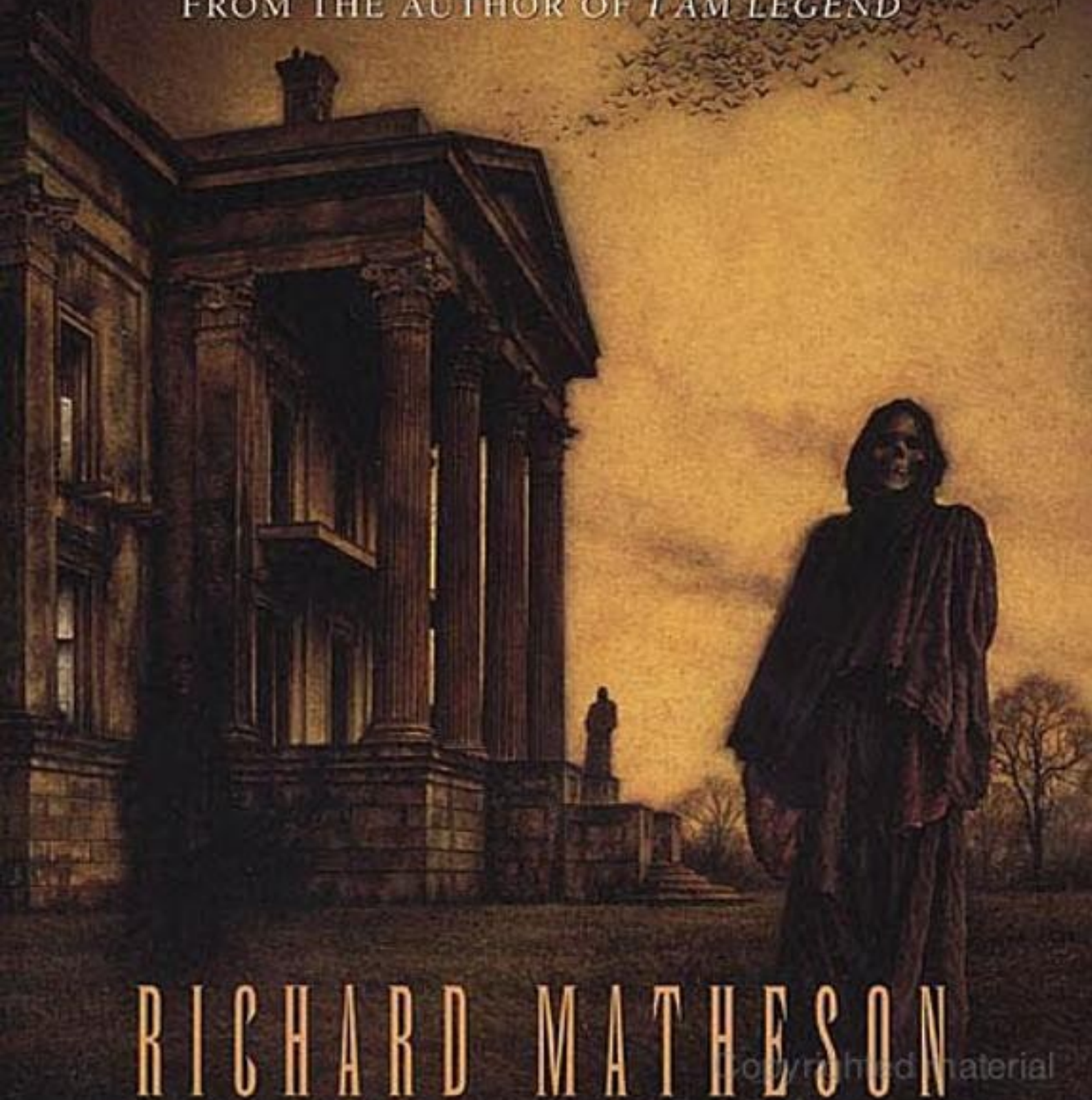


HELL HOUSE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *I AM LEGEND*



RICHARD MATHESON

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HELL HOUSE

RICHARD MATHESON



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HELL HOUSE

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With love, for my daughters
Bettina and Alison,
who have haunted my life so sweetly

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Contents](#)

[December 18, 1970](#)

[December 20, 1970](#)

[December 21, 1970](#)

[December 22, 1970](#)

[December 23, 1970](#)

[December 24, 1970](#)

[Also by](#)

HELL HOUSE

DECEMBER 18, 1970

3:17 P.M.

It had been raining hard since five o'clock that morning. Brontean weather, Dr. Barrett thought. He repressed a smile. He felt rather like a character in some latter-day Gothic romance. The driving rain, the cold, the two-hour ride from Manhattan in one of Deutsch's long black leather-upholstered limousines. The interminable wait in this corridor while disconcerted-looking men and women hurried in and out of Deutsch's bedroom, glancing at him occasionally.

