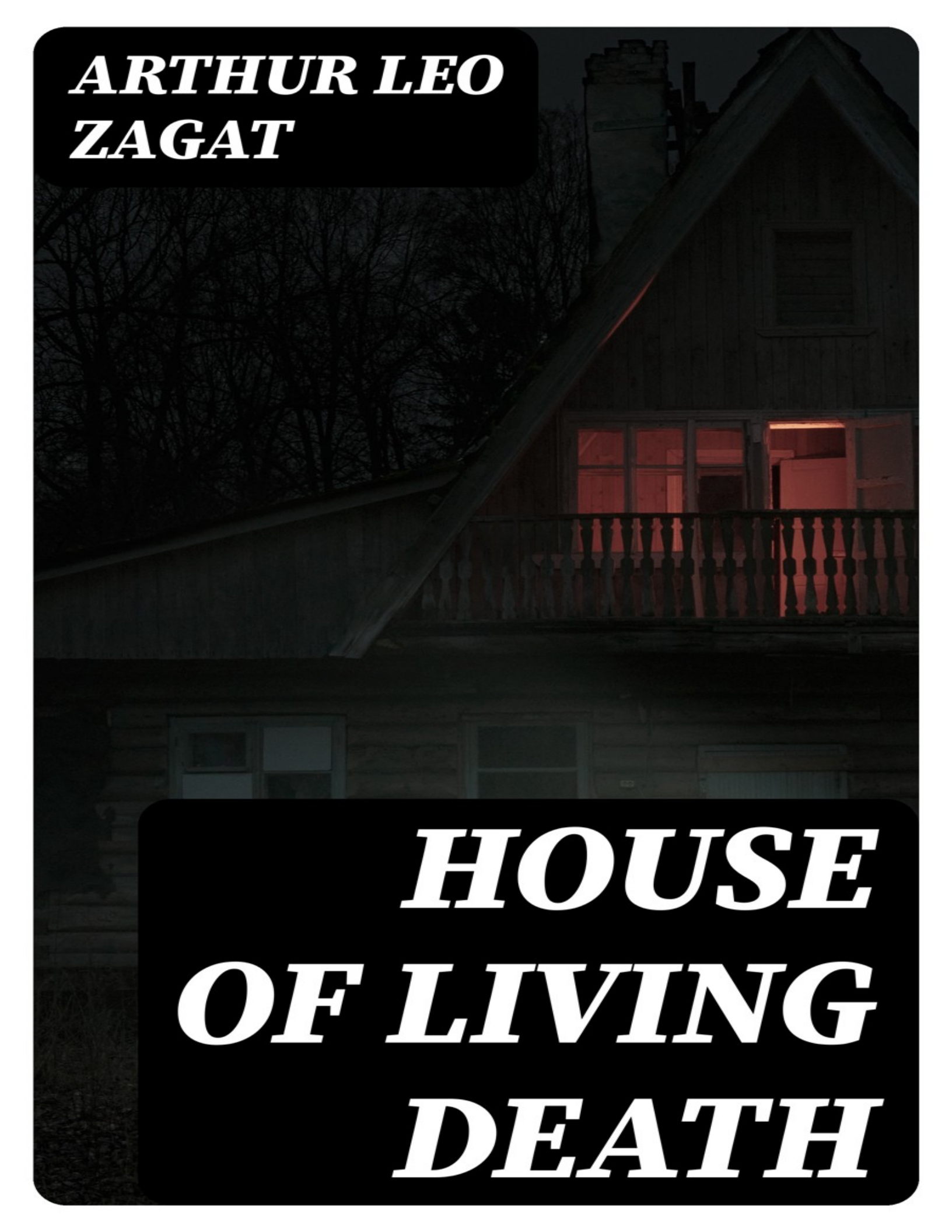




***ARTHUR LEO
ZAGAT***

***HOUSE
OF LIVING
DEATH***

Arthur Leo Zagat

House of Living Death

EAN 8596547320838

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ARE *you* sane?

Are you *certain* there is no taint in your blood, no lurking bomb of madness in your heritage that may not explode under sudden stress and make of you a staring-eyed lunatic—seething, perhaps, with the passion to see red blood spurting from arteries severed by your knife?

