

PULP TIME



P.H. Cannon

Illustrated by
Fabian

An Apocryphal Tale of H.P. Lovecraft
and His Friends, as if Narrated by
Frank Belknap Long, Jr.

PULPTIME



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Being a Singular Adventure of
Sherlock Holmes, H. P. Lovecraft, and the Kalem Club,
As if Narrated by Frank Belknap Long, Jr.

P.H. Cannon

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Fabian

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DEDICATION

For my grandparents,

Lillian R. Cannon and Charles P. Harper

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FOREWORD

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

I've often thought that Sherlock Holmes and H. P. Lovecraft were more closely akin, in almost every aspect of their approach to the problems of daily living, and the realities of their age, than might ordinarily be suspected.

Both were **originals**, in the best and most defiant sense of that greatly abused, and often misunderstood, term. Both were **strong-willed**, and would have laughed to scorn the charge of eccentricity, if only because the adoption of certain so-called poses helped them to express some aspects of their personalities which were of vital emotional importance to them. Let others mock what was as natural to them as breathing, and let all such carpers be damned!

The resemblances become even more striking when we break them down, and consider them one by one. Both men were hermitlike in many ways, preferring a bachelor life of their own choosing, where originality of thought could be pursued in some measure remote from the whirlwind distractions of big city life (even though London dwarfed Providence in that respect, the latter was not exactly a village). The fact that Lovecraft was married for a brief period, and traveled quite a bit in his later years, does not alter the basic resemblance here. Holmes traveled even more extensively, and took an active part in many of the investigations he set in motion. But always he returned to his Baker Street lodgings, to create about himself the legend that has

become familiar to us all.

The creation of such a legend, never a simple or less than inspiration-inspiring thing, no matter how much it may be in accord with a man's strongest impulses, brings up another point of resemblance of major importance.

Whatever pursuits may have fascinated Holmes to an extreme degree, enabling him to deal with the criminal mind in both a coldly scientific and miraculously intuitive way, he remained primarily, as did HPL, an artist to his fingertips. To combine such a legend with a body of work that is outstanding in itself can never be less than a work of art.

Although HPL liked to pretend that he was far more interested in things apart from his writing, such as his New England heritage in general, and ancient, gambrel-roofed houses in the sunset's glow, and the sweep of cosmic immensities which made all human striving seem ultimately meaningless when viewed in the light of exploding suns, it was the **combination** of his stories and poems, and that other, legendary aspect of himself which provided him with the kind of fame that will endure — and this I have never doubted — well into the twenty-first century. And that is just as true of Holmes (always remembering, of course, that there may not be a twenty-first century for Man).

I was pondering all of this when, a short while ago, Peter Cannon placed before me a manuscript bearing the byline of a long-vanished young writer who had yielded to no one in his respect and admiration for Holmes, and who had accompanied HPL on many walks in his now legendary New York days and shared with him the enchanted vistas of those far-off realms which his pen turned wholly magical across the years.

The wonder of it, I must confess, left me totally stunned. "How did this ever come into your possession?" I finally managed to gasp.

"Well, you see, I —" Peter's voice trailed off for a moment, as if he were marshalling all of his defenses to justify what he'd done.

"I wrote it myself, of course," he said at last. "I took the liberty of attaching your name to it as the

author because I felt you wouldn't really mind."

My name! I thought. Of all the gall—

It is always disturbing to be forced, right out of the blue, to ask yourself an often-quoted question: "Oh say, could that boy have been I?" But when I remembered what a dedicated Lovecraftian Peter had been for more than a decade my momentary pique was gone.

Just in the past seven or eight years books about HPL have increased so greatly in number — including, of course, my Arkham House Memoir, **Dreamer on the Nightside** — that to discuss them in a critical way, however briefly, would exceed the space limitations I've set myself here. But Peter's achievement can be summarized quite simply. Without some recent and direct source material to guide him at the time, Peter secured an M.A. at Brown University through his early interest in the Lovecraftian supernatural horror story *Mythos*, and since then, as an editor in a major publishing house in New York — located at the very core of the Big Apple, so to speak — he has brought a vanished era to life in so imaginatively splendid a way that I have no wish to challenge a word of it, beyond one small matter which a reading of HPL's letters probably led him to exaggerate. My health at that period was far from good, and I had **recently suffered a heart attack**. Whenever I returned at a late hour from the wilds of Brooklyn — there were a few lethal muggings even in those days — my mother stayed awake, and worried. And her own health at that time had me worried, since her physician had warned her not to lift anything heavy, and avoid all housework of a strenuous nature. To HPL she appeared over-solicitous and she undoubtedly was, to some extent, but not nearly as much so as was HPL's mother when he went rambling about Providence in the small hours. My father's concern was just as genuine, but he had the good sense to realize that if you don't take risks, even grave ones at times, you curtail independence.

Oh yes — just one thing more, which Peter couldn't possibly have known about. In my last and final conversation with Holmes he made a surprising revelation. "This fellow Doyle," he said, "meant well

—he always did. But it was Watson who had the wit and wisdom to truly understand me. He was a man of superb intellectual perceptiveness. He downplayed all of that deliberately, pretending to be just the opposite. It pleased him to put on a mask, pretending to be a naive and credulous dolt because — well, because he was an artist to his fingertips. He was somewhat like Boswell in that respect, and we all know now, from the many volumes of Boswell's letters, that he was Johnson's peer, and perhaps more than his peer, in the position he occupies in the hierarchy of the immortals."

"But the Lovecraft cult, I fear, is on even a more infantile level than the Baker Street Irregulars and the cult of Sherlock Holmes."

—Edmund Wilson

**THE HOUND
OF THE
BANKERVILLES**



PULPTIME

I

One dreary spring afternoon, in April of '25, I was immersed in a volume of Swinburne, when my mother knocked on my bedroom door and announced that Howard was on the 'phone. So absorbed had I been in the floral excesses of that extravagant poet, that I hadn't noticed the ring. I immediately set aside my book, and rushed into the hallway to grab the receiver.

"Howard, you're back from the South!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed I am, Belknapius," said my friend. "It was truly an aesthetically satisfying trip for the Old Gentleman. The neo-Greek and -Roman architecture of the Federal City really brought home a vivid sense of the Periclean or Augustan Age... as I wrote you."

"Yes, I got your postcards. Thanks." I didn't bother to mention that, out of the half dozen cards he'd sent, so crammed had they been with his minuscule script declaiming playfully about our nation's capital "named for that traitor against his lawful majesty, King George III," two had been charged an extra cent each postage due.

"Some 48 hours I believe it's been since I returned to this Babylonish burg—most of it spent sawing the proverbial log. Right now, though, I'm feeling in the mood to blow a buck on a re'lar feed. Any chance you could pop out to Brooklyn and join me for a bite at the local Italian eatery?"

"I'm sure mother and dad won't mind. I can easily meet you there by six."

My parents consented to my outing, though my mother insisted that I wear my raincoat, in spite of every sign that the sky was clearing. An hour later I had left the Upper West Side of Manhattan and was riding the IRT train, crowded with businessmen and secretaries headed home at the end of the work day, across the East River into Brooklyn. I brought along my Swinburne, to keep me company during the journey. I disembarked at Borough Hall, and walked the few blocks east to Willoughby Street, the site of John's Spaghetti Place. While

the many fine houses of 19th-century vintage along my route revealed that this had once been a prosperous district, the area now retained at best an air of shabby respectability—a far cry from the lovely Parkside address Howard had had to give up after Sonia's departure for a job in the Midwest at New Year's.

I had a while to wait outside the diner, Howard being notoriously unpunctual, before I spotted the distinctive form of my mentor approaching me with quick, jerky strides from the other side of the street.

"Good ole Sonny!" cried Howard Lovecraft, as he seized my hand. "I'll be damned! You haven't changed a bit in my absence. Still sporting those hairs on your upper lip, I see—four on one side, five on the other..."

I ignored Howard's little joke about my moustache, but I may well have winced slightly at "Sonny"—a nickname, as I've noted elsewhere, that I've never cared for. Would that he'd stick to the dignified, Latinate "Belknapius" when addressing me, his favorite "grandson."

For my part, I was pleased to find Howard in good spirits, which had been all too rare in recent months with his continuing failure to secure a job. Though he never discussed his financial situation with me, I knew his revision work couldn't be bringing in much of an income, and he hadn't sold an original story in over a year. Nor had he written one since "The Shunned House" in October.

I was pleased, too, to note that my friend appeared to have lost even more weight during his travels. After his marriage to Sonia in March of last year, he'd positively ballooned out under her solicitous care and steady feeding. From first-hand experience I knew what an excellent cook she was. Now he was close to resembling again the lean figure I'd first met in person in April of '22, while he'd been courting his future wife in Brooklyn.

Over a plateful of spaghetti and meat balls HPL held forth on the architectural delights of Washington, D.C., which he and George Kirk, a friend who occupied the room above him at his boarding house on Clinton Street, had been shown by E. L. Sechrist, a correspondent who was an anthropologist at the Smithsonian. He explained that Mrs. Renshaw, a revision client, had driven them about in her motor-car, but more memorable really had been the exploring on foot.

"At last," said Howard, "after traversing a delectable bit of Park, Kirk and I reached the Capitol on its commanding elevation, and began to circumnavigate it till we reached that central and original portion whose corner-stone was laid by

General Washington, with Masonic ceremonies, in 1793... The original Capitol building — central portion with dome, and the two wings — was finished in 1827; the two extensions being added during the 'fifties. As I gazed upon this gigantic construction, I could not but compare it with other similar buildings I had seen; and I will confess that some of its rivals did not suffer by the estimate. For perfect artistry of form, delicacy of detail, and purity of material, it cannot compete with the modern Rhode Island State House."

With the monologue now round to Providence, to home, Howard grew grim, his long jaw slackened. He began to speak wistfully of his native city, or at least of certain geographic regions within it — Exchange Place, Market Square, Narragansett Bay, Quisnicket Park, the "Antient Hill."

I'd been finished some time, before Howard finally ate his last bite of vanilla ice cream (washed down with the dregs of a cup of sugar-laden coffee), and we left John's Spaghetti Place. This nostalgic talk of Providence led my comrade to remark upon his present less than ideal circumstances. As we strolled leisurely back toward the boarding house at 169 Clinton, he had a lot to say about one of his fellow lodgers.

"That Syrian with the room next to mine still plays eldritch and whining monotones on a strange bagpipe. Just last night it made me dream ghoulish and indescribable things of crypts under Bagdad and limitless corridors of Eblis beneath the moon-cursed ruins of Istakhar. I have yet to see this man — in my imagination he wears a turban and long robe of figured silk — so I can picture him in any shape that lends glamour to his weird pneumatic cacophonies."

For a moment Howard seemed to brood on this exotic image. Then he continued.

"On the brighter side, since my return I've discovered a new tenant — an honest-to-God white man — living on the floor above me. An elderly fellow, he apparently keeps as odd hours as Grandpa; for I encountered him in the front hall quite early this morning. He was sneaking about in the most outlandish garb, yet I detected a certain nobility in his wrinkled visage. He introduced himself — in a flat, twangy voice — as 'Mr. Altamont of Chicago.'"

Chicago, home of **Weird Tales**, I thought. Where Howard might have been at this moment had he cared to accept the editorship of "The Unique Magazine" when the owner, J. C. Henneberger, offered it to him last March. Alas, that he had had to turn it down, because Chicago has no Georgian buildings!

As we neared Howard's boarding house, from about a block's distance, we spied a knot of three people gathered in conversation on the stoop of 169 Clinton. In the fading light it wasn't easy to tell, but one appeared to be a tall, older man with a bushy white beard, while the other two had all the earmarks of young street toughs. Abruptly one of the latter shoved the bearded fellow, who in reaction put up his dukes in John L. Sullivan fashion and began to return the blows. Howard and I glanced at one another, then started to run toward the scuffle, no one else being in the vicinity.

As we charged down the sidewalk, we could see that the toughs were getting the better of their older adversary, who nonetheless kept fighting in a spirited way, until a solid shot to the head felled him to the ground. Noticing our rapid approach, the two youths abandoned their victim and fled up the street into the gloom.

"Good God, Frank," said Howard as we bent over the sprawled figure, trying to raise himself on his elbows. "It's that new lodger I was just telling you about... Are you all right, Mr. Altamont?"

