

THOUGHTAUDIO



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I saw him on a sleepless night when I was walking desperately to save my soul and my vision. My coming to New York had been a mistake; for whereas I had looked for poignant wonder and inspiration in the teeming labyrinths of ancient streets that twist endlessly from forgotten courts and squares and waterfronts to courts and squares and waterfronts equally forgotten, and in the Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rise blackly Babylonian under waning moons, I had found instead only a sense of horror and oppression which threatened to master, paralyze, and annihilate me.

The disillusion had been gradual. Coming for the first time upon the city, I had seen it in the sunset from a bridge, majestic above its waters, its incredible peaks and pyramids rising flowerlike and delicate from pools of violet mist to play with the flaming golden clouds and the first stars of evening. Then it had lighted up window by window above the shimmering tides where lanterns nodded and glided and deep horns bayed weird harmonies, and had itself become a starry firmament of dream, redolent of faery music, and one with the marvels of Carcassonne (car **ka**-sone) and Samarkand (Sa-mark-**and**) and El Dorado and all glorious and half-fabulous cities. Shortly afterward I was taken through those antique ways so dear to my fancy — narrow, curving alleys and passages where rows of red Georgian brick blinked with small-paned dormers above pillared doorways that had looked on gilded sedans and paneled coaches — and in the first flush of realization of these long-wished dreams I thought I had indeed achieved such treasures as would make me in time a poet.

But success and happiness were not to be. Garish daylight showed only squalor and alienage and the noxious elephantiasis of climbing, spreading stone where the moon had hinted of loveliness and elder magic; and the throngs of people that seethed through the flumelike streets were squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them, who

could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart.

So instead of the poems I had hoped for, there came only a shuddering blankness and ineffable loneliness; and I saw at last a fearful truth which no one had ever dared to breathe before — the unwhisperable secret of secrets — the fact that this city of stone and stridor is not a sentient perpetuation of Old New York as London is of Old London and Paris of Old Paris, but that it is in fact quite dead, its sprawling body imperfectly embalmed and infested with queer animate things which have nothing to do with it as it was in life. Upon making this discovery I ceased to sleep comfortably; though something of resigned tranquility came back as I gradually formed the habit of keeping off the streets by day and venturing abroad only at night, when darkness calls forth what little of the past still hovers wraithlike about, and old white doorways remember the stalwart forms that once passed through them. With this mode of relief, I even wrote a few poems, and still refrained from going home to my people lest I seem to crawl back ignobly in defeat.

Then, on a sleepless night's walk, I met the man. It was in a grotesque hidden courtyard of the Greenwich section, for there in my ignorance I had settled, having heard of the place as the natural home of poets and artists. The archaic lanes and houses and unexpected bits of square and court had indeed delighted me, and when I found the poets and artists to be loud-voiced pretenders whose quaintness is tinsel and whose lives are a denial of all that pure beauty which is poetry and art, I stayed on for love of these venerable things. I fancied them as they were in their prime, when Greenwich was a placid village not yet engulfed by the town; and in the hours before dawn, when all the revelers had slunk away, I used to wander alone among their cryptical windings and brood upon the curious arcana which generations past deposited there. This kept my soul

alive and gave me a few of those dreams and visions for which the poet far within me cried out.

The man came upon me at about two in the morning one cloudy August morning, as I was threading a series of detached courtyards, now accessible only through the unlighted hallways of intervening buildings, but once forming parts of a continuous network of picturesque alleys. I had heard of them by vague rumor and realized that they could not be upon any map of today; but the fact that they were forgotten only endeared them to me, so that I had sought them with twice my usual eagerness. Now that I had found them, my fervor was again redoubled; for something in their arrangement dimly hinted that they might be only a few of many with dark, platitudinous counterparts wedged obscurely between high blank walls and deserted rear tenements, or lurking lamplessly behind archways, unbetrayed by hordes of the foreign-speaking or guarded by furtive and uncommunicative artists whose practices do not invite publicity or the light of day.

