

THOUGHTAUDIO



THE FESTIVAL

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“Devils so work that men perceive things which do not exist as if they were real.”¹

— *Lactantius*

I was far from home, and the spell of the eastern sea was upon me. In the twilight I heard it pounding on the rocks, and I knew it lay just over the hill where the twisting willows writhed against the clearing sky and the first stars of evening. Because my fathers had called me to the old town beyond, I pushed on through the shallow, new-fallen snow along the road that soared lonely to where Al-de-ba-ran twinkled among the trees, on toward the very ancient town I had never seen but often dreamed of.

It was the Yuletide, which men call Christmas, though they know in their hearts it is older than Bethlehem and Babylon, older than Memphis and mankind. It was the Yuletide, and I had come at last to the ancient sea town where my people had dwelt and kept the festival in the elder time when the festival was forbidden; where they also had commanded their sons to keep the festival alive once every century, so that the memory of primal secrets might not be forgotten. Mine were an old people, old even when this land was settled three hundred years before. They were strange, because they had come as dark, furtive folk from opiate southern gardens of orchids, and spoken another tongue

¹ LATIN IN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT: *“Efficiunt daemones, ut quae non sunt, sic tamen quasi sint, con-spicienda hominibus exhibeant.”*

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before they learned the tongue of the blue-eyed fishers. Now they were scattered and shared only the rituals of mysteries that no one living could understand. I was the only one who came back that night to the old fishing town as legend bade, for only the poor and the lonely remember.

Then beyond the hill's crest, I saw Kingsport outspread frostily in the gloaming darkness; snowy Kingsport with its ancient vanes and steeples, ridgepoles and chimneypots, wharves and small bridges, willow trees and graveyards; endless labyrinths of steep, narrow, crooked streets, and the dizzy church-crowned central peak that time dare not touch; ceaseless mazes of colonial houses piled and scattered at all angles and levels like a child's disordered blocks; antiquity hovering on gray wings over winter-whitened gables and gambrel roofs. Against the rotting wharves, the sea pounded; the secretive, immemorial sea out of which the people had come in the elder time.

Beside the road at its crest, a still higher summit rose, bleak and windswept, and I saw that it was a burying ground where black gravestones stuck ghoulishly through the snow like the decayed fingernails of a gigantic corpse. The printless road was very lonely, and sometimes I thought I heard a distant horrible creaking as of gallows in the wind. They had hanged four kinsmen of mine for witchcraft in 1692, but I did not know exactly where this occurred.

As the road wound down the seaward slope, I listened for the merry sounds of a village in the evening but did not hear them. Then I thought of the season and felt that these old Puritan folk might well have Christmas customs strange to me, and full of silent hearthside prayer. After that, I did not listen for merriment or look for wayfarers but kept on past the hushed, lighted farmhouses and shadowy stone walls to where the signs of ancient shops and sea taverns creaked in the salt breeze, and the grotesque knockers of pillared doorways glistened along deserted, unpaved lanes in the light of diminutive, curtained windows.

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I had seen maps of the town and knew where to find the home of my people. It was told that I should be known and welcomed, for village legend lives long. So, I hastened through Back Street to Circle Court, and across the fresh snow on the one full flagstone pavement in the town, to where Green Lane leads off behind the Market House. I was glad I had chosen to walk. The white village had seemed very beautiful from the hill; and now I was eager to knock at the door of my people, the seventh house on the left in Green Lane, with an ancient, peaked roof and jutting second story, all built before 1650.

There were lights inside the house when I came upon it, and I saw from the diamond windowpanes that it must have been kept very close to its antique state. The upper part overhung the narrow, grass-grown street and nearly met the overhanging part of the opposite house, so that I was in a tunnel, with the low stone doorstep wholly free from snow. There was no sidewalk, but many houses had high doors reached by double flights of steps with iron railings. It was an odd scene, and because I was strange to New England, I had never known anything like it before. Though it pleased me, I would have relished it better if there had been footprints in the snow, people in the streets, and a few windows without drawn curtains.



When I tapped the archaic iron door knocker, I was half afraid. Some fear had been gathering in me, perhaps because of the strangeness of my heritage, the bleakness of the evening, and the oddness of the silence in that aged town of curious customs. When my knock was answered I was thoroughly afraid because I had not heard any footsteps before the door creaked open. But I was not afraid long; for the gowned, old man wearing slippers had a bland face and stood stoically in the doorway. His presence reassured me, and though he made signs that he was dumb, he wrote a quaint and ancient welcome with the stylus and wax tablet he carried.