"I'm okay, mister," gasped the man. "Those guys didn't break nothin', I guess."

"Filthy, rat-faced Asiatic slime," muttered Howard, looking in the direction of the by now vanished assailants.

We carefully helped Mr. Altamont to his feet, and despite his protests led him, breathing heavily and making feeble motions to brush the dust off his checked suit, inside the boarding house and into Howard's ground-floor room. There we insisted that he lie down on the fold-out couch that served as HPL's bed. For someone his age, Mr. Altamont clearly had a strong, sinewy physique, however unsteady his movements. After a minute or two of resting in a seeming daze, deaf to our entreaties, he sat up on the couch, his gray eyes alert above his ample whiskers. He drank a glass of water Howard had drawn for him from the tiny corner sink and began to speak:

"Pardon me, gents, but at 71 an old duffer such as myself ain't the one for fisticuffs like I used to be. Otherwise I'd've shown those hooligans a thing or two... I'm much obliged to you — Mr. Lovecraft, ain't it? — and to your young pal here for the timely rescue."

We murmured that it was no matter, that we only regretted not having arrived a few seconds sooner. And then, ever mindful of the formalities, Howard said, "This is my good friend, Frank Belknap Long, Junior."

"You're a bit on the bookish side, I bet," said the man,



turning his keen eye on me. "You've got that dreamy look too." I was taken aback by the old codger's perceptiveness, then realized he must have spotted the Swinburne verses clutched in my hand—though this was an unlikely remark, it struck me, coming from someone of apparently little education.

"Ho, ho, a regular Sherlock Holmes, eh what, Sonny?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Altamont.

"Precisely?" said Howard.

"I am Sherlock Holmes," he said, suddenly speaking in a decidedly cultivated British accent. A trace of a smile showed on his lips, and a twinkle glinted in his eye.

"Are you indeed, my dear sir," answered HPL in his haughtiest of upper-class New England tones. He exchanged a knowing glance with me, as if to say let's humor the fellow. "Very well then. Would you mind giving us a demonstration of your renowned powers of deduction to prove your identity? Anyone can see that Belknap here is a delicate dreamer, but what can you deduce about myself?"

"As for yourself, Mr. Lovecraft," he said, nodding toward Howard's extensive bookshelf, "you are even more erudite than your young friend; but rather squeamish for a writer of tales of such monstrous mayhem. A pity that your career as an author of the supernatural has not proven as lucrative as one might wish."

Howard flushed visibly at this personal observation.

"Pray forgive me," he continued, "but every evidence from your threadbare (albeit neatly patched) suit to your Spartan larder points to a frugal existence."

Howard looked furtively over at the shelf stocked with cans of spaghetti and baked beans, packages of crackers, and packets of sugar scrounged from cafeterias which constituted his food supply.

"And, I venture, you have an abnormal sensitivity to cold weather..."

"What, how..."

"My dear Lovecraft, your kerosene heater, judging from the odour in this room, has obviously been much in use lately. Now the weather, as unsettled and cool as it has been, has not been unusually cold. Your average American, especially one of limited means like yourself, would not be apt to use such a device, unless warmth were a prime consideration... And yes, I realise our landlady is British, and hence prone to keep the furnace at low heat."

"But, but how did you know about my... my 'squeamishness' as you put it?" Howard's lantern jaw had sagged almost a foot by this point in the demonstration.

"In the course of our encounter early this morning in the hallway, I observed that you were headed for the community rubbish bin, carrying a couple of used mousetraps at arm's length. Now only a man of at least moderate circumstances could afford to dispose of two perfectly good mousetraps, as these clearly were—or else a man who did not care to handle small animal carcasses."

Although Howard wasn't altogether pleased by our visitor's amazing deductions about himself, a certain startled look of wonder on my friend's face indicated to me that any doubts as to the veracity of the old gentleman's claim were fast receding. As for myself, I had in the course of this dialogue come to accept the man's assertion as to his identity, and now stood gaping like a yokel in speechless awe.

"Sherlock Holmes!" exclaimed Howard, persuaded at last. "Why I used to be infatuated with you! I read every one of Dr. Watson's stories,* and even organised a detective agency at thirteen, arrogating to myself the proud name of S. H...."

"My blushes," replied the great detective, "but if you will allow me to repay the compliment, you should realise that you are not entirely unknown in England, Mr. H. P. Lovecraft. Copies of **Weird Tales** do reach us across the Atlantic — where, I might add, many readers of discrimination, myself included, consider your 'Rats in the Walls' the finest tale of supernatural horror to come out of America since the work of your countryman, Mr. Poe."

To these handsome words of praise, which undoubtedly put to rest any remaining ill-feelings, Howard responded with characteristic modesty: "You mustn't take us **Weird Tales** hacks seriously, Mr. Holmes. Arthur Machen, M. R. James, Blackwood, Lord Dunsany — your native English and Celtic authors — they are your modern masters of the tale of supernatural horror."

"Only later generations can determine who will hold the most exalted rank in the genre, Mr. Lovecraft. In the meantime, I advise you not to let your natural humility cause you to undervalue your own talents, to the detriment of your original fiction writing."

How much longer this mutual admiration would have gone on I can't say, but by this juncture I could restrain my curiosity no longer. With all the impetuosity of my 22 years, I abruptly asked the obvious question: "But Mr. Holmes,

* But perhaps not **His Last Bow**, else HPL might have caught on to the Mr. Altamont guise right away [Ed.'s note].

what are you doing in the United States? And in Brooklyn, in a boarding house, of all places? I thought you'd retired to the English countryside and were raising bees."

"Quite to the point, young man," he replied. "Please forgive me if I do not explain everything at once. For the moment suffice it to say that an extremely important case—a case involving one of Britain's most respected figures—has brought me to your hospitable shores." His lined face grew grim, as if memories of some dark deed weighed heavily upon him.

"In any event," he continued, brightening, "the quiet life on the Sussex Downs, with all its agreeable features, has been too often dull. I was in need of a voyage, and wanted to see your grand country one final time before age forces an end to any extensive travelling."

"We're infinitely honoured by your presence," said Howard.

"I must confess, Mr. Lovecraft," said the venerable detective, "that my conclusions about your living habits were not drawn solely from my own observations, since you so kindly brought me to your rooms. A mutual friend has told me a good deal about you. Furthermore, my taking lodgings at 169 Clinton Street was no accident. I would have disclosed my true identity to you soon enough, had not this evening's little mishap provoked the revelation. Perhaps it is all for the best."

"A mutual friend, you say?" said Howard.

"Yes, the celebrated conjuror and escape artist, Harry Houdini. When I communicated with him prior to my sailing for New York and asked as to suitable allies outside the official forces that might aid me in this matter of utmost delicacy, he recommended you. Soon after my arrival, disguised as a retired English squire, I met with Houdini, who supplied me with more details as to your qualifications. I was persuaded that you were my man—a gentleman whose good sense and discretion I could trust. With delight I learned that you are an indefatigable walker, and are quite familiar with the more obscure byways and alleys of Manhattan and Brooklyn."

"Only in certain older districts, where there're still survivals of an earlier, more gracious age than the current decadent era," said HPL.

"And you do engage in free-lance 'literary' work, Houdini tells me. Might you consider a job of a non-literary nature, but which would make use of your skills as a guide? I daresay you might find the pay somewhat more remunerative."

"I'm terribly flattered, Mr. Holmes, though I scarcely imagine that I'd be equal to the task..."

"Well, you may not be required to act as my sole lieutenant... But enough for now. Events have happened so quickly, with surprises for us all. You need time to think matters over — I shall say no more tonight. I am rather fatigued, and also have this bruise to nurse." So saying Mr. Holmes rose slowly and deliberately from the couch and tottered to the door, with one hand at his temple and the other waving aside any proffered assistance.

"One final word before I retire to my own room. I must have the assurance of you both that you will keep my identity — and of course my presence here — a secret. It is essential to my effectiveness that I remain incognito."

We readily gave him our assent.

"Do not even hint of this in your letters to your aunts, Mr. Lovecraft," said the detective, shaking a slim hand towards Howard's desk, where lay the start of one of his lengthy epistles describing the minutiae of his daily existence to his Aunt Lillian Clark in Providence. "There will be time enough tomorrow to discuss matters in detail and make decisions. Until then I bid you good-night, gentlemen, with heartfelt thanks again for appearing 'in the nick of time,' as they say.

"No, please, I can make it up the stairs on my own steam," he said, exiting with a short bow.

After the departure of our extraordinary guest, Howard and I looked at one another in stunned silence. To be honored by the confidence of no less a personage than Sherlock Holmes! The implications were overwhelming. All we could manage at last to say was that we'd talk the next day. The hour was getting on, and I didn't want to be riding the subway too late. At parting, Howard promised to call me as soon as he and Mr. Holmes had had a chance to confer — and we both vowed to keep this wonderful secret of Great Britain's foremost private consulting detective to ourselves.

H

I waited at home the next day, too excited to concentrate on either reading or writing, for Howard to 'phone, which he finally did in the early evening. He apologized for not getting in touch sooner, but he and Mr. Holmes had been engaged in intense conversation all through the afternoon.

"The man's no less remarkable in person than in Dr. Watson's accounts, Belknap," said Howard. "Age seems to have little affected his keen intelligence. The good doctor's assertions to the contrary in **A Study in Scarlet**, he has a wide and brilliant knowledge of many subjects. The only disturbing sign is a certain air of abstraction, a shortness of his attention span at times, perhaps a result of the blow he received from those hoodlums yesterday."

"Where is he now?"

"Taking a nap. He does seem to need his rest." Howard paused a moment, then continued. "I must say I'm immensely gratified that he seeks my help in this 'case'—and yours, too, Belknapius. We discussed it, and we agreed there was every advantage in bringing you in on it. We old gentlemen could use a fresh, energetic kid like yourself..."

How my friend, less than half the age of Sherlock Holmes, could persist in his "old man" conceit in the circumstances was beyond me, but I held my tongue.

"As for the particulars of the case and what Mr. Holmes specifically desires of us, you'll learn soon enough. Two days from now we'll be coming into Manhattan to pay a call on Houdini, who'll give us the straight dope. By all means you must join us for the meeting."

"Why don't you first stop by here with Mr. Holmes," I said. "Then we could go on to Houdini's place—he lives nearby..."

"That's an excellent idea, Sonny. Swell. Unless Mr. Holmes has any objections, we'll plan on swinging by the House of Long earlier that afternoon."

"And he does plan to pay you?"

"Indeed, yes. He repeated his promise to **pay** Grandpa —

and you — actual long green; you know, kale, jake, berries, details yet to be worked out. Boy, if this detective business doesn't beat David V. Bush revisionism all to hell!..."

"What shall we tell my parents?"

"I suppose we could tell them that he's an amateur press associate of mine from Great Britain—or some such. Before our rendezvous I'm sure he and I can work out some plausible explanation for our acquaintance.

"By the way, I've persuaded our distinguished friend to drop that corny accent and ridiculous slang—he'll blow his cover if he keeps it up." Howard himself, of course, from time to time among those he knew well indulged in the use of slang, aware of the humorous contrast it made with his naturally formal and precise, almost archaic manner of speech.

In closing Howard said that he had to go shortly to wake up the detective, to take him on a walking tour of the Clinton Street neighborhood.

My parents wondered at my agitated behavior over the next two days, my mother fearing it might be the onset of some nervous affliction, but I assured her I was quite all right, just anxious for them to meet Howard's "English colleague," on vacation in America.

When HPL and Sherlock Holmes showed up at our apartment at 825 West End Avenue (well before the hour of our appointment with Houdini), Howard introduced his companion to my parents as "John Altamont, Esquire—of Devon" (not Chicago). My mother insisted that our visitors have some tea, while my father returned to his dental surgery offices next door.

Once settled comfortably in the parlor, our foreign guest explained in his normal British voice that amateur journalism had become his chief hobby in retirement.

"While his natural modesty precludes him from saying so," put in Howard, "Mr. Altamont is in truth one of the leading lights in the Transatlantic Circulator. He and I have engaged in a most lively correspondence through that organization since its inception in 1921."