He spoke to me without invitation, noting my mood and glances as I studied certain knockered doorways above iron-railed steps, the pallid glow of traceried transoms feebly lighting my face. His own face was in shadow, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat which somehow blended perfectly with the out-of-date cloak he affected; but I was subtly disquieted even before he addressed me. His form was very slight, thin almost to cadaverousness; and his voice proved phenomenally soft and hollow, though not particularly deep. He had, he said, noticed me several times at my wanderings; and inferred that I resembled him in loving the vestiges of former years. Would I not like the guidance of one long practiced in these explorations, and possessed profoundly deeper local information than any obvious newcomer could possibly have gained?

As he spoke, I caught a glimpse of his face in the yellow beam from a solitary attic window. It was a noble, even a handsome, elderly countenance; and bore the marks of a lineage and refinement unusual for the age and place. Yet some quality about it disturbed me almost as much as its features pleased me — perhaps it was too white, or too expressionless, or too much out of keeping with the locality, to make me feel easy or comfortable. Nevertheless, I followed him; for in those dreary days my quest for antique beauty and mystery was all that I had to keep my soul alive, and I reckoned it a rare favor of Fate to fall in with one whose kindred seeking seemed to have penetrated so much farther than mine.

Something in the night constrained the cloaked man to silence, and for a long hour he led me forward without needless words; making only the briefest of comments concerning ancient names and dates and changes, and directing my progress mostly by exaggerated gestures as we squeezed through interstices, tiptoed through corridors, clambered over brick walls, and once crawled on hands and knees through a low, arched passage of stone whose immense length and tort-u-ous twisting effaced at last every hint of geographical location I had managed to preserve. The things we saw were very old and marvelous, or at least they seemed so in the few straggling rays of light by which I viewed them; and I shall never forget the tottering Ionic columns and fluted pilasters, the urn-headed iron fenceposts and flaring-linteled windows, and decorative fanlights that appeared to grow quainter and stranger the deeper we advanced into this inexhaustible maze of unknown antiquity.

We met no person along the way, and as time passed the lighted windows became fewer and fewer. The streetlights we first encountered had been of oil, and of the ancient

lozenge<sup>1</sup> (**la**-zenje) pattern. Later I noticed some with candles; and at last, after traversing a horrible unlighted court where my guide had to lead me with his gloved hand through total blackness to a narrow wooden gate embedded in a high wall, we came upon a fragment of alley lit only by lanterns in front of every seventh house — unbelievably Colonial tin lanterns with conical tops and holes punched in the sides. This alley led steeply uphill — more steeply than I had thought possible in this part of New York — and the upper end was blocked squarely by the ivy-clad wall of a private estate, beyond which I could see a pale cupola, and the tops of trees waving against a vague lightness in the sky. In this wall was a small, low-arched gate of nail-studded black oak, which the man proceeded to unlock with a ponderous key. Leading me within, he steered a course in utter blackness over what seemed to be a gravel path, and finally up a flight of stone steps to the door of the house, which he unlocked and opened for me.

We entered, and as we did so I grew faint from a reek of infinite mustiness which welled out to meet us, and which must have been the fruit of unwholesome centuries of decay. My host appeared not to notice this, and in courtesy I kept silent as he piloted me up a curving stairway, across a hall, and into a room whose door I heard him lock behind us. Then I saw him pull the curtains of the three small-paned windows that barely showed themselves against the lightening sky; after which he crossed to the mantel, struck flint and steel, lighted two candles of a candelabrum of twelve sconces, and made a gesture enjoining soft-toned speech.

In this feeble radiance I saw that we were in a spacious, well-furnished and paneled library dating from the first quarter of the Eighteenth Century, with splendid

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<sup>1</sup> LOZENGE: A rhombus or diamond shape.

doorway pediments, a delightful Doric cornice, and a magnificently carved overmantel with scroll-and-urn top. Above the crowded bookshelves at intervals along the walls were well-wrought family portraits; all tarnished to an enigmatical dimness and bearing an unmistakable likeness to the man who now motioned me to a chair beside the graceful Chippendale table. Before seating himself across the table from me, my host paused for a moment as if in embarrassment; then, tardily removing his gloves, wide-brimmed hat and cloak, stood theatrically revealed in full mid-Georgian costume — from queued hair and neck ruffles to knee-breeches, silk hose, and buckled shoes I had not previously noticed. Now slowly sinking into a lyre-back chair, he commenced to eye me intently.