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He beckoned me into a low, candlelit room with massively exposed rafters and dark, stiff, sparse furniture of the seventeenth century. The past was vivid there, for not one attribute of that time was missing. There was a cavernous fireplace and a spinning wheel where a bent old woman in a loose wrapper and deep poke bonnet sat with her back to me, silently spinning despite the festive season. An infinite dampness seemed to envelop the place and I marveled that no fire was blazing. The high-backed wooden bench faced the row of curtained windows at the left, and it seemed to me that someone was occupying it, though I was not sure. I did not like everything about what I saw and again felt the fear I had earlier. This fear grew stronger the more I looked at the old man's bland face, the more its very blandness terrified me. The eyes never moved, and the skin was too wax-like. Finally, I was sure it was not a face at all, but a fiendishly cunning mask. But the flabby hands, curiously gloved, wrote genially on the tablet and told me I must wait a while before he could lead me to the place of the festival.

Pointing to a chair, a table, and a pile of books, the old man now left the room. When I sat down to read I saw that the books were worn and moldy and that they had included old Morryster's wild *Marvels of Science*, the terrible *Saducismus Triumphatus* of Joseph Glanvil, published in 1681, the shocking *Daemonolatreia* of Remigius, printed in 1595 at Lyons, and worst of all, the unmentionable *Necronomicon*² of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, in Olaus Wormius' forbidden Latin translation: a book which I had never seen, but of which I had heard monstrous things whispered. No one spoke to me, but I could hear the creaking signs in the wind outside, and the whirl of the wheel as the bonneted old woman continued her silent spinning, spinning, spinning.

² NECRONOMICON: also referred to as the Book of the Dead, or under a purported original Arabic title of Kitab al-Azil

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I thought the room and the books and the people very morbid and disquieting, but because an old tradition of my father's had summoned me to strange feastings, I resolved to expect strange things. To quiet myself, I tried to read, and soon became tremblingly absorbed by something I found in that accursed *Necronomicon* — a thought and a legend too hideous for sanity or consciousness. I became suddenly disturbed when I imagined I heard the closing of one of the windows that faced the wooden bench as if it had been stealthily opened. It seemed to follow the whirring of the old woman's spinning wheel. This was not much, though, for the old woman was spinning very hard, and the aged clock had been striking. After that, I lost the feeling that there was a person on the wooden bench and was reading intently and shudderingly when the old man came back booted and dressed in a loose antique costume and sat down on that very wooden bench so that I could not see him. I was unquestionably nervous while waiting, and the blasphemous book in my hands made it doubly so. However, when 11 o'clock struck the old man stood up, glided to a massive carved chest in a corner, and got two hooded cloaks, one which he donned, and the other which he draped around the old woman, who had suddenly ceased her monotonous spinning. Then they both started ambling to the outer door; the woman creeping lamely, and the old man, after picking up the very book I had been reading, beckoned me as he drew his hood over that unmoving masked face.

We went out into the moonless and tortuous network of that incredibly ancient town; went out as the lights in the curtained windows disappeared one by one, and the Dog Star³ leered at the throng of cowled, cloaked figures that poured silently from every doorway and formed monstrous processions up this street and that, past the creaking

³ DOG STAR: Sirius is nicknamed the Dog Star because it's the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major, which means "greater dog" in Latin.

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signs and antediluvian⁴ gables, the thatched roofs and the diamond-paned windows, threading precipitous lanes where decaying houses overlapped and crumbled together, gliding across open courts and churchyards where the bobbing lanterns made eldritch drunken constellations.

Amid these hushed throngs, I followed my voiceless guides, jostled by elbows that seemed preternaturally soft and pressed by chests and stomachs that seemed abnormally pulpy, but never seeing a face and never hearing a word. Up, up, up, the eerie columns slithered, and I saw that all the travelers were converging as they flowed near a focus of crazy alleys at the top of a high hill in the center of the town, where perched a great white church. I had seen it from the road's crest when I looked at Kingsport in the new dusk, and it had made me shiver because Aldebaran⁵ had seemed to balance itself for a moment on the ghostly spire.