"Perhaps the pleasantest aspect of my American holiday so far," responded the detective, "has been my meeting in person one so celebrated in the circles of the National Amateur Press Association—along with his delightful friends." He repeated this last phrase with a wink towards my mother.

"Are you married, Mr. Altamont?" asked my mother, as she poured out the fragrant Oolong tea.

"I am not, madam, nor have I ever been," answered Sherlock Holmes. "To have admitted the intrusion of the softer passions into my own delicate and finely adjusted temperament would have introduced a distracting factor which might have thrown doubt upon all my mental results. For the man of highly developed intellect, they have no place."

Since my parents were used to my associating with all manner of eccentric persons, with all manner of eccentric views, my mother betrayed no particular surprise at this statement.

"Oh, Mr. Altamont, you can hardly expect me to take you seriously," she said. "Why look at Howard here. He's certainly a man of 'highly developed intellect,' yet he's found it in his heart to take a wife... How is Sonia, might I ask? Has she had any success in finding a job in the Midwest?"

"She's well, thank you, Mrs. Long," said Howard. "She's not as bothered by nerve trouble as she was. She has a number of leads in the job hunt. I believe she'll be back to New York for another visit next month." Conversation fell into something of an awkward lull after this, and we had barely finished our first cup of tea before Howard suggested that it was time to head over to Houdini's. "The sprightly wizard has an extremely busy schedule, and I wouldn't want to keep him waiting for an instant," he announced.

As we took our leave, Sherlock Holmes thanked my mother with much show of gallantry, which appeared to make a great hit with her. Since there was a little time yet before our appointment, we determined to follow a roundabout route through Riverside Park. There, on the embankment by Grant's Tomb overlooking the Hudson, all golden and shimmering in the late afternoon light, we paused to admire the view. Howard began to wax in characteristic fashion about the sunset and architectural vistas which so potently provoked his fancy and so on—all very familiar to me from repeated hearings but of course new to the detective.

"Coming for the first time upon the town," began Howard, "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 clouds and the first stars of evening..."

As HPL continued to rhapsodize in this vein, I noticed a certain glazed look come over the eyes of Sherlock Holmes. Truly Howard's speech was having a hypnotic, one might almost say soporific, effect on him. At last Howard stopped, and the spell was broken. "Most poetic, most poetic," mumbled the detective, abruptly coming back to life.

We moved on, back along the picturesque, winding paths of the park, the older men walking briskly in long strides ahead, while I trotted to keep up a few feet behind. I sensed that a strong rapport already existed between my two companions—a real sympathy of character and temperament. And, as fragments of talk of complicated chemistry experiments reached me to the rear, I'll admit I felt a sharp twinge of inadequacy, for being so obviously not nearly the equal of either of these two geniuses.

At 278 West 113th Street, a solid building with elaborate stonework in the Romanesque style, we rode the plush elevator up to the Houdinis' 10th floor apartment. Mrs. Houdini greeted us warmly at the door, then ushered us down an ornately carpeted hallway, lavishly furnished with Victorian pieces and knickknacks (not at all to Howard's taste, I knew), to the library of the greatest magician and escape artist of the age. A large mahogany desk, littered with papers, dominated the center of the high-ceilinged room, but our attention was immediately drawn to the walls of bookshelves on every side of us. No doubt here we were face to face with the conjuror's fabled and vast collection of books on magic, occultism, and arcane lore of every description.

After a minute or two (which we put to good use studying the contents of the shelves), Harry Houdini himself entered the room, clutching a copy of a Western adventure magazine. A short, broad-shouldered man, with wiry dark hair shot with grey, and a head like an "idealized bust of a Roman general or consul" (to quote an esteemed American critic), our host shook hands with each of us in turn, with a grip, needless to say, of iron.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please sit down," he said, as he moved around the desk, gesturing towards the Gothic Revival armchairs arrayed before it. He took his own seat, and tossed the magazine amongst the debris atop the desk. "I suppose none of you is keen on cowboy yarns, but I do recommend 'Lightning Kid's Debut' by Phillip Roberts in this issue of **Ace-High.**"

He was right. Neither HPL nor I had ever been a fan of the Western pulps. On the other hand, given his involvement in a number of cases with roots in the American West, Mr. Holmes may have been more receptive to such tales.

"Speaking of fine stories," continued Houdini, "let me tell you again, Lovecraft, how pleased I was with 'Imprisoned with the Pharaohs.' A year after its appearance in **Weird Tales** it



still gives me the creeps to think of it. The bit at the end where the five shaggy-headed monsters turn out to be the fingers of an enormous **paw** came as a real shocker."

"You are too kind, Houdini," said HPL, "though if I do say so myself I went the limit in descriptive realism in the first part, then when I buckled down to the under-the-pyramid stuff I let myself loose and coughed up some of the most nameless, slithering, unmentionable **horror** that ever stalked cloven-hoofed through the tenebrous and necrophagous abysses of elder night."

While Howard had been pleased with the story he had ghost-written for Houdini, it had been a rush job and had brought on one of his more severe headaches. In fact, HPL had spent much of his honeymoon in Philadelphia retyping the manuscript, having lost the original typed copy on the journey from Providence to New York to marry Sonia.

"Now, my dear Holmes," said Houdini, clasping his mighty hands together and leaning forward, "on to the matter at hand. To begin with, how much do our young friends know of this business?"

"I have given Lovecraft a brief account of the background," said the detective after a moment, "but for the benefit of Frank I believe we ought to go over everything from the start. Pray, Houdini, please tell your end of the tale first."

"Very well, Holmes," said Houdini, turning his stern but kindly gaze on me. "Frank, have you ever heard of Jan Martense?"

I answered that I hadn't.

"Yes, I suspect you don't often follow the society columns of our metropolitan newspapers — where the name now and then appears. Martense is a wealthy man, yet unobtrusively so, living quietly for the most part at his mansion on Suydam Street in one of Brooklyn's more fashionable old neighborhoods. He is a man of refinement, a collector of rare books and manuscripts, a patron of the arts. He served his country as a captain of infantry during the World War, and was wounded at Belleau Wood. He is the scion of one of New York's ancient Dutch families — and he is one of the most clever criminal minds operating on the Eastern Seaboard today."

"Astounding that a man — a gentlemen — of such distinguished lineage should turn to crime," interjected HPL.

"What exactly has he done in the criminal line?" I asked.

"Among his nefarious activities," resumed the magician, "is bootlegging. He owns and runs a chain of profitable speakeasies in Brooklyn. Indeed, he keeps an office at one, at Richard and Wolcott Streets. You may know the area;

Lovecraft—it's not far from you.

"Along with the liquor trade, he also trafficks in the smuggling of illegal aliens into this country. He maintains a number of seedy buildings, including a run-down Roman Catholic church, as holding stations for these people near the waterfront in the notorious Red Hook district—the same section as where his speakeasies are located, as it happens. I gather most of these wretches originate from the Middle East or the Orient."

"Unclassified Asian dregs wisely turned back by Ellis Island, in fact, Houdini," said Howard.

"As serious as these crimes are, Martense has managed to keep his own hands clean. The authorities have never been able to connect him directly with these goings-on. Besides, he is on good terms with the Brooklyn police force, who tend to look the other way at the bootlegging and speakeasy operations, and have little desire to probe too deeply into those sinister buildings with their teeming alien hordes by the waterfront. More men are seen to enter than to leave them, I might add. He is a powerful man.

"But, however heinous these activities, they are of little concern to me. He has, though, gotten into a new racket of late that very much does concern me. Does the name Cordelia Garrison sound at all familiar to you, Frank?"

"Yes, it does," I said, "but I can't place it."

"Miss Cordelia Garrison has made something of a sensation among certain circles of New York society—as a spiritualistic medium. She's received no small degree of attention in the papers. Not since the medium Margery created such a fuss in the matter of the **Scientific American** prize contest last year have I encountered such a wily—and charming—opponent. I have several times challenged Miss Garrison to give a demonstration of her spiritualist powers under my supervision, but she refuses to set a date and manages to put me off short of an out-right refusal." Houdini shrugged his massive shoulders, as if in annoyance that a mere woman should frustrate him.

"In any case, I haven't the time to pursue her, as I'm soon leaving on a cross-country tour. At some point I may even have to go to Washington, to testify before Congress concerning pending legislation to outlaw fortune telling in the District of Columbia. Well, you may be wondering what connection all this has with you, gentlemen. Miss Garrison is known to be a very close friend of Jan Martense, who I have every good reason to think has been orchestrating her career. At more than one séance he has appeared as her companion.

Here's where you pick up the thread, Holmes... Holmes?"

The great detective had been leaning back in his chair, fingertips pressed together, eyes closed, seemingly in deep concentration.

"Eh, I say, how's that?" he said at last.

"Holmes, if you will, please tell Howard and Frank a bit more of this link between Miss Garrison and Jan Martense," said Houdini, a trifle testily, I thought.

"Yes, quite so. Thank you, Houdini," said Sherlock Holmes, opening his eyes. "Mr. Martense has lately spent some time in England—to negotiate with his suppliers in the liquor trade. Whilst in my native land, he succeeded by devious means (I won't bore you with the details) in gaining possession of some extremely sensitive documents—documents whose rightful owner would pay any price to have recovered discreetly. This is where I come into the case. The reputation of one of Britain's most illustrious figures hangs in the balance. Confidence requires that I not disclose my client's identity even to present company—at least not at this time."

"Miss Garrison has the support of some very prominent people, I fear," began Houdini, as I wondered to myself who this esteemed personage could be of whom the detective spoke with such solemn secretiveness. "One of them is no less than your celebrated English author, and my friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Only the other week he told reporters that he believed her to be genuine. An endorsement from so eminent a figure only makes our cause the more difficult."

"Spiritualism has never had a more sincere champion," added Sherlock Holmes. "But to return to the main point, Houdini. We are agreed, then, that we have goals of mutual interest. You wish to have an end put to Miss Garrison's fraudulent career. I am most willing to approach her and discover her methods, for in so doing I stand to gain a strong card that may be key to my recovering what I seek, if played at just the right time.

"Winning Miss Garrison's confidence will require my moving out of Brooklyn at some not too distant point, and establishing myself in one of Manhattan's finer hotels; representing myself as a well-to-do Englishman who wishes to establish contact with the spirit of his late son, lost with millions of other noble souls in the Great War..." Howard's countenance clouded at this revelation.

"Do not worry, my dear Lovecraft, I shall maintain my Clinton Street quarters as well—you and I have a good deal of leg work yet ahead of us in Brooklyn. We must pay a visit soon to Mr. Martense's Suydam Street mansion (preferably

when he is not at home), and see what we can find there. We should also call in at one of his speakeasies. This will necessitate a little undercover work, which I trust, Frank, you will be game for..." I felt a palpable thrill of excitement at this last remark.

"I wish I could join you in this adventure, gentlemen," said Houdini, gesturing with an unspoken "Oy-vay" expression at the heaps of papers on his desk, "but my work... I will have to content myself with observing your progress from the gallery." With another gesture he indicated that our interview was over.

"The best of luck to you, Holmes," said the magician, as he showed us out, shaking hands again firmly with each of us. "Oh, and Lovecraft, speaking of all this spiritualist business, do let me know what your Providence protege Eddy thinks of my proposed anti-spiritualism book. Perhaps after this is cleared up you'll have the time to set down to a collaborative effort. **The Cancer of Superstition** I think would be a good working title..."

"Well, my dear fellows," said Sherlock Holmes in high good humor once we'd reached the street, "you should now at least have an inkling of what we are up against. I admit my plan is somewhat of an indefinite one; we shall have to play certain things intuitively as the action develops. If either of you has any doubts at this stage, please speak up. You are still free to bow out, but I shall consider you committed for the duration of the case, whatever the vicissitudes of our fortunes, if you choose to continue."

"I think I speak for Frank as well as myself, Mr. Holmes," said Howard, "when I say that you have our wholehearted support."

"Splendid, splendid," replied the venerable detective, rubbing his thin hands together. "With two such stalwart allies a successful outcome is all but assured."

I said farewell to my two comrades at the 110th Street subway stop, where they planned to catch a train for Greenwich Village. Despite his contempt for the "Bohemian" and pseudo-artistic elements of that antique district, Howard was eager to show our famous friend some of its more obscure, Colonial thoroughfares, which appeared to particular advantage in the moonlight.