Without his hat he took on an aspect of extreme age which was scarcely visible before, and I wondered if this unperceived mark of singular longevity was not one of the sources of my original disquiet. When he spoke at length, his soft, hollow, and carefully muffled voice did not infrequently quaver; and now and then I had great difficulty in following him as I listened with a thrill of amazement and half-disavowed alarm which grew each instant.

“You behold, Sir,” my host began, “a man of very eccentric habits, for whose costume no apology need be offered to one with your wit and inclinations. Reflecting upon better times, I have not hesitated to ascertain their ways and adopt their dress and manners, an indulgence which offends none if practiced without ostentation. It has been my good fortune to retain the rural seat of my ancestors, swallowed up by two towns, first Greenwich, which was built here after 1800, then New York, which joined in 1830. There were many reasons for the close keeping of this place in my family, and I have not been remiss in discharging such obligations. The squire who succeeded in it in 1768 studied Sartain arts and made Sartain discoveries, all connected with influences residing on this particular plot of ground, and eminently deserving of the strongest guarding. Some curious effects of these arts and discoveries I now propose to show you — of course,

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under the strictest secrecy; and I believe I may rely on my judgment of men enough to have no distrust of either your interest or your fidelity.”

He paused, but I could only nod my head. I have said that I was alarmed, yet to my soul nothing was more deadly than the material daylight world of the city, and whether this man was a harmless eccentric or a wielder of dangerous arts I had no choice but to follow him and quench my sense of wonder on whatever he might have to offer. So, I listened.

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“To my ancestor,” he softly continued, “there appeared to reside some exceedingly remarkable qual-i-ties in the will of mankind; qualities having suspected dominance not only over the acts of oneself and of others, but over every va-ri-ety of force and substance in Nature, as well as over many elements and dimensions deemed more universal than Nature herself. May I say that he openly disregarded the sanctity of things as great as space and time, and that he put to strange use the rites of the Sartain Indians once encamped upon this hill. The natives expressed anger when the place was built and were troublesome and pestilent in asking to visit the grounds at the full moon. For years they stole over the wall each month when they could, and by stealth performed Sartain acts. Then, in '68, the new squire caught them performing their rituals, and was amazed at what he saw. Thereafter he bargained with them and exchanged free access to his grounds for the exact inwardness and secrets of what they did. He then learned that their Indian grandfathers got part of their custom from their red ancestors and part from an old Dutchman in the time of the States-General. However, soon thereafter all the Indians died from smallpox. I fear the squire must have served them monstrous bad rum infused with the disease — whether by intent or not, I do not know. But a week after he learned their secrets, he was the only man living that knew them. You, Sir, are the first

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outsider to be told there is a secret. And split me if I have risked tampering with *the powers* had you not been so passionate after bygone things.”

I shuddered as the man speech grew strange and mysterious. He went on.

“But you must know, Sir, that what the squire got from the native Indians was but a small part of the learning he came to have. He had not been to Oxford for nothing, nor talked to no account with an ancient chemist and astrologer in Paris. He came to believe that all the world is but the smoke of our intellects; past the bidding of the vulgar, but by the wise to be puffed out and drawn in like any cloud of prime Virginia tobacco. What we want, we may make about us; and what we don’t want, we may sweep away. I won’t say that all this is wholly true in body, but it is sufficiently true to furnish a very appealing spectacle now and then. You, I conceive, would be tickled by a better sight of Sartain’s other years than your imagination affords you; so please hold back any fright at what I intend to show. Come to the window and be quiet.”