There was an open space around the church; partly a churchyard with spectral shafts, and partly a half-paved square swept nearly bare of snow by the wind and lined with unwholesomely archaic houses having peaked roofs and overhanging gables. Death fires danced over the tombs, revealing gruesome vistas, though unexpectedly failing to cast any shadows. Past the churchyard, where there were no houses, I could see over the hill's summit and watch the glimmer of stars on the harbor, though the town was invisible in the dark. Occasionally, a lantern bobbed horribly through serpentine alleys on its way to overtake the throng that was now slipping speechlessly into the church.

⁴ ANTEDILUVIAN: of or belonging to the time before the biblical Flood.

⁵ ALDEBARAN: the brightest star in the constellation Taurus.

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I waited until the crowd had oozed into the black doorway, and until all the stragglers had followed. The old man was pulling at my sleeve, but I was determined to be the last. Then finally I went into the cave the sinister man and the old spinning woman before me. Crossing the threshold into that swarming temple of unknown darkness, I turned to look at the outside world as the churchyard's phosphorescence cast a sickly glow on the hilltop pavement. As I did so I shuddered. For though the wind had not left much snow, a few patches did remain on the path near the door; and in that fleeting backward look, it seemed to my troubled eyes that they bore no mark of passing feet, not even mine.

The church was scarcely lit by all the lanterns that had entered it, for most of the throng had already vanished. They had streamed up the aisle between the high white pews to the trapdoor of the vaults which yawned loathsomely open just before the pulpit and were now squirming noiselessly in. I followed dumbly down the footworn steps and into the dank, suffocating crypt. The tail of that sinuous line of night marchers seemed extremely horrifying, and as I saw them wriggling into a venerable tomb, they seemed more horrible still. Then I noticed that the tomb's floor had an aperture down which the throng was sliding, and in a moment, we were all descending an ominous staircase of rough-hewn stone; a narrow spiral staircase damp and curiously odorous, that wound endlessly down into the bowels of the hill, past monotonous walls of dripping stone blocks and crumbling mortar. It was a silent, shocking descent, and I observed after a staggering interval that the walls and steps were changing in nature as if chiseled out of the solid rock. What mainly troubled me was that the myriad footfalls made no sound and produced no echoes. After more eons of descent, I saw some side passages and burrows leading from unknown recesses of blackness to this shaft of night-filled mystery. Soon they became excessively numerous, like impious catacombs of nameless menace; and their pungent odor of decay grew quite unbearable. I knew we must have passed down

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through the mountain and beneath the earth of Kingsport itself, and I shivered that a town should be so aged and maggoty with subterranean evil.

Then I saw the lurid shimmering of pale light and heard the insidious lapping of sunless waters. Again, I shivered, for I did not embrace the events that the night had brought and wished bitterly that no forefather had summoned me to this primal rite. As the steps and the passage grew broader, I heard another sound, the thin, whining mockery of a feeble flute; and suddenly there spread out before me the boundless vista of an inner world — a vast fungous shore lit by a belching column of sick greenish flame and washed by a wide oily river that flowed from a frightful abyss and unsuspected to join the blackest gulfs of the immemorial ocean.



Fainting and gasping, I looked at that unhallowed Erebus⁶ of titan toadstools, leprous fire, and slimy water, and saw the cloaked throngs forming a semicircle around the blazing pillar. It was the Yule-rite, older than man and fated to survive him; the primal rite of the solstice and of spring's promise beyond the snows; the rite of fire and evergreen, light and music. In that Stygian⁷ grotto I saw them do the rite, and adore the sick pillar of flame, and throw into the water handfuls gouged out of the viscous vegetation which glittered green in the chlorotic glare. I saw this, and I saw something amorously squatted far away from the light, piping noisomely on a flute; and as the thing piped, I thought I heard noxious muffled fluttering in the fetid darkness where I could not see. But what frightened me most was that flaming column, spouting volcanically from depths profound and inconceivable, casting no shadows as healthy

⁶ EREBUS: the primeval god of darkness and the son of Chaos.

⁷ STYGIAN: relating to the Styx River.

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flames should, and coating the nitrous stone above with nasty, venomous verdigris. For in all that seething combustion, no warmth lay, but only the clamminess of death and corruption.

The man who had brought me here now squirmed to a point directly beside the hideous flame and made stiff ceremonial motions to the semicircle he faced. At certain stages of the ritual, they performed groveling obeisance⁸, especially when he held above his head that abhorrent *Necronomicon* he had taken with him; and I shared all the obeisance's because I had been summoned to this festival by the writings of my forefathers. Then the old man made a signal to the half-seen flute player in the darkness, when thereupon the player changed its feeble drone to a scarce louder drone in another key, precipitating as it did so a horror unthinkable and unexpected. At this horror I sank nearly to the lichened earth, transfixed with a dread not of this nor any world, but only of the mad spaces between the stars.