III

The following week, after our visit to Houdini, Howard 'phoned to say that Mr. Holmes wished to attend the next meeting of the Kalem Club, our informal "literary" group that gathered as a rule every other Wednesday, more often than not at my parents' apartment, to discuss books, art, politics—the "burning issues" of the day. The Kalem Club, or simply "the Gang" as Howard preferred to call it, was so designated because the last names of the original members all began with K, L, or M. Once again my parents had generously offered our apartment for the use of the Kalems.

"As before, Mr. Holmes will present himself as 'Mr. John Altamont,' of Devon, England," said Howard. (Devonshire, as HPL had proudly informed me on more than one occasion, was the ancestral home of the Lovecrafts.) "We'll tell the Gang the same story that we told your mother. No one besides myself knows anything about the activities or membership of the Transatlantic Circulator."

"What have you and Mr. Holmes been up to?" I asked.

"Oh, we've made some real progress, Sonny. In the course of less than a week our renowned colleague, posing as a delivery 'boy,' succeeded in befriending the cook at the Martense mansion—an elderly widow. I must say, he can act quite the ladies' man when circumstances require it of him! From her he learned all the details he needed of the house's floor plan, and the hours her master customarily keeps.

"Then, just last night, I joined the detective in a bonafide second-story job, with jimmy and everythin'! (Mind you, we were careful to leave no signs of our uninvited entrance.) You couldn't have told ole Grandpa from a reg'lar cracksman, had you seen me decked out in all the proper felonious fittings. We thoroughly searched Mr. Martense's vast, high-ceilinged study, but found no trace of that which Mr. Holmes is looking for. In any event he is now persuaded that it's sequestered at other than the Suydam Street premises, so we must seek elsewhere."



Any disappointment I may have felt at having been left out of this escapade was somewhat made up for by the fact that its results had been successful only in a negative sense. I expressed none of this to Howard, though, and merely said I'd look especially forward to the forthcoming gathering.

That Wednesday evening, the 29th, my parents left around 7:00, before the arrival of the first Kalem, as they had tickets to the latest Broadway hit comedy, "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter," with Basil Rathbone. My mother, as she invariably did before one of our meetings, had set out a tray of cookies and prepared a pot of strong black coffee, which she had left to simmer on the stove. Because Mr. Altamont's presence would make this a special occasion, she'd also baked a cake. My father, true to form, had grumbled a little, saying he was glad they were going out for the night, and thus wouldn't have to hide in the bedroom and listen to the hum of "all that gab" coming from the living room, as they had to do whenever the gang was over and they were home.

The guests for this particular meeting included Sam Loveman, the poet and boyhood friend in Cleveland of Hart Crane; Rheinhart Kleiner, a retired accountant and justice of the peace; kindly, white-haired Everett McNeil, an author of boys' books in his day; George Kirk, owner and proprietor of the Chelsea Book Shop on 8th Avenue; Arthur Leeds, a writer of adventure stories; Wheeler Dryden, Charlie Chaplin's half-brother; and James F. Morton, mineralogist, liberal arts essayist, and Negro rights advocate. HPL appeared last of all accompanied by the detective, dressed in a suit of worn but stylish tweeds, as would befit "John Altamont of Devon, a retired gentleman of property" (as introduced to the company by Howard).

In deference to his age, I offered our foreign visitor the most comfortable chair, the one habitually reserved for Howard, but he declined, choosing instead a less conspicuous seat on the divan. My mentor winked at me, as if to say this was all right—Sherlock Holmes preferred to observe from the wings rather than place himself at the center of attention.

Howard sat down in his accustomed spot, which commanded the whole room, and commenced the proceedings with, for no especial reason (unless perhaps it had formed a subject of discussion on the ride over from Brooklyn), a tirade against modern poetry. Reared as he'd been on Pope, Dryden, Samuel Johnson — in short, the eighteenth-century English school that had regarded the heroic couplet as the epitome of

the verse form—he had no sympathy for the radical poetry of the present era. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," in particular, had been anathema to him ever since its sensational appearance in **The Dial** earlier in the decade.

"'The Waste Land' is a practically meaningless collection of phrases, learned allusions, quotations, slang, and scraps in general; offered to the public as something justified by our modern mind with its recent comprehension of its own chaotic triviality and disorganization," began Howard, warming to the attack.

"Yes, Howard, yes," interjected Sam Loveman, after HPL had spontaneously recited a passage from his parody, "Waste Paper," "the form may be off-putting, but the poem's message seems to be that the past is far superior to the present—an idea I'm sure you have no quarrel with... What's your opinion, Mr. Altamont?"

After a few moments, the detective, who'd been in his meditative pose, fingers tented, replied, "I beg your pardon?"

"Sam's curious to know what you think of T. S. Eliot's epic poem, 'The Waste Land,'" said Howard.

"I am afraid I have not read it," said Sherlock Holmes. "I am too old to take much of an interest in current high-brow literature. I suspect, however, that I would agree with Lovecraft's assessment of Mr. Eliot and his work." No one troubled our guest with any further questions about twentieth century art and literature.

As frequently happened, the talk broke down among smaller groups. Sitting next to Ev McNeil, Sherlock Holmes nodded in interested fashion as the venerable boys writer prattled on about his youthful exploits. Loveman told me that he had been in touch with the litterateur Vincent Starrett, who had expressed an interest in seeing some of Howard's stories. HPL and Morton exchanged a few heated words on the issue of Negro rights.

When music came up as a topic, our British friend admitted that he used to play the violin as a hobby, but had in his retirement virtually given it up. "A touch of rheumatism has stiffened my fingers such that I am no longer as nimble on the strings as I once was," he said.

Howard said that he'd studied the violin as a boy, but couldn't stand the long hours of practice. "It pleased my mother and solicitous older relatives to imagine they were fostering a musical prodigy; though they relented when they saw how close I was coming to actual nervous collapse."

"A shame you were unable to continue," remarked the detective, "for I am sure you would have found ultimate

mastery of the instrument more than ample reward for those many painful hours of learning."

"After I abandoned the violin I did play a zobo with two other boys," added Howard. "We called ourselves the Blackstone Military Band."

Later I overheard Sherlock Holmes and Wheeler Dryden discussing the English music hall theatre and the prominent London stage figures of the gay nineties. "I once considered a career on the stage," confided the detective. "Friends used to flatter me on my powers as an actor."

The gang broke up on the early side, just as my parents returned (they greeted everyone, then retired down the hallway). It wasn't uncommon for a meeting to last far into the small hours, but Ev McNeil was looking droopy-eyed, and Kirk and Leeds had ceased trying to hide their yawns.

Howard and Mr. Holmes lingered, after the rest departed. "A capital set of associates you have, my dear Lovecraft. All sharp and keen — good men indeed. They may well prove useful in case we require extra hands in this business. For now, however, we three will suffice.

"I trust, Frank, that you will be available Saturday for our next move — a visit to Mr. Martense's Wolcott Street speakeasy. Here it is that he maintains an office from which, I understand, he carries on his business in the bootlegging trade. We have scouted the vicinity on more than one occasion, and locals have told us that his handsome French touring car is frequently seen parked before it. I imagine this excursion might be even more interesting, and let us hope more fruitful, than last week's house-breaking adventure. Do you think your parents will object?"

"No, no, I don't think there'd be any problem," I said. Then I asked a question that had been preying on my mind since our first acquaintance. "I'm sorry if I'm being too inquisitive, Mr. Holmes, but why isn't Dr. Watson here in America on this case with you?"

"Oh, I'm afraid Watson has seen fit to take yet another wife of late, his fourth or fifth, I believe. He is evermore the staid, family man in his declining years. No more gallivanting about for him."

And so, my curiosity satisfied at least on this minor point if still somewhat befuddled by the large mystery of what I was getting involved in, I wished my two older friends a safe journey back to Brooklyn.

IV

That weekend following the meeting of the Kalems, I found myself once again on the car to Brooklyn, anxiously anticipating the evening's "stake-out" of Martense's Wolcott Street speakeasy. I'd told my parents that I was going to attend an impromptu gathering of some of the gang at Sam Loveman's apartment in Columbia Heights. I knew full well that they'd have forbidden my attendance had they been informed of my true purpose and destination. A speakeasy was not a place they'd allow any son of theirs to patronize.

I wore my two-toned sports jacket, since Howard had said that Mr. Holmes wished us to dress casually. "According to the esteemed detective, the clientele who frequent the speakeasy adhere to a standard of dress far removed from our own Anglo-Saxon tastes," my friend had said. "We must not make ourselves conspicuous, but blend in with the local yokelry."

I'd never worn this jacket in Howard's presence, for fear of inciting his ridicule. Indeed, when he greeted me at the door to his room he let out a laugh and exclaimed: "My God, Belknapius, aren't you the flashy boob. Your getup's perfect!"

Since HPL's wardrobe consisted principally of a few dark suits (he was now wearing the pants to one of his older suits and a white shirt), he was relying on Sherlock Holmes to supply him with the necessary costume. We mounted the creaky stairs up to the second floor, where we waited outside the detective's room a minute or so after knocking before he let us in. His quarters turned out to be even more Spartanly furnished than Howard's, a huge steamer trunk at the base of the bed dominating the room. There was a strong scent of stale pipe tobacco. (Pipe smoking had of late become one of my own more pleasurable habits.)

"How fortunate we are, my dear Lovecraft, that you and I are of the same approximate build," said Sherlock Holmes, as he rummaged through the giant trunk. "This 'spiffy number' ought to fit you to a tee." The detective held up in both

hands a badly pressed sports coat of a green and pink hue that made my own by comparison seem like a formal dinner jacket. Howard blanched at the sight of such a monstrosity, but quickly recovered his poise and gamely slipped it on.

"And here's a neck-tie to match," said our British friend, proffering a strip of cloth which appeared to be decorated with scrambled eggs.

"Gad," said Howard, eyeing the thing as if about to be sick to his stomach, "it even has a pattern!" For someone who shunned even striped regimental ties as too gaudy, to wear such a garment was a colossal concession. But HPL's mood for adventure soon mastered his natural repugnance. "Ugh. Well, if one's to pass for a zippy moron, one has to dress the part!" he said, adjusting the knot.

The detective's clothes tended also to the garish, but were much more muted than Howard's and showed some trace of style. He rather resembled my image of an English racetrack "tout."

The detective slipped Howard a few dollar bills to cover our "expenses," then departed with a final word of instruction: "Remember, lads, your job is simply to keep a sharp eye on me whilst I attempt to learn what information I can from the patrons. They are chiefly locals who are apt to be wary of any trouble from strangers."

We followed fifteen minutes later, walking south on Clinton into the shabby Red Hook neighborhood. We'd calculated that we'd reach our destination by foot in less than half an hour, though Howard slumped along, I noted, in a dispirited fashion the very opposite of his usual rapid gait. I guessed this was due to more than just insuring that we gave our elderly friend sufficient lead time.

"Are you bothered appearing in that ghastly jacket, Howard?" I asked.

"What? No, no, I'm quite willing to play my part in the disguise end of things... In fact, there's another consideration far more disturbing to my sensibility. Although I've informed Holmes that I detest drink, I didn't have the heart to confess that I've **never** touched the nauseous stuff—and don't intend to start now. I hope you won't mind doing the booze guzzling for us both, Belknap."

Around nine o'clock Howard and I found ourselves standing in front of a nondescript "candy" store, the windows of which were filled with posters and bills advertising fights and other local events. Across the upper panes was the name

"O'Connell's." Parked in front was a fancy foreign car, a four- or maybe even six-cylinder Renault, that had to belong to Martense.

As Sherlock Holmes had instructed us, we sauntered down the block and turned down the alley dividing O'Connell's from the next building. We picked our way carefully along its shadowy length, Howard pausing more than once to mew affectionately at a stray cat, before coming to an imposing wooden door flanked by garbage cans. At our knock the door shortly opened, just enough to permit the head of a beefy-looking Irishman to peer out.

We must have passed the initial inspection, for the man said in a not unfriendly manner: "Strangers, eh? Hope you don't object to a search." We submitted to being frisked without protest, then having proved clean were allowed to enter.

"The local flatfoots are OK, but you can never tell when the feds might drop in," he said as we followed him down a flight of steps to the basement. We proceeded along a well-lit, white-washed corridor to another heavy door, at which stood an only slightly less burly sentry. This sentinel gave us the scrutiny also, but declined to search us. He opened the door and waved us inside.