My host now took my hand to draw me to one of the two windows on the long side of the mal-odorous room, and at the first touch of his ungloved fingers I turned cold. His flesh, though dry and firm, was of the quality of ice; and I almost shrank away from his pulling. But again, I thought of the emptiness and horror of reality I was experiencing in New York, and boldly prepared to follow wheresoever I might be led. Once at the window, the man drew apart the yellow silk curtains and directed my stare into the blackness outside. For a moment I saw nothing except a myriad of tiny dancing lights, far, far before me. Then, as if in response to an insidious motion of my host’s hand, a flash of lightning played over the scene, and I looked out upon a sea of luxuriant foliage — foliage unpolluted, and not the sea of roofs to be expected by any normal mind. On my right the Hudson glittered wickedly, and in the distance ahead I saw the unhealthy

shimmer of a vast salt marsh constellated with nervous fireflies. The flash died, and an evil smile illumined the waxy face of the aged necromancer.

“That was before my time — before the new squire’s time. Pray let us try again.”

I was faint, even fainter than the hateful modernity of that accursed city had made me.

“Good God!” I whispered; “can you do that *any time*?” As he nodded he bared the black stumps in his mouth of what had once been yellow fangs, and I clutched at the curtains to prevent myself from falling. But he steadied me with that terrible, ice-cold claw, and once more made his insidious gesture.

Again, the lightning flashed — but this time upon a scene not wholly strange. It was Greenwich, the Greenwich that used to be, with here and there a roof or row of houses as we see it now, yet with lovely green lanes and fields and bits of grassy common. The marsh still glittered beyond, but in the farther distance I saw the steeples of what New York was then; Trinity and St. Paul’s and the Brick Church dominating their sisters, and a faint haze of wood smoke hovering over the whole scene. I breathed hard, but not so much from the sight itself as from the possibilities my terrified imagination conjured up.

“Can you — dare you — go *farther*?” I spoke with awe, and I think he shared it for a second, but the evil grin returned.

“*Farther?* What I have seen in my days would blast you to a mad statue of stone! Back, back — forward, *forward* — look, you puling (pew-ling) <sup>2</sup>lack-wit!”

As he snarled the phrase under his breath he gestured anew; bringing to the sky a flash more blinding than either that had come before. For a full three seconds I could glimpse that pan-demon-i-ac sight, and in those seconds, I saw a vista which will forever torment me in my dreams. I saw the heavens verminous with strange flying things, and beneath them a hellish black city of giant stone terraces with impious pyramids flung savagely to the moon, and devil-lights burning from unnumbered windows. Swarming loathsomely on aerial galleries, I saw the yellow, squint-eyed people of that city, robed horribly in orange and red, and dancing insanelly to the pounding of fevered kettledrums, the clatter of obscene cro-tala, and the maniacal moaning of muted horns whose ceaseless dirges rose and fell undulantly like the waves of an unhallowed ocean of bi-tu-men<sup>3</sup>.

I saw this vista and heard with the mind’s ear the blasphemous domdaniel<sup>4</sup> of cacophony which accompanied it. It was the shrieking fulfilment of all the horror which that corpse-city had ever stirred in my soul; and forgetting every injunction to silence I screamed and screamed and screamed as my nerves gave way and the walls quivered about me.

Then, as the flash subsided, I saw that my host was trembling too; a look of shocking fear half-blotting from his face exposed the serpent distortion of rage which my

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<sup>2</sup> PULING: Crying querulously or weakly; whimpering

<sup>3</sup> BITUMEN: an asphalt of ancient Asia Minor used as cement and mortar.

<sup>4</sup> DOMDANIEL: A fictional cavernous hall at the bottom of the ocean where evil magicians, spirits, and gnomes meet.

screams had excited. He tottered, clutched at the curtains as I had done before, and began twisting and turning his head wildly, like a hunted animal. God knows he had cause, for as the echoes of my screaming died away there came another sound so hellishly suggestive that only numbed emotion kept me sane and conscious. It was the steady, stealthy creaking of the stairs beyond the locked door, as with the ascent of a barefoot and skin-shod horde; and at last, the cautious, purposeful rattling of the brass latch that glowed in the feeble candlelight. The old man clawed and spat at me through the moldy air, and barked things in his throat as he swayed with the yellow curtain he clutched.