Not long ago a red bubble of rage exploded within your skull and you wanted to smash a leering, grinning face before you; smash it to a gory pulp. Temper, you say. Temper? Are you sure? Dead sure?

Remember: a madman believes himself normal, is convinced it is those others who are insane; those others who do not see the evil faces he envisions, who do not hear the shuddersome, compelling voices whispering in his ears the command to kill, *kill, KILL!*

Think. Think of the time you woke to deadly stillness in the night and knew, *knew* beyond doubt that someone was in the room, *something* that in the next horrible moment would be at your throat, ripping the life from your quivering breast with sharp, unhuman claws. You tried to scream for help and could not; you could not stir a limb, a finger; and the clammy-cold sweat on your brow was like an icy touch from Outer Darkness...After an eternity you managed somehow to switch on your bed lamp...and nothing was there, nothing at all. "A bad dream," you muttered, still shaking with abysmal fear. *But was it a dream?* Were you not awake; acutely, fearfully awake as you plumbed that hell of causeless terror?

The fear of death is nothing, the fear of being buried alive a pale, wan thing, to the uttermost horror man can

face: the fear of going insane, the fear that one *is* insane!

I know!

I held on to the rail as puffing little tugs bunted and hauled the *San Pedro* into its dock at Bush Terminal. My legs still buckled at the knees, a trip-hammer still pounded at the base of my skull though it was three weeks since I had come to aboard the freighter and known that I was homeward bound. Before that, I could dimly remember a parade of reptilian horror through my cabin, dim, vasty shapes moving through the mists that alcohol had evoked within my soul. But I had not touched a drop aboard ship, and my head was clear. I swear that it was.

Not that I was thinking. I was trying not to think. I was trying not to remember the terse cablegram that had come to me on the saltpeter *estancia* in the hinterland behind Iquique, the yellow slip carrying the news of my father's sudden death, the message that had rocked me back on my heels and set me guzzling *pulque* to deaden the week of waiting before I could get a boat for home. I was trying not to realize that the big house on Fifth Avenue would be cold, and empty; that dad would not be there to engulf my hand in his and say—as he always said on my return from one of the earth's far places—"Hello Hal! I've missed you. Come in and have a drink."

I suppose they let me guzzle to sottishness and insensibility as the kindest way to help me through that infinite week. At any rate it was not until the *Pedro* had been ten days at sea that I had waked to a dreary world that no longer held the father I adored, waked to know that I was

alone, utterly alone. Small wonder that I was still white and jittery as the *Pedro* warped in to her berth.

I felt in the pocket of my jacket for a cigarette, and paper rustled. This was the suit in which I had been carried aboard; someone must have stuffed a last minute message into it. I pulled out the paper. It was a radiogram.

IMPOSSIBLE WAIT FOR YOU STOP SEE AVERY DUNN 200 WALL STREET IMMEDIATELY ARRIVAL NEW YORK STOP FULLY EMPOWERED SETTLE FATHERS ESTATE STOP

So far it made sense. But the signature gave me a jolt, the first, but by no means the last in this weird affair. "IRMA KAHN." The name was utterly strange to me. *Irma*. A woman's name. What on earth had a strange woman to do with my father's estate? Dad had been almost a hermit in the five years since mother left us, wouldn't so much as look at another woman. And this Avery Dunn! Our attorneys were Humperdinck, O'Ryan and Schwartz, a dry as dust firm of legal luminaries who have long monopolized the affairs of the first families of the metropolis.

I thought of looking at the dateline. My head was clear, I repeat. The message was addressed to me at Iquique, had arrived the day the *Pedro* sailed. It had been sent from the Liner *City of Paris*, bound for France.

It was more than a year since my father had sent me down to rehabilitate his sadly neglected *estancia*. Maybe...I crushed the paper in my hand. No. Damn it! Dad wasn't that kind, he'd never...