Through the thick cigarette smoke that clouded the large, low-ceilinged room, we could discern little at first. We sat down at a small, rough oak table by the entrance, which afforded a good view of the whole premises. The room held a jumbled array of similar small tables, and along one wall an old-fashioned saloon bar with brass fittings. There we soon spotted Sherlock Holmes — with glass in hand chatting amiably, it appeared, with a couple of other customers.

The crowd consisted of solid working-class folk, mostly male. Perhaps a few could be described as tough characters, but many were decently dressed in coat and tie. I'm sure it crossed Howard's mind as it did mine that our flamboyant attire may not have been precisely necessary. For a moment an elegant figure stepped out from behind a curtained area in one corner, surveyed the scene, then slipped back out of sight. "Martense," said Howard.

We ordered two beers from a hearty, blonde waitress, who returned in a minute with two frothy mugs and collected a few coins from HPL. Howard picked his up gingerly, as if it were one of his used mousetraps, his long face registering complete disgust.

"Here, Sonny," he said, after a perfunctory sniff at the brew, "I simply cannot bring myself to drink this revolting liquid." He pushed the mug in my direction. "No one's apt

to notice your drinking my share as well in this joint."

Now my parents weren't Puritans, and we did enjoy an occasional, precious bottle of wine left-over from pre-Prohibition days, but I was far from accustomed to imbibing more than moderate quantities of alcohol. I'd been still in my teens when the Volstead Act was passed. But I was thirsty, and quickly despatched my own beer. At intervals Howard furtively poured the contents of his mug into mine, and once or twice, with nose wrinkled, brought his mug to his lips, feigning to sip.

As soon as I was done, the buxom bar-maid removed the empties and deposited another round.

"Pardon me, Miss," said Howard, "but my friend and I didn't order these beverages."

She gave him a hard look and answered rather abruptly: "Listen, pal, you're here to drink, ain't ya?" Then winking and in a softer tone she said, "Come on, have a good time. Don't be such a sourpuss!"

There was no arguing with this. Howard's natural courtesy prevented him from protesting further to the lady, and he handed her some more change.

I for one was beginning to "have a good time." I swallowed my third and fourth beers in short order, while Howard concentrated on keeping an eye on Sherlock Holmes at the bar. The ancient detective was walking animatedly with his companions, with much convivial raising and clinking of glasses. Howard expressed the wish that he would finish up his business soon so we could leave, but our British friend showed no sign of moving on at any time soon.

Inevitably I had to excuse myself, and scuffled my way among the clusters of tables, across the sawdust floor, towards the "Gents" sign. When I returned to my chair a few minutes later, still feeling very happy, I was mildly startled to hear someone shouting close at my ear through the general din.

"I don't believe it! It really is Howard P. Lovecraft, the tea-totaling, human walking machine in O'Connell's saloon!"

I turned around with some deliberation, and found myself gazing directly into the beaming red face of the distinguished modernist poet, Hart Crane. I'd seen him in person only once before, but there was no mistaking those boyish good looks, as yet showing no trace of the ravages of alcohol.

"Why hello, Hart. Good to see you," said Howard, in a tone, however, that belied the sincerity of his greeting.

As I've written elsewhere, HPL had met Crane in Cleveland while visiting Sam Loveman in 1922, and they had run across one another since then in New York City. One couldn't have



imagined two men more opposite in taste and temperament, though a certain grudging mutual respect, if not full cordiality, existed between them. Here, I vaguely realized, was another momentous encounter; a replay, of sorts, of a chance meeting in a Greenwich Village cafeteria the year before. Again I was privileged to witness perhaps the foremost American poet of the post-war generation accosting the twentieth-century master of the supernatural horror tale on whom had fallen the mantle of Edgar Allan Poe. I knew Crane had been working on his masterpiece, "The Bridge," inspired by the view of the Brooklyn Bridge from his rooming house window, and a snatch of it came suddenly to mind: "And when they dragged your weary flesh through Baltimore — did you betray the ticket, Poe?" No greater single line has ever been written about Poe — or so I thought at the time (though now I can't figure out what on earth I meant by this judgment!). Surely, in any event, I like to think, the shade of Poe, more than a little tipsy, presided over the scene.

"Here, you don't mind if I draw up a chair and join you boys. Hey, that's some outfit you've got on, Howard. You must've paid some Lower East Side shyster all of \$5 for it!"

"Please, Hart," said HPL, "keep it down. Frank and I would prefer it, in fact, if you left us alone."

"I bet you would," said Crane, giving me a funny leering look. "I've been watching you guys. How many rounds have you bought for your young friend here? Five? Six? Now don't tell me he's your nephew, or grandson, or something!" The poet patted me benevolently on the head.

"You've met Belknap... er, Frank, before, Hart," said Howard.

"At first I couldn't believe it," said Crane, his joviality unaffected by Howard's terseness. "Prissy Howard Lovecraft entertaining a young gentleman friend in a speak... Wait till Loveman hears about this!"

"Christ, Hart, don't tell Sam. Dammit, I can't explain..."

"Oh, there's no need to explain, Howard. I understand. Jesus, I always wondered about you and Sonia Greene — and that piping voice of yours, hah!"

No doubt Crane's remarks must have been provoking to HPL, but he kept his temper. A Rhode Island Yankee has to maintain his dignity.

"Say, come on, don't take this romance stuff too seriously," continued Crane. "You ought to adopt a more light-hearted approach. Which reminds me, you've gotta meet **my** friend. We met on the wharf not more than two hours ago — a case of love at first sight if there ever was one." He turtled and

waved somewhere in the distance of the room. Whether Sherlock Holmes had observed the advent of a third party to our table I was unable to tell.

"Hey, sailor... yeh, you, come on... Don't be shy, these are buddies of mine."

Out of the smoke emerged a chunky, coarse-looking youth, yet handsome in a dark, Mediterranean way, dressed in foreign naval garb. He seemed reluctant to join us, but Crane cajoled him into a chair, and swung a comradely arm around his shoulder.

"Manuel doesn't speak English so hot, so you'll have to excuse him if he doesn't contribute much to the conversation."

Crane motioned to our waitress — whose bosom I frankly admired as she leaned over — and ordered another round of beers. She eyed Crane and his sailor friend with disapproval, I thought, acknowledging the order without speaking.

Perhaps realizing that our uninvited table companions were planning to stay for a while, Howard tried to make the best of it by turning the conversation to other topics.

"Sam tells me that you're thinking of leaving the city, giving up your apartment. It's in the same building, by the way, Frank, from which the crippled Washington Roebling supervised the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge..." The poet didn't interrupt the historio-architectural disquisition that ensued, as he paid ever increasing attention to his nautical pal, who was now smiling a little but still dumb.

"Yeh, I gotta get out of the city for the summer," said Crane suddenly. "Sweet's Catalogues pays me a lousy 35 bucks a week. Say, Howard, you found a job yet? And where are our drinks?"

How Howard would've replied to the first question will remain forever a mystery, but to the second question we did receive something of an answer.

"Excuse me, 'fellas,'" said a large-bull-necked man, who'd come up to our table, "are you through yet with the tea-party?"

None of us deigned to reply to this rude question.

"You are pansies, ain't you?" he continued.

"Who, sir, are you calling a pansy?" said Crane.

"Listen, we don't like your kind coming to a place for decent people, so why don't you and your chums shove off quietly? Or to put it another way, go on, beat it! Scram!" He started to pull Crane's chair back.

"All right then, if you insist," said Crane, slowly rising from the seat slipping from under him. Abruptly he wheeled about, and made a roundhouse swing at the bouncer. Unfortunately,

the blow missed by a long shot, and the momentum carried him almost gracefully over onto the neighboring table, which exploded in a spray of foam and liquid.

"Okay, buddy, out you go the hard way," muttered the man, seizing the form of the sodden poet by the pants.

Howard and I sat transfixed, incapable in this instance to rush to the rescue. Manuel, however, did not remain passive. He rose up with a roar, the first sound he'd emitted in our presence all night, and leapt on the back of the bouncer, in the process knocking over a second table, much to the horror of its occupants. We could see other husky employees approaching what was clearly developing into a general fray. How long Crane and Manuel would be able to resist the uneven fight Howard and I did not wait to find out. Forgotten for the moment, we seized the opportunity to duck out the now unguarded door, its sentinel already committed to the growing battle. Our last glimpse was of the trim, well-dressed gentleman we'd seen earlier, emerging from behind the curtain.

Outside, pausing under a lamp post, we caught our breath. "Gad, we would have to run into that —," said Howard. "What a case the man is!" Then, taking a more pitying tone: "Poor Crane! A real poet and a man of taste, descendant of an ancient Connecticut family, and a gentleman to his fingertips, but the slave of dissipated habits..."

"I wonder how Mr. Holmes is getting along," I said.

"A fine pair of undercover agents we've turned out to be, Belknapius. I fear we've failed Holmes this time out."

As Howard expounded on how unconstitutionally fitted he was for this work, a lithe figure slipped into the light.

"Capital, capital," said the detective, rubbing his long hands together. "You've done excellent work tonight, my boys, excellent work."

"What?" exclaimed Howard.

"Come, let us remove ourselves from the precincts of O'Connell's speakeasy and proceed briskly back to Clinton Street. Some fresh air will especially do you a terrific lot of good, Frank, I believe."

"Did you discover any useful information, Holmes?" asked Howard, as if he were still incredulous that our outing had been anything less than an utter disaster.

"Indeed, I did, my dear fellow — thanks to that brilliant diversion you created. It drew Mr. Martense from his office just long enough for me to steal in unnoticed and make a rapid survey of its contents. In his haste he left exposed on his desk a most revealing document—a schedule of ships due to dock in the East River over the next two months. One date in

particular was circled in red. If I am not mistaken, I daresay he shall be unloading a shipment of illegal aliens into his Red Hook way-stations that same night... Yes, we now hold an extremely valuable card by making the most of a lucky break thrown our way. My companions at the bar, as congenial as they were, had little to tell me of Mr. Martense and his activities.

"Incidentally, that handsome friend of yours is possessed of a great deal of charm. Soon after you departed he calmed down considerably, apologized to Martense, even offered to pay for damages. An extraordinary fellow. When I left he and Martense were standing at the bar, chatting about poetry, oddly enough. Do tell me who he is, and how you came to know him."

Given this invitation, Howard outlined the history and accomplishments of Hart Crane for the rest of the time back to 169 Clinton, relieved, I suspect, that the detective had not asked for a detailed account of the circumstances leading up to Crane's outburst on the present occasion.

I went home to Manhattan, perhaps feeling not quite as well as I had earlier, but still in a cheerful mood as I reflected on my own role in the night's adventure.

V

A couple of rather uneventful weeks passed, uneventful compared to the previous two at least for me. Howard checked in by 'phone once—to say that Sherlock Holmes had established himself at the exclusive Gotham Hotel in Manhattan. Posing as a wealthy British widower, he had already made contact with Miss Cordelia Garrison. In the meantime, Sonia had returned from the Midwest on one of her periodic visits to New York. It was just as well that the detective only showed up occasionally at 169 Clinton, where he still maintained his room, and required no services of HPL during this period. At the Kalem Club meeting on the 13th, Howard appeared listless, and failed to dominate the proceedings in his usual fashion. "Mr. Altamont" did not attend.

The following weekend, however, I received a call from Howard, his voice filled with all the enthusiasm he'd shown in the first days of his association with Sherlock Holmes. "Holmes has succeeded in arranging a séance with Miss Garrison at her apartment on lower Fifth for this coming Tuesday evening. It's all settled that you and I will accompany him as 'seconds.' By Azathoth, I won't let the intrepid sleuth down this time!" he vowed.

Shortly after six o'clock on the appointed day, Howard and I, dressed in our best suits, met Sherlock Holmes at his hotel suite, which in its lavish splendor formed a real contrast to his Clinton Street digs. The detective as well fit the part of the worldly retired manufacturer, "John Altamont, Esquire," attired in spotless evening clothes. His wild white beard was now neatly trimmed—in a fashionable George V spade. He looked remarkably relaxed, as he lounged in a fancy Empire chair, pipe in hand, as if he were quite accustomed to such comfortable surroundings.