“The full moon — damn you — you yelping dog — you called them, and now they have come for me! Moccasined feet — dead men — Gad<sup>5</sup> sink you, you red devils. Yes, I poisoned that rum of yours — but haven’t I kept your pox-rotted magic safe? You swilled yourselves sick — curse you. You must blame the squire for your fall — not me! Let go, you red devils! Unhand that latch — I have nothing for you here.”

At this point three slow and very deliberate raps shook the panels of the door, and a white foam gathered at the mouth of the frantic enchanter. His fright, turning to steely despair, left room for a resurgence of his rage against me; and then he staggered a step toward the table on whose edge I was steadying myself. The curtains, still clutched in his right hand as his left hand clawed at me, grew taut and finally crashed down from their lofty fastenings, admitting to the room a flood of that full moonlight which the brightening of the sky had foreshadowed. In those greenish beams the candles paled, and a new semblance of decay spread over the musk-reeking room with its wormy paneling, sagging floor, battered mantel, rickety furniture, and ragged draperies. It spread over the

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<sup>5</sup> Gad: Origin late 15<sup>th</sup> century used as an euphemistic alteration of God.

old man, too, whether from the same source or because of his fear and vehemence. I saw him shrivel and blacken as he lurched near and strove to rend me with vulturine talons. Only his eyes stayed whole, and they glared with a propulsive, dilated incandescence which grew as the face around them charred and dwindled.

The rapping was now repeated with greater insistence, and this time bore a hint of metal. The black thing facing me had become only a head with eyes, impotently trying to writhe across the sinking floor in my direction, and occasionally emitting feeble little spits of immortal malice. Now swift and splintering blows assailed the sickly panels, and I saw the gleam of a tomahawk as it cleft the rending wood. I did not move, for I could not. I watched dazedly as the door fell into pieces to admit a colossal, shapeless influx of inky substance starred with shining, malevolent eyes. It poured thickly, like a flood of oil bursting from a rotten bulkhead. It overturned a chair as it spread, and finally flowed under the table and across the room to where the blackened head with the eyes still glaring at me stood. Around that head the inky influx closed, totally swallowing it up. In another moment, it had begun to recede, bearing away its invisible burden without touching me and flowing again out the black doorway and down the unseen stairs, which creaked as before, though in reverse order.

Then the floor gave way at last, and I slid gaspingly into the night-filled chamber below, choking with cobwebs and half-swooning with terror. The green moon, shining through broken windows, exposed the half open hall door. As I rose from the plaster-strewn floor and twisted myself free from the sagging ceiling, I saw sweep past it an awful torrent of blackness, with scores of baleful eyes glowing from it. It was seeking the door to the cellar, and when it found it, it vanished therein. I now felt the floor of this lower room giving way as that of the upper chamber had done, and at once a crashing noise from above had been followed by the fall of the cupola past the west window. Now liberated for the instant from the wreckage, I rushed through the hall to the front door;

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and finding myself unable to open it, seized a chair and broke a window, climbing frenziedly out upon the unkempt lawn where moonlight danced over yard-high grass and weeds. The wall was high, and all the gates were locked; but moving a pile of boxes in a corner I managed to climb to the top of the wall and cling to the great stone urn set there.

Around me in my exhaustion I could see only strange walls and windows and old gambrel roofs. The steep street of my approach was nowhere visible, and the little I did see succumbed rapidly to a mist that rolled in from the river despite the glaring moonlight. Suddenly the urn to which I clung began to tremble, as if sharing my own lethal dizziness; and in another instant my body was plunging downward to I knew not what fate.

The man who found me said that I must have crawled a long way despite my broken bones, for a trail of blood stretched off as far as he dared look. The gathering rain soon effaced this link with the scene of my ordeal, and reports could state no more than I had appeared from a place unknown at the entrance of a little black court off Perry Street.

I never sought to return to those shadowy labyrinths, nor would I direct any sane man there if I could. Of whom or what that ancient creature was, I have no idea; but I repeat that New York City is dead and full of unsuspected horrors. Where *HE* has gone, I do not know; but I have gone home to the pure New England lanes upon which fragrant sea winds sweep at evening.

**THE END**