Out of the unimaginable blackness beyond the gangrenous glare of that cold flame, out of the Tartarean⁹ leagues through which that oily river rolled uncanny, unheard, and unsuspected, there flopped rhythmically a horde of tame, trained, hybrid winged beasts that no sound eye could ever wholly grasp, or sound brain ever wholly remember. They were not altogether crows, nor moles, nor buzzards, nor ants, nor vampire bats, nor decomposed human beings, but something I cannot and must not recall. They flopped limply along, half with their webbed feet and half with their membranous wings; and as they reached the throng of celebrants the cowled figures seized and

⁸ OBEISANCE: deferential respect

⁹ TARTAREAN: hellish, infernal, sulfurous

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mounted them and rode off one by one along the reaches of that unlighted river, into pits and galleries of panic where poison springs feed frightful and undiscoverable cataracts.

The old spinning woman had gone with the throng, and only the old man remained because I had refused him when he motioned me to seize an animal and ride like the rest. I saw when I staggered to my feet that the amorphous flute player had rolled out of sight, but that two of the beasts were patiently standing by. As I hung back, the old man produced his stylus and tablet and wrote that he was the true deputy of my fathers who had founded the Yule worship in this ancient place; that it had been decreed I should come back; and that the most secret mysteries were yet to be performed. He wrote this in a very ancient hand, and when I still hesitated, he pulled from his loose robe a seal ring and a watch with my family arms, to prove that he was what he said. But it was hideous proof because I knew from old papers that the watch had been buried with my great-great-great-great-grandfather in 1698.

Presently, the old man drew back his hood and pointed to the family resemblance in his face, but I only shuddered, because I was sure that the face was merely a devilish waxen mask. The flopping animals were now scratching restlessly at the lichens, and I saw that the old man was nearly as restless himself. When one of the flying beasts began to waddle and edge away, he turned quickly to stop it; so that the suddenness of his motion dislodged the waxen mask from what should have been his face. Then, because my nightmare position barred me from the stone staircase down which we had come, I flung myself into the oily underground river that bubbled somewhere in the caves to the sea; I flung myself into that putrescent juice of earth's inner horrors before the madness of my screams could bring down upon me all the charnel legions these pest-gulfs might conceal.

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At the hospital they told me I had been found half-frozen in Kingsport Harbor at dawn, clinging to a large drifting mast that accident sent to save me. They told me I had taken the wrong fork of the hill road the night before and fallen over the cliffs at Orange Point — a conclusion they deducted from footprints found in the snow. There was nothing I could say because everything was wrong. Everything was wrong, because the broad window showed a sea of roofs in which only about one in five was ancient with the sound of trolleys and motors in the streets below. They insisted that this was Kingsport, and I could not deny it.

I went delirious when I heard that the hospital stood near the old churchyard on Central Hill. After this, they sent me to St. Mary's Hospital in Arkham, where I could have better care. I liked it there, for the doctors were broad-minded, and even lent me their influence in obtaining the carefully sheltered copy of Alhazred's objectionable *Necronomicon* from the library of Miskatonic University. They said that I was experiencing psychosis and strongly suggested that I get my harassing obsessions off my mind.

To comfort myself, I read again that hideous chapter and shuddered doubly because it was indeed not new to me. I had seen it before, but let footprints tell what they might, and where I had seen it were best forgotten. There was no one in waking hours who could remind me of it; but my dreams are filled with terror, because of phrases I dare not quote except for one lone paragraph. I translate it into English as best as I can from the awkward Low Latin I know.

“The nethermost caverns,” wrote the mad Arab, “are not for the fathoming of eyes that see, for their marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the ground where dead thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the mind that is held by no head. Wisely, did Ibn

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Schacabac say that happy is the tomb where no wizard has lain, and happy the town at night whose wizards are all in ashes. For it is an old rumor that the soul of the devil worshipper hastes not from his charnel clay but from his vats and instructs *the very worm that gnaws*, until out of corruption horrid life springs, and the dull scavengers of earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great holes are secretly dug where earth's pores ought to suffice, and things have learned to walk that ought to crawl."

THE END