Howard, too, seemed in good form, his cheerfulness a result no doubt in part from having found earlier that day a volume

of Bulwer-Lytton in a second-hand bin for just 10¢. Both he and I listened attentively as Sherlock Holmes outlined the plot for this night's excursion.

"I have had a number of preliminary interviews with Miss Garrison, as she is extremely careful in whom she selects. Had she known of my connection with Houdini, she surely would have refused my request for a seance. The amount of money I have agreed to pay is large, but not excessively so. By acting not overly eager, I think I have allayed any suspicions rather than the opposite.

"From studying the newspaper accounts of her demonstrations—here, have a look at these cuttings—I believe I have an excellent idea of her methods, and am tonight prepared to counter them. You will note that a 'spirit box' is her preferred mode of communication with the 'outer spheres.'"

Howard and I glanced at the newspaper articles describing her sensational successes. A somewhat fuzzy photograph revealed Miss Garrison to be a comely blonde.

"I have told her that you, Howard," continued the detective, "were a friend through correspondence of my late son, an active member in the British amateur press. She raised no objection to my bringing two American companions to the session to act as 'controls.' She seemed particularly impressed when I said that both of you were professional writers; and all the more so that you were writers of tales of the supernatural. When I mentioned **Weird Tales**, she admitted that the names of Lovecraft and Long were indeed familiar to her from those pages. Because you write about ghostly manifestations and what not, I suspect she assumes you are likely to believe in such things in actuality. Pray do not disappoint her by betraying your fervent mechanistic materialist philosophies..." The detective chuckled, then took a long draw on his shag.

"Mr. Martense is almost certain to be present, I might add," said Sherlock Holmes as he rose languidly from his chair. "And now, gentlemen, if you are ready, the game's afoot. Let us grab our hats and be off."

In the taxi riding down Fifth Avenue the detective gave us some final words of advice on conducting ourselves. "Be sharp, lads. I need hardly say that Miss Garrison is a most attractive young woman. We must not allow a pretty face to affect our judgment adversely."

The building at 55 Fifth was a fine brick structure with stone facing, some twenty stories high, located across the street from the bookseller Dauber & Pyne (where, as chance would have it, Howard would do part-time work the following

spring, just before moving back to Providence). A uniformed doorman directed us to a private elevator, which carried us up to Miss Garrison's penthouse apartment.

A Negro maid showed us into a marble-floored foyer, took our hats, and led us down a short hallway into an airy living room, furnished with white and cream-colored chairs and sofas and piano as well in the ultra-modern, art-deco style. Even Howard, who could abide this mode no more than he could the Victorian, appeared struck by the aesthetics of the scene. "**Certe, nullas bananas nodie habemus,**" he quipped, feigning a chord at the keyboard.

Beyond the piano our attention was drawn to a pair of French doors, opening on to a terrace. While we waited we couldn't resist going outside for a look. The three of us stood entranced at the railing, gazing beyond the Italianate clocktower of the Edison Building towards the East River and Brooklyn. Howard very possibly was on the verge of launching into a spiel on the outspread cityscape, but a soft voice behind us broke the spell before he could begin.

"Yes, gentlemen, it is a magnificent view."

We turned, and there, silhouetted in the doorway to the terrace, was one of the most ravishing women I'd seen in my life — a vision worthy of Shelley or Keats. The newspaper photo had scarcely done her justice. She had curly blonde hair, set off by dark eyebrows in pleasing contrast, and wore a simple evening dress of some gauzy, diaphanous material; on her feet were what appeared to be ballet slippers. That her arms and neck were bare of jewelry served only to highlight her natural beauty.

"Miss Garrison," said Sherlock Holmes, bowing, "may I introduce to you my friends, Howard Lovecraft and Frank Long, Jr."

"My pleasure, Mr. Altamont," replied our hostess. She smiled and extended an exquisite long-fingered hand.

Howard and I took her hand in turn, each of us mumbling a few banal words of greeting. I was jittery, and clearly Howard was not insensible before such glamorousness. Only the detective retained his outward composure — but then he was an older man and seemingly indifferent to women, if one took his pronouncements at face value.

"You know, Mr. Lovecraft, I'm a regular reader of **Weird Tales**," she said, joining us at the rail. "'The White Ape' truly made me shudder." She shivered, which may have been caused as much by the thinness of her dress as by the memory of HPL's story.

"I am gratified that you liked that particular tale, Miss



Garrison," said Howard. "I only regret that it was published with such an obvious title. Were I to employ such a title by choice, I can assure you that it would have nothing whatsoever to do with a white ape. Properly it should have been 'The Facts concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family.' Ah, the vagaries of editors!"

"And you too, Mr. Long, you also possess great talent. 'The Desert Lich,' 'Death Waters,' and 'The Ocean Leech' all show promise of a bright future in one so young." She lightly placed a hand on my shoulder as she delivered these compliments. Too overwhelmed to reply, I kept staring out at the lights of the city, thankful that darkness hid my flushed cheeks.

After a few more moments, Miss Garrison observed that it was getting cold on the terrace, and we returned to the living room, where the colored maid waited respectfully.

"Shall we have a drink, gentlemen, before we commence? I always find the spirits more receptive when all participants are at their ease."

Sherlock Holmes and I each asked for a glass of wine, while Howard ordered a ginger ale. At that moment the door buzzer sounded.

"Never you mind the door, Dinah," said Miss Garrison. "I'll answer it while you take care of the drinks." She excused herself and with a light step disappeared down the hallway.

Though we couldn't see this new visitor as he entered, I could tell from the delighted murmurs we heard that this person was a welcome and familiar guest to the apartment. Miss Garrison shortly returned on the arm of the man we'd spotted in O'Connell's — Jan Martense, impeccably dressed as before in evening clothes. He was a smart-looking fellow of about thirty-five, inclining to the corpulent, with slicked-back hair, greying at the temples, and a pencil moustache. As he shook hands with each of us in turn, it seemed he hardly noticed either Howard or myself, but did study Sherlock Holmes with some intensity.

Dinah brought us our drinks, along with a plate of sliced cheese (one of Howard's favorite foods, as it happened). When Miss Garrison sat down in one of the deco chairs, we likewise made ourselves at home.

Martense led off the conversation, talking about the world of sophistication and society, travel abroad — all topics beyond the mundane experiences of Howard and myself. HPL did attempt to join in with an account of his maternal grandfather's Italian journeys, but only the detective was capable of holding his own with the man. He matched

Martense's stories of this or that high-class hotel or restaurant with anecdotes concerning foreign capitals, French wines, the best London tailors, and so on—without being too personal or particular. Soon the two of them became wholly absorbed in their two-way exchange, with the pleasant result that Howard and I were left with Miss Garrison to ourselves.

Miss Garrison queried us further about **Weird Tales** and the amateur press movement in America, Mr. Altamont's late son and his amateur activities in Britain, and gently probed us on our views towards spiritualism. Without overplaying our parts, I think HPL and I managed to convey an open-mindedness, even enthusiasm, towards spiritualistic experimentation. We admitted that this would be the first time for both of us.

"Astral planes and auras, isn't that what it's all about?" I said, deliberately pointing up my naivete on the subject. I also stated my belief in telepathy, which of course ironically is a real phenomenon.* This helped give her the right impression.

After about a half-hour of this agreeable getting acquainted, Miss Garrison said that it was time we moved on to the library for the "business of the evening." Mr. Martense directed us down the hallway to a door just off the foyer. This opened onto a considerably less modern room than the one we'd been sitting in, the windows covered with heavy maroon draperies, the walls lined with built-in bookshelves (one I noticed was filled with the shopgirl romances of R. W. Chambers). A dim overhead light barely illuminated the only furniture of the room, a card table and three chairs. Underneath the table was a solid wooden box, about a foot square and several inches deep, with a spring hinge on top.

"This then I take it, Miss Garrison, is the celebrated 'spirit box?'" asked Sherlock Holmes. "As I understand it, the spirits will communicate with us by depressing the flap, which completes a circuit powered by dry cell batteries, thus ringing a bell?"

"That's correct, Mr. Altamont," said Miss Garrison.

"You have no objection to my taking a look at the apparatus and making a quick inspection of the room?"

"None at all."

"I appreciate your indulgence, for I have been fooled too often in the past," said the detective, as he sauntered around the room, cursorily examined the rug, the drapes and windows,

* The ESP experiments of J. B. Rhine and others would verify it in the thirties [Ed.'s note]

and the bookshelves. "I must be absolutely certain in my own mind that the spirit phenomena are genuine—that there is no chance for trickery. Yes, no wires here, I see," he added, picking up the box. "In this regard I also appreciate your allowing me to bring along my young friends."

"You have my assurance, Mr. Altamont, that Miss Garrison is entirely sincere," said Jan Martense.

"We're ready to proceed," said Miss Garrison, taking a chair.

"Capital, capital," said Sherlock Holmes, sitting down in the chair to her left. He rolled up his right pants leg, exposing sock and garter and a stretch of white leg, just below the knee.

"This is the correct procedure, then?" said the detective, taking her left hand in his right, and pressing his right ankle against her left calf.

"That's satisfactory," she said.

"Here, I say, Howard, Frank—would one of you be so kind as to sit on Miss Garrison's right and assume an identical posture?"

I was eager for the honor, but shyness prevented me from speaking up. Happily Howard demurred.

"I think Frank would do a better job than I," he said.

Accordingly I sat down next to Miss Garrison, and imitated Sherlock Holmes' position, taking her right hand in my left and pressing my left leg against her right calf (though I wasn't bold enough to roll up my pants leg). Thus was Miss Garrison "controlled"—that is, she could not move without one of us detecting it.

We determined that Mr. Martense and Howard would wait just outside the door, while this phase of the seance was conducted. Later perhaps HPL would have his turn. Martense extinguished the light as they left, leaving those of us remaining in blackness.

After a minute of silence, Miss Garrison began her invocation, in a soft but emotion-laden voice, calling upon the spirit of the "late Jack Altamont, of His Majesty's Royal Fusiliers." She went on in this manner for maybe a quarter of an hour, pausing now and then as if waiting for a response. It was an eerie experience, I'll admit, though on the whole an entertaining one. The opportunities of holding hands with a beautiful girl in the dark were rare enough for me in those days, and I was savoring every moment.

"Oh, spirit from the great gulf beyond the great gulf beyond, manifest thyself, show that you favor this gathering of sincere believers now before you," intoned Miss Garrison. "One ring for yes, and two rings for no. Oh, spirit, do you

hear us?"

There was a single ring. I jumped, but kept my grip on her hand.

"Mr. Altamont? Are you listening, Mr. Altamont? You may now speak to the spirit of your late son."

Suddenly Sherlock Holmes came to life and launched into a sentimental spiel about how pleased he was to be at last in communication with his own dear boy, and how grateful he was to Miss Garrison for providing the opportunity. His thin voice cracked with emotion—it was a very persuasive performance.

"Are you happy, Jack?" asked the detective finally.

One ring.

"Are you with your dear mother?"

One ring.

"Is she happy?"

One ring.

He went on in this vein for some time, and I would've rapidly lost interest if it weren't for the proximity of Miss Garrison.

Mr. Holmes eventually wound down, and our hostess asked me if I cared to put a question to the spirit before he rejoined "the great void."

"I sure would," I said. "Can it be about the future?"

"Certainly," she said, giving my hand a squeeze. "Proceed."

"All right. If I were to predict, spirit, that you will answer this question with two rings, would I be telling the truth?"

This was followed by a long silence.

"I think, Mr. Long, that we have lost the spirit with that question of yours," said Miss Garrison at last with a trace of asperity. "Not every question about the future can be answered simply yes or no." She released my hand and announced in a loud voice that the session was over.

Almost immediately the door opened, and the overhead light came on. Blinking, I could make out Howard and Martense standing in the foyer—and behind them, Dinah, holding our hats. Evidently Mr. Martense had decided it was time for us to go. Sherlock Holmes asked about the possibility of holding another séance, but Miss Garrison declined to set anything definite. We all thanked her for a most enlightening demonstration, bade Mr. Martense adieu, and departed.