A gangplank rattled to a dingy, splintered pier-floor, a whistle blasted aloft. I had to find out what this was all about, find out as quickly as I could. I jerked around,

thumped down a companionway, and was down the gangplank before the last rope had been fastened. My footing heaved as if it were still the *Pedro's* deck, but that didn't slow my sprint down the long, dark tunnel of the covered pier. I was out in sun-glare and a yellow cab was veering toward me across the cobbles. I lunged for it, yelled "Wall Street. Two Hundred Wall," at the goggle-eyed driver, and scrambled inside. He started off with a jerk that threw me into the leather seat.

The lobby man looked at me rather queerly when I asked for the number of Avery Dunn's office, but he said "Fourteen-ten," promptly enough. There was a mirror in the elevator, and I smoothed down my hair with the palm of my hand, got my tie around from under my left ear. I needed a shave pretty badly, but that couldn't be helped. At that I had to admit I was a tough-looking specimen. I stand six-four in my stocking feet, but you've got to measure me to realize it, because I'm built in proportion to my height. The Porto-Rican sun had tanned me pretty near to the leathery shade of a *mozo*, and my eyes were blood-shot and starey. I shouldn't have liked to meet myself on a dark night.

The door of Fourteen-ten didn't give me much information as to who and what Avery Dunn was. His name was down in one corner of the frosted-glass panel, painted in neat gilt letters. And under it was the one word, **AFFAIRS**. Big letters sprawled across the glass wouldn't have conveyed half the sense of importance those little ones did. And there was something queerly non-committal, almost mysterious about that evasive label. When I got the door open I decided that Mr. Dunn's "affairs" must be

manifold. Past the low railing that cut off a square around the entrance I could see a big room, and the rattle of typewriters was like a spigotty revolution going full blast. There must have been two dozen girls seated at long rows of little desks, all busily packing away. Only three or four men were visible, moving around.

"Well," a snippy voice cut across my observation. "What is it?" I jerked my eyes back to the girl who sat at the telephone desk just beyond the railing. She was wearing some kind of black dress with a white collar, and there wasn't too much red on her lips. But her eyes were insolent. "What do *you* want?"

The muscles under my ears hardened a bit, but I answered, mildly enough, "Mr. Dunn. My name is Harold Armour."

Her face changed when I said it. Something came into it, not fright, but something akin to it. "Harold Armour," she repeated, I thought unnecessarily loudly. She thrust a plug into one of the holes in front of her and said, "Mr. Harold Armour to see you, Mr. Dunn...Yes sir." Then to me: "You are to go right in sir. Straight back." She readied out a hand to swing open the gate in the railing beside her.

I looked at the opening and, quite unreasonably, hesitated a moment. Was some obscure sixth sense warning me of danger? Or were the first crawling worms of madness waking in my brain? At any rate, the prickling across the nape of my neck subsided almost immediately and I strode through, pounding stiff-legged toward the line of partitioned-off small offices at the back of the big room.

Even then there was nothing wrong with my observation, with the keen functioning of my thoughts. I can call up the face of each typist who flicked a quick glance at me as I passed; can spot on a diagram the position of every one of the male clerks. I can sketch for you, even now, the way the door of Dunn's office was set back in an embrasure made by two large square pillars, placed unusually close. But I did jerk that door open with uncalled-for violence and slam it shut behind me.

I SHOT a quick glance around the little room I had entered. If you spend much time in the outlands you get that habit; going into unfamiliar places your life may depend on a knowledge of every small item of your surroundings. And so I am certain, dead certain, of what I saw—*or thought I saw*.

The wall to my left, some ten feet long, was lined with book-laden shelves. So was the one to my right, except that at its further end the line of shelving was broken by a door. I noticed a diagonal scratch across the bronze key-plate of that door. Afterwards I clung frantically to the memory of that scratch, pictured it again and again as I battled with horror. Over and over, a thousand times or more, I asked myself if any dream, any hallucination, could be as detailed as that.

Opposite me a window let light flood in on a massive desk that dwarfed the little man seated behind it. Avery Dunn was looking straight at me, his sallow face an expressionless mask. There was something faintly Mongolian about his features; a vague heightening of the cheekbones, an almost imperceptible slanting of the eyelids.