He drew his watch from its vest pocket and raised the lid. He'd been here more than an hour now. What did Deutsch want of him? Something to do with parapsychology, most likely. The old man's chain of newspapers and magazines were forever printing articles on the subject. "Return from the Grave"; "The Girl Who Wouldn't Die"—always sensational, rarely factual.

Wincing at the effort, Dr. Barrett lifted his right leg over his left. He was a tall, slightly overweight man in his middle fifties, his thinning blond hair unchanged in color, though his trimmed beard showed traces of white. He sat erect on the straight-back chair, staring at the door to Deutsch's bedroom. Edith must be getting restless downstairs. He was sorry she'd come. Still, he'd had no way of knowing it would take this long.

The door to Deutsch's bedroom opened, and his male secretary, Hanley, came out. "Doctor," he said.

Barrett reached for his cane and, standing, limped across the hallway, stopping in front of the shorter man. He waited while the secretary leaned in through the doorway and announced, "Doctor Barrett, sir." Then he stepped past Hanley, entering the room. The secretary closed the door behind him.

The darkly paneled bedroom was immense. Sanctum of the monarch,

Barrett thought as he moved across the rug. Stopping by the massive bed, he looked at the old man sitting in it. Rolf Rudolph Deutsch was eighty-seven, bald, and skeletal, his dark eyes peering out from bony cavities. Barrett smiled. "Good afternoon." Intriguing that this wasted creature ruled an empire, he was thinking.

"You're crippled." Deutsch's voice was rasping. "No one told me that."

"I beg your pardon?" Barrett had stiffened.

"Never mind." Deutsch cut him off. "It's not that vital, I suppose. My people have recommended you. They say you're one of the five best in your field." He drew in laboring breath. "Your fee will be one hundred thousand dollars."

Barrett started.

"Your assignment is to establish the facts."

"Regarding what?" asked Barrett.

Deutsch seemed hesitant about replying, as though he felt it was beneath him. Finally he said, "Survival."

"You want me—?"

"—to tell me if it's factual or not."

Barrett's heart sank. That amount of money would make all the difference in the world to him. Still, how could he in conscience accept it on such grounds?

"It isn't lies I want," Deutsch told him. "I'll buy the answer, either way. So long as it's definitive."

Barrett felt a roil of despair. "How can I convince you, either way?" He was compelled to say it.

"By giving me *facts*," Deutsch answered irritably.

"Where am I to find them? I'm a physicist. In the twenty years I've studied parapsychology, I've yet to—"

"If they exist," Deutsch interrupted, "you'll find them in the only place on earth I know of where survival has yet to be refuted. The Belasco house in Maine."

"*Hell House*?"

Something glittered in the old man's eyes.

"Hell House," he said.

Barrett felt a tingling of excitement. "I thought Belasco's heirs had it sealed off after what happened—"

"That was thirty years ago," Deutsch cut him off again. "They need the money now; I've bought the place. Can you be there by Monday?"

Barrett hesitated, then, seeing Deutsch begin to frown, nodded once. "Yes." He couldn't let this chance go by.

"There'll be two others with you," Deutsch said.

"May I ask who—?"

"Florence Tanner and Benjamin Franklin Fischer."

Barrett tried not to show the disappointment he felt. An over-emotive Spiritualist medium, and the lone survivor of the 1940 debacle? He wondered if he dared object. He had his own group of sensitives and didn't see how Florence Tanner or Fischer could be of any help to him. Fischer had shown incredible abilities as a boy, but after his breakdown had obviously lost his gift, been caught in fraud a number of times, finally disappearing from the field entirely. He listened, half-attentive, as Deutsch told him that Florence Tanner would fly north with him, while Fischer would meet them in Maine.

The old man noted his expression. "Don't worry, you'll be in charge," he said; "Tanner's only going because my people tell me she's a first-class medium—"

"But a mental medium," said Barrett.

"—and I want that line of approach employed, as well as yours," Deutsch went on, as though Barrett hadn't spoken. "Fischer's presence is obvious."

Barrett nodded. There was no way out of it, he saw. He'd have to bring up one of his own people after the project was under way. "As to costs—" he started.

The old man waved him off. "Take that up with Hanley. You have unlimited funds."

"And time?"

"That you don't have," Deutsch replied. "I want the answer in a week."

Barrett looked appalled.

"Take it or leave it!" the old man snapped, sudden, naked rage in his expression. Barrett knew he had to accede or lose the opportunity—and there was a chance if he could get his machine constructed in time.

He nodded once. "A week," he said.

3:50 P.M.

Ananything else?" asked Hanley.

Barrett reviewed the items in his mind again. A list of all phenomena observed in the Belasco house. Restoration of its electrical system. Installation of telephone service. The swimming pool and steam room made