours, seeming to intimate that each beat of the human heart narrows that much more the span of mortal life.

Now the clock sounded the midnight hour. "Thud, thud,

thud—" Before it stood John Ware, his body traced with cabalistic markings in a black pigment which he had prepared according to an ancient and noxious formula.

As the clock thudded out the midnight hour, John Ware repeated an incantation, which, had it not been for his devouring passion for evil, would have caused even him to shudder at the mere sounds of the contorted vowels. To his mouthing of the unhuman phrases, he performed a pattern of motions with his body and limbs which was an unearthly grotesquerie of a dance.

"Thud, thud, thud—" the beat sounded for the twelfth time and then subsided to a dull, muffled murmur which was barely audible in the silence of the chamber. The body of John Ware sank to the thick rug and lay motionless. The spirit was gone from it. At the last stroke of the hour of midnight it had fled.

With a great thrill of exultation, John Ware found himself outside in the night. He had succeeded! That which he had summoned had accepted him! Now for the next hour he would feast to his fill on unholy evil. Ware was conscious that he was not alone as he moved effortlessly through the night air. He was accompanied by a being which he perceived only as an amorphous darkness, a darkness that was deeper and more absolute than the inky night, a darkness that was a vacuum or blank in the color spectrum.

Ware found himself plunging suddenly earthward. The walls of a building flashed past him and an instant later he was in a sumptuously furnished living room, where stood a man and a woman. Ware felt a strong bond between himself and the woman. Her thoughts were his, he felt as she did. A wave of terror was enveloping him, flowing to him from the woman, for the man standing before her held a revolver in his hand. He was about to pull the trigger. John Ware lived through an agony of fear in those few moments that the helpless woman cringed before the man. Then a shapeless darkness settled over the man. His eyes glazed dully. Like an automaton he pressed the trigger and the bullet crashed into the woman's heart. John Ware died as she died.

Once again Ware was soaring through the night, the black

being close at his side. He was shaken by the experience. What could it mean? How had he come to be identified so closely with the tortured consciousness of the murdered woman?

Again Ware felt himself plummeting earthward. This time he was in a musty cellar in the depths of a vast city's tenement section. A man lay chained to a crude, wooden table. Over him stood two creatures of loathsome and sadistic countenance. Then John Ware *was* the man on the table. He knew, he thought, he felt everything that the captive felt. He saw a black shadow settle over the two evil-looking men. Their eyes glazed, their lips parted slightly as saliva drooled from them. The men made use of an assortment of crude instruments, knives, scalpels, pincers and barbed hooks, in a manner which in ten short minutes reduced the helpless body before them from a screaming human being to a whimpering, senseless thing covered with wounds and rivulets of blood. John Ware suffered as the victim suffered. At last the tortured one slipped into unconsciousness. An instant later John Ware was moving swiftly through the night sky. At his side was the black being.

It had been terrible. Ware had endured agony that he had not believed the human body was capable of suffering. Why? Why had he been chained to the consciousness of the man on the torture table? Swiftly Ware and his companion soared through the night moving ever westward.

John Ware felt himself descending again. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a lonely farm house, with a single lamp glowing in one window. Then he was in an old fashioned country living room. In a wheel chair an aged man sat dozing. At his side, near the window, stood a table on which burned an oil lamp. A dark shape hovered over the sleeping man. Shuddering in his slumber, the man flung out one arm, restlessly. It struck the oil lamp, sending it crashing to the floor, where it shattered and a pool of flame sprang up instantly. The aged cripple awoke with a cry, and made an effort to wheel his chair from the flames. But it was too late. Already the carpet and floor were burning and now the man's clothing and the robe that covered his legs were afire. Instinctively the victim threw up his arms to shield his face. Then he screamed piercingly, again and again. John Ware felt everything that the old man felt. He suffered the inexpressible agony of being consumed alive by flames. Then he

was outside in the night. Far below and behind him the house burned like a torch in the distance. Ware glanced fearfully at the shadow that accompanied him as they sped on at tremendous speed, ever westward.

Once again Ware felt himself hurtling down through the night. Where to this time? What unspeakable torment was he to endure now? All was dark about him. He glimpsed no city or abode as he flashed to earth. About him was only silence and darkness. Then like a wave engulfing his spirit, came a torrent of fear and dread. He was striving to push something upward. Panic thoughts consumed him. He would not die—he wanted to live—he would escape! He writhed and twisted in his narrow confines, his fists beating on the surface above him. It did not yield. John Ware knew that he was linked with the consciousness of a man who had been prematurely buried. Soon the victim's fists were dripping with blood as he ineffectually clawed and pounded at the lid of the coffin. As time is measured it didn't last long. The exertions of the doomed man caused him quickly to exhaust the small amount of air in the coffin and he soon smothered to death. John Ware experienced that, too. But the final obliteration and crushing of the hope that burned in the man's bosom probably was the worst of all.

Ware was again soaring through the night. His soul shuddered as he grasped the final, unmistakable significance of the night's experiences. *He, he* was to be the victim, the sufferer, throughout this long hour of midnight.

He had thought that by accompanying the dark being around the earth, he would share in the savoring of all the evils that flourish in the midnight hour. He *was* participating—but not as he had expected. Instead, *he* was the victim, the, cringing, tormented one. Perhaps this dark being he had summoned was jealous of its pleasures, or perhaps it derived an additional intensity of satisfaction by adding John Ware's consciousness to those of its victims.

Ware was descending again. There was no resisting the force that flung him earthward.

He was completely helpless before the power he had summoned. What now? What new terror would he experience?

On and on, ever westward through the night, John Ware endured horror after horror. He died again and again, each time in a more fearsome manner. He was subjected to revolting tortures and torments as he was linked with victim after victim. He knew the frightening nightmare of human minds tottering on the abyss of madness. All that is black and unholy and is visited upon mankind he experienced as he roamed the earth with the midnight being.

Would it never end? Only the thought that these sixty minutes must pass sustained him. But it did not end. It seemed an eternity had gone by. Such suffering could not be crowded into a single hour. It must be days since he had left his body.

Days, nights, sixty minutes, one hour? John Ware was struck with a realization of terrific impact. It seemed to be communicated to him from the dark being at his side. Horribly clear did that being make the simple truth. John Ware was lost. Weeks, even months, might have passed since he had left his body. Time, for him, had stopped still.

John Ware was eternally chained to the amorphous black shape, and was doomed to exist thus horribly forever, suffering endless and revolting madness, torture and death through eternity. He had stepped into that band of time known as midnight, and was caught, trapped hopelessly—doomed to move with the grain of time endlessly around the earth.

For as long as the earth spins beneath the sun, one side of it is always dark and in the darkness midnight dwells forever.