We said little in the cab back up Madison Avenue, apart from Howard's acknowledging his failure to draw Martense into a discussion of his ancient Dutch ancestry, which he appeared curiously uninterested in. Martense in return had attempted to dwell in detail on contemporary mainstream fiction—one of Howard's weaker subjects, unfortunately. When we pressed the

detective for his thoughts on the séance, he waved aside our pleas, saying we would have an explanation soon enough when we got back to the Gotham. Only an enigmatic smile gave any clue that he had been satisfied with the evening's proceedings.

Howard and I waited with growing impatience in the sitting room of the suite, while our friend changed into his dressing gown. In time he joined us, and began assiduously to fill his pipe, tamp it, light it, and so on. Clearly he was enjoying keeping us in suspense.

"Well, Holmes," said Howard, no longer able to restrain his curiosity. "Did you detect the fraud? I kept a close watch on Martense while we waited outside, and I'm certain he couldn't have caused the box to ring."

"I'm baffled," I said. "As far as I can tell, Miss Garrison never moved an inch. Did she have a hidden buzzer under her foot?"

"No, Frank, there was no hidden buzzer. I saw to that when I studied the area of carpet immediately under and before her chair. There was nothing."

"How did she do it then" persisted Howard. "Surely you aren't suggesting the action of a supernatural agency..."

"You may have noticed, my dear fellows," said the detective, "that in addition to having a finely shaped body, Miss Garrison also possesses a very athletic build. By means of small, subtle movements of her right leg she was able in the course of her preliminary speech to shift her foot within range of the box. These movements would have been imperceptible to ordinary skin.

"You ask how I was able to sense this motion? For several hours earlier today I wore a silk rubber bandage just below my right knee. By this evening my calf had become swollen and extremely tender. The heightened sense of feeling permitted me to notice the slightest sliding of Miss Garrison's ankle or flexing of muscle. Did you not observe, Frank, before the lights were put out, that Miss Garrison wore silk stockings and that her skirts were pulled well above her knees?"

I certainly had. "But what if she had moved her right leg, the one I was touching?"

"An excellent point, Frank. After picking up and examining the box I took the precaution of setting it down a bit to the left, in my direction, making it an awkward proposition to effect the ringing with her other foot..."

Howard and I gaped in astonishment at the man's ingenuity.

"That sensitizing the leg business is an old trick," continued Sherlock Holmes. He chuckled softly. "I taught it to Houdini

himself years ago when we crossed paths during one of his European tours... Well, now that we know Miss Garrison's method, we hold a very powerful trump in our hands. The threat of its play—the exposure of Miss Garrison—should contribute a great deal toward obtaining from Mr. Martense what we seek.

"The hour is getting on, my friends, and an old man needs his rest. So I must say good-night—till tomorrow when the Kalem Club convenes. At Sam Loveman's Columbia Heights apartment, is it not? In Brooklyn. Very well. Soon the Kalems may play their part, a troop of loyal retainers, in what will surely be the final act of our little drama. Farewell."

"What's this about the Kalems getting into the act?" I asked HPL as we strode out onto Fifth Avenue, into the fresh spring night air.

"I'm not apprised fully of the wily private eye's intentions for them myself. But undoubtedly we will learn all we need to know tomorrow."

VI

The Kalem Club meeting for this particular Wednesday, the 20th, had originally been scheduled to be held at Ev McNeil's. Howard, however, had thought it judicious to switch it to Sam Loveman's, since Ev tended to be even more tedious in his own surroundings and some members might be apt to avoid a McNeil gathering. According to Howard, the detective wanted to be sure there was a good turn-out. Howard had also hinted to the others that this was to be more than just the usual literary gab session.

When I arrived I was asked if I knew what was on HPL's mind but I pleaded ignorance. Sherlock Holmes and Howard were the last to appear. With the exception of the "dainty" (as Howard referred to him in private) Wheeler Dryden, who had returned to England, all the original gang were on hand who had met "Mr. Altamont" before—Leeds, Kleiner, Morton, Kirk, McNeil, and Loveman.

"Fellow Kalems," began Howard, addressing the gang assembled in Loveman's one-room apartment, "may I have your attention."

"What's going on, Howard," asked Morton. "Are you about to announce you've sold a collection of your stories to a book publisher?"

"Before I say anything further," continued Howard, not deigning to answer Morton, "I must request of you all that what you'll shortly hear not go beyond this room. It is vitally important, for reasons I'll soon make clear. Do I have the assurances of every one of you to keep silent, upon your word as gentlemen?"

After a little hesitation, we all, including myself, murmured our assent.

"I have to confess," said HPL, "that I've been guilty of a deception. Mr. Altamont here is not merely a retired professional man of fine old Anglo-Saxon stock..."

I noticed Loveman roll his eyes at this remark. He'd never been one to tolerate Howard's harping on the superiority of

the Nordic race and culture-stream. Indeed, in later years he would break from Howard on this account.

"No, Mr. Altamont happens to be very much in business at this moment — in his capacity as a private consulting detective."

This revelation prompted a few exclamations of surprise and wholesale muttering from the Kalems.

"He has been engaged on a case requiring the utmost delicacy and discretion, on the behalf of a prominent English client, who wishes to remain anonymous. His investigation had brought him to America, where lies the ultimate solution to the case. He is requesting your help, as it is a matter too sensitive to confide to the official police forces. I think we should consider it the highest compliment that he deems us equal to the task. He himself will now explain the details..."

Sherlock Holmes, who'd been listening calmly to Howard's introduction, rose slowly from his easy-chair. His keen gray eyes darted from one face to the next, as if to measure each man's mettle with a single piercing look.

"Thank you," said the detective. "I believe everyone here knows of the notorious Red Hook section of Brooklyn, with its seedy waterfront and dilapidated warehouses? For the benefit of those who have not seen it for themselves, pray, my dear Lovecraft, could you give us a description — in just a few sentences — of this unsavoury district?"

"Yes, certainly," said Howard. "Red Hook is a maze of hybrid squalor near the ancient waterfront opposite Governor's Island, with dirty highways climbing the hill from the wharves to that higher ground where the decayed lengths of Clinton and Court Streets lead off toward the Borough Hall..."

You couldn't accuse HPL of white-washing his own neighborhood, I thought.

"Some of the obscure alleys and byways have that alluring antique flavour which conventional reading leads us to call 'Dickensian'... The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging on one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant."

"Thank you, that will be sufficient," broke in the detective. "To speak plainly, I seek a certain master criminal who has in his possession a valuable item that rightfully belongs to my client. This man has his headquarters in a building in Parker Place in Red Hook. I have every good reason to suppose he is holding this item there, and I intend to confront him in his den, as it were, and secure its safe return — this Saturday night the 23rd.



"With Lovecraft's guidance, I have learned a good deal about the area in the few weeks since I arrived in New York. Through unostentatious rambles, carefully casual conversations, and well-timed offers of hip pocket liquor, I have succeeded in soliciting all the background knowledge I need."

"Who is this guy you're after, if you don't mind my asking," said Leeds.

"He is Jan Martense, elegant man-about-town. Besides being a thief, he is a smuggler of illegal aliens and engages in the bootlegging trade. He also promotes a little mediumistic charlatany on the side."

From the confused buzzing that followed this statement, I gathered no one was familiar with the name, let alone had heard of his nefarious activities.

"Much of Red Hook, houses and waterfront," continued the detective, "is underlain by a system of subterranean passages — tunnels with exits at various strategic locations. I need men to watch these potential escape routes..."

For nearly a minute the group sat in stunned silence. Morton looked at Leeds; Leeds looked at Kleiner; Kleiner looked at Kirk; and Kirk looked at Loveman. (I avoided all glances.) For these men, whose most thrilling exploits consisted of browsing through second-hand book shops and dawdling in cafeterias, this call to action must have hit hard. Here was a chance to partake in a real adventure — not just read about it in a pulp magazine or book. Had I not been already involved, I know I would've leapt at the opportunity.

"Is there any danger?" piped up old Ev McNeil.

"There might be some danger," said Sherlock Holmes. "To be fair, I cannot deny the possibility."

This admission sparked off another round of muttering.

"Weapons will not be necessary, I daresay," he continued. "I shall carry a side-arm, but I cannot recommend that any of you do so... I have gotten the 'goods' on this chap Martense — information that should persuade him to hand over what I want without argument in exchange for my silence concerning certain criminal pursuits of his. I realise it is not easy to make a quick decision on this, and I would be more than happy to withdraw from the room while you discuss it among yourselves.

"I might add that I am willing to pay each man ten dollars for his services for one night's work."

The detective beckoned to Howard, and the two of them retired outside in the hall. The rest of us huddled together. Despite expressions of nervousness from some quarters, we soon reached a decision and called our companions back into

the apartment.

"We're with you, Mr. Altamont, 100%," said Kleiner, speaking for the gang, "even though for some of us it will mean missing the Blue Pencil Club meeting scheduled for this Saturday. Just give us the low-down on what you want us to do..."

Sherlock Holmes declared his satisfaction at our unanimous support, and then proceeded to outline the specifics of his plan:

"I have determined to pay our call on Mr. Martense in three days time, because he will then be occupied with the transferring of a large number of aliens from a tramp steamer which recently docked in the East River — a period when he will be especially vulnerable."

The detective spread a large scale street map of Brooklyn out on Loveman's coffee table, then commenced with a red pencil to mark the positions we were to take in the vicinity of the Parker Place "headquarters." Operating in pairs, each pair of Kalem's would be at their respective posts by ten o'clock. Our job would be to watch for any suspicious disturbances, and if need be provide help to the team that would be descending into the underground passages. On the map Sherlock Holmes also drew in a rough network of tunnels, based on what he'd gleaned from loquacious locals. When Kleiner volunteered to provide his motor-car, which could be used for a quick getaway, our British friend readily assented.

"Very well, then," concluded the detective. "We shall all gather at my Clinton Street room early Saturday evening. Please take care to wear your oldest, cheapest clothes."

After this there was no question of settling down and resuming the usual sort of Kalem Club discussion of abstract matters — the whole gang was clearly too excited at the prospect of the forthcoming "raid." Just before breaking up, Kleiner offered to take those who were free Friday afternoon on a scouting excursion in his Ford through Red Hook. "Mr. Altamont" said he thought such a trip would be wise, but cautioned discretion, not to journey too far off the better traveled streets.

I accompanied Howard and Mr. Holmes as far as my subway stop. The detective's mood definitely seemed to be sanguine.

"I have appreciated more than I can say the role you two have played so gamely," he said. "Your help has been inestimable. I cannot guarantee the success of our endeavors, but I do feel on the whole confident — confident enough to have gone ahead and booked passage back to England for late next week..."

Neither Howard nor I said anything in response to this

surprising news, but I'm sure he must have felt the same dismay in light of the detective's near departure as I did.

"To speak frankly," said Sherlock Holmes in a graver tone, "I have not been wholly candid with you about the real nature of this case; but I promise you a full explanation once this is all over.

"Much yet remains ahead of us, and until then I strongly urge, Sonny, that you get plenty of rest in preparation for Saturday. We want your ardent youthful spirit to be an inspiration to us all in the coming trial. Farewell."

VII

I anticipated our expedition into Martense's Red Hook lair with a keen sense of what could only be called adventurous expectancy. When I arrived at Clinton Street that Saturday night, I found the rest of the gang all gathered in the detective's room — every Kalem suitably attired in old working clothes. In order to avoid any pointed questions from my parents (who were assuming I was attending the Blue Pencil Club meeting), I had worn my customary jacket and tie. Howard had said Mr. Holmes would once again provide whatever was required in the costume line.

The detective did in fact pull from his voluminous trunk two pairs of grubby mechanic's trousers with suspenders and two greasy plaid shirts, which Howard and I quickly donned. Thus were we transformed such that our own mothers would have been unable to distinguish us from the toughest of dockside louts. As a final touch, Sherlock Holmes applied dark make-up to the faces of all of us, to lend a swarthy cast to our white and pink skins.

"Gad, we've been turned into veritable Syrians!" exclaimed Howard.

"Our being able to pass for 'natives' may be essential to our success tonight," said our English friend.

Before the gang departed, we reviewed our instructions. Morton and Loveman would take their post outside the dance-hall church; McNeil and Kirk would cover the wharves; and Leeds and Kleiner, in Kleiner's car, would wait in an alley near Parker Place.

"Yesterday's scouting of salient landmarks was a big help," said Kleiner. "We all know where we're supposed to go..."

Sherlock Holmes wished our six comrades well, and slipped each a ten dollar bill as they left. Kleiner would drive the entire group as far as the vicinity of Parker Place, from where each twosome would walk to their respective destinations. We waited another minute while the detective finished his preparations. He slipped a pocket compass into his leather

jacket, along with a flashlight, and what appeared to be a small bundle of envelopes. Finally he drew a small calibre revolver from a bureau drawer.

"I trust we shall have no need of this, lads," he said, as he loaded the chambers, "but we must be careful to take every precaution."

The sight of the gun didn't reassure me especially, but I wasn't about to admit that I felt any fear. I was grateful enough that my older colleagues were permitting me to accompany them in the first place. On Friday Howard had called, evidently because Sherlock Holmes had had second thoughts about my role, to try to persuade me to take a lesser, safer part with the rest of the Kalems. He was worried for my parents, in case anything should happen to me. But I was adamant. Having participated in every action of consequence so far, I wasn't about to miss the climax to our efforts. All my life, owing to a congenitally weak heart, I'd been coddled. A nearly fatal acute appendicitis while at N.Y.U. a few years earlier (which had cut short my academic career) had only increased this over-solicitousness of others. For once to expose myself deliberately to some sort of physical danger — for me, with my frail health, this had an irresistible appeal.

Shortly after ten o'clock Sherlock Holmes, Howard, and I were heading south along the derelict length of Columbia Street, towards the center of Red Hook. Soon we were making our way through a cluster of monotonous squalid streets, lined with brick houses dating from the first quarter to the middle of the nineteenth century. HPL commented now and then on a particularly notable architectural feature, but for the most part we proceeded in silence.

Sherlock Holmes led us past the tumble-down stone church, where we saw Morton and Loveman loitering near the steps, among a crowd of foreigners jabbering away in some strange patois. We could hear the strains of jazz coming from the open door at the top of the steps, indicating that a dance was getting under way. We of course did not acknowledge our two friends as we passed, but I couldn't refrain from turning around for a last glimpse just before rounding the next corner — and caught them conversing with a couple of girls in gaily-colored dresses.

"The church is nominally Catholic," remarked Howard, "but priests throughout Brooklyn deny the place all standing and authenticity."

After another two blocks we came to Parker Place, a dingy square of dilapidated brownstones, then walked by a side street, where we spotted Leeds and Kleiner standing next to Kleiner's Model-A. If a speedy exit from this dismal locale should prove necessary at any point, they were ready to drive off in only the time it took to turn the crank.

Presently we entered a dim, dirty alley, filled with evil-smelling garbage cans whose contents must have been ripening for weeks. The detective motioned us to stop by a pile of discarded crates, which suspiciously looked as if they had once contained liquor bottles. At Sherlock Holmes' bidding, Howard and I dismantled this heap, revealing an ancient manhole cover. Again our British comrade signaled with a bony hand, and Howard and I lifted the heavy metal disk away from the opening. The detective shined the thin beam of his flashlight into the hole, but Stygian darkness hid the bottom.

"This entrance should serve us as well as any other," he whispered. "I discovered it on one of my earlier rambles in the district."

Sherlock Holmes gingerly slipped into the hole first, followed by myself, and then Howard, who succeeded in pulling the manhole cover back into place. We didn't want to leave any trace of our entry from the inside if at all possible. The three of us climbed down perhaps a good fifteen or twenty feet, carefully clutching onto slippery iron rungs, the only illumination from the detective's feeble light.

With relief we reached a solid surface, the concrete floor of a tunnel with an arched ceiling maybe eight feet high at its apex. In the light Mr. Holmes guardedly swept about us, we could make out nitrous brick walls and stretches of rusty pipe. A rank smell left no doubt that we were in a sewer.

The detective consulted his compass, and we proceeded in Indian fashion in the same order in which we descended in a southwesterly direction. The only noises were the dripping of water and the soft scurrying of small creatures that seemed to be all around us, yet mercifully never strayed into our yellow beam.

We met with a number of intersecting passageways, and each time the detective chose without hesitation one path or another, glancing on occasion at his compass. An increasingly vile fishy odor pervaded the fetid atmosphere, suggesting we were nearing the waterfront. Behind me Howard stifled a gagging sound, and I recalled his strong aversion to seafood.

As we continued through the clammy labyrinth, we could hear the sound of human voices and footsteps — but these



were very faint, as if coming from an infinite distance ahead of us. The rough brick work gave way to plastered walls, and lightbulbs in overhead sockets began to appear at regular intervals, obviating the need for our artificial light. We were soon traversing a proper corridor, with open archways on either side leading to what seemed to be storage rooms. We briefly investigated two of these rooms, and found one to be an extensive wine cellar with racks filled with bottles to the ceiling and the other to contain wooden boxes stamped with Scotch whiskey labels.

The noises of human activity we had heard earlier were louder and more distinct now, and all at once it sounded as if a group of several gruff-speaking men were about to round the corner a few yards in front of us. We quickly stepped into the nearest room, which proved to be a sort of dormitory with lines of crude wooden bunk beds against the walls. Happily this gang passed beyond our hiding place, and we remained undetected.

We resumed our progress at a more cautious pace, and took the time to explore two other rooms farther down the corridor. The first contained a printing press and a large assortment of printing paraphernalia. Stacked in neat piles on a table were cards that Sherlock Holmes identified as United States Immigration Authority health forms. The second room was furnished with desks and a blackboard, and was clearly meant to serve as a classroom. Howard picked up one of the textbooks that were scattered about — it had the title **Well-Bred Speech** (if I recall correctly). What Jan Martense was up to here couldn't have been plainer.

By some miracle we encountered no one, until at last the corridor we were following opened out into a vast cavernous space and we abruptly found ourselves among a crowd of milling foreigners with dark complexions on a kind of pier or dock. Before us was an oily canal lit by flaming torches—a marvelously spectral scene that would've done justice to any tale of supernatural horror. Amazingly, we were not challenged by any of these people grunting softly among themselves in alien dialect — it was as if they were all anxiously awaiting some event, and too distracted to take notice of strangers. Or perhaps in the gloom, with our dusky faces, we weren't recognized as such.

Suddenly a ray of strong light shot through this scene of phantasms, and we heard the sound of oars amidst the low babbling. From a bend in the canal a boat with a lantern in its prow darted into sight, followed closely by a second, and then finally a third. Each made fast to an iron ring in the

slimy stone pier, then poured forth its occupants—huddled masses of humanity, many of them women and children. Those on the pier helped the newcomers out—some with low shouts or exclamations of joy, as if they'd discovered a relative or friend. As soon as their living cargo were all unloaded, the row boats untied and set out again into the darkness of the canal.

Amidst the general confusion, we observed a few authoritative-looking individuals herding people into small groups, then leading them off into one or another of the side passageways. Then at once there appeared a well-dressed, debonair figure, who contrasted sharply with those in humble garb around him. He surveyed the operations for about a minute, barking an occasional order to his lieutenants (in an unintelligible tongue), and finally, seemingly satisfied, retreated towards an exit at the far end of the pier.

Sherlock Holmes nodded grimly at us both, and we immediately made bold to follow Mr. Martense; Howard and the detective instinctively adopting a kind of forward, slumping gait, in order I realized to minimize their height among the swarms of sawed-off Levantines.

We pursued Martense at a discreet distance through a series of passages. He appeared too preoccupied to notice our trailing him. In any event, parties of men were rushing about all over the place, so we were not especially conspicuous.

Plaster walls soon gave way to actual wooden panels and wainscotting, with electric-light sconces. Paintings hung on the walls, and there was carpeting on the floor. Surely we had crossed into the area of Martense's own personal apartments—the nerve center of the complex. "We must be directly beneath Parker Place," murmured Mr. Holmes, glancing at his compass.

We succeeded in following Martense into a room decorated tastefully with modern drawings and photographs that may have been an office before he turned and acknowledged us. At first he gibbered at us in a queer language that was wholly incomprehensible. When we failed to react, he frowned, then spoke in English in a genial enough tone.

"Yes, may I help you? Are you by any chance lost?"

"No, sir," said Sherlock Holmes, as he closed the door, an ancient one with antique panels, behind us. "Chance is not a factor. My friends and I have some very important business to conduct with you, Mr. Martense."

If our adversary showed any initial surprise at hearing such a rude-looking fellow speak the King's English, he quickly recovered.

"How's that? Do I detect the unmistakable voice of Mr. John Altamont? Or would you prefer that I address you by your real name, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?"

If our companion was surprised in his turn, he betrayed no sign. For a moment we all stood somewhat awkwardly, Mr. Martense stroking his moustache absentmindedly as he regarded us — three clearly by no means welcome guests — with a puzzled air.

"Shall we drop all pretences, then?" replied the detective. "I believe you know why I am here and for what purpose."

"Yes, I do. The letters."

"Are you willing to hand them over?"

"And if I refuse?"

"I am on to your game, Martense, or rather I should say games. To begin, my colleagues and I have tonight witnessed your smuggling operations in full-swing. I admit I am impressed by their scale and organisation."

Martense bowed.

"Secondly — and of more immediately personal concern to you — are the mediumistic practices of Miss Cordelia Garrison. It should come as no surprise to you that in the course of the séance in which all present participated I detected the method of her cheat. An exposure in the press would be most damaging to her reputation. My associate Harry Houdini is fully prepared to join me in a campaign against her — if required..."

"You appear to know a great deal about me, Mr. Holmes," said Martense. "A great deal. Perhaps too much."

"Granted these crimes, sir, I am willing to leave you alone, the law being certain to bring you to justice in the long run, if only you will return to me what rightfully belongs to another."

"Ah, sir, you can hardly expect me to produce the letters at such sudden notice..."

"I think I can make such a demand," said Sherlock Holmes evenly. "I have thoroughly searched your Suydam Street mansion, which you seem to spend very little time at these days, and found nothing. Nor did I uncover anything at your Wolcott Street speakeasy. Nor would a man of your independence rely on a safe deposit box in a commercial bank. No, it has to be here — in this unlikely spot — that a secretive collector such as yourself keeps the cream of his magnificent collection."

During this exchange, I'd had the chance to study more closely the decorations and furnishings in the room. The photographs I now saw were all of famous authors — Wells, Verne, Conrad, Hardy, Kipling, Tennyson, Dickens — with

autographs beneath each. A row of cases with glass tops, just like a museum, contained further manuscript and pictorial materials. Mr. Holmes' conclusion that here was where Martense kept the pride of his collection must not have been difficult to arrive at.

"Very clever, Mr. Holmes," said Martense, in a voice lacking its earlier good humor. "Yes, you stand now in my private sanctum. Here I maintain the bulk of my literary collection — almost solely for my own viewing, I might add. I assure you that fewer than a handful of educated men have entered this room besides yourselves. Perhaps eight know of its existence. I'm a very private man — much like you, my dear sir.

"I admire, too, your boldness in attempting to beard me in my own den. Don't you worry that I could have dozens of armed men in here at the touch of a buzzer? You'd have no prayer of escape."

"I have taken the precaution, Martense," answered the detective, "of placing a sizeable number of my own men at key points in the immediate district. They have orders to call in the official forces, if I and my two friends have not emerged from these burrows by midnight. A raid at this juncture could have very unfortunate results for you and your operations..."

This was sheerest bluff on the part of the detective, but thankfully Martense didn't challenge it.

"Yes, I'd gotten a report that two suspicious characters were at the church... How characteristic of you, Mr. Holmes, to rely on amateurs rather than professionals."

"I have no desire to have to resort to force," said the detective. "I firmly believe we can come to terms through reasonable discussion. I judge you to be a reasonable man."

"Very kind of you to say so, sir," said Martense, and then with a certain tone of resignation: "Well, then, let's discuss this business like gentlemen. As you've observed for yourselves, tonight I have many things to attend to, but perhaps we can come to some sort of accommodation in short order. I'm sorry I can't offer you each a chair, but would any of you care for a cigar?"

Martense proffered a box of Dutch Masters, but we all declined. He took one for himself, sat down in the one chair in the room, situated behind a modern glass-topped desk. He settled back, cut off the end of the cigar with a pocket knife, lit it and drew a couple of puffs. By this nonchalant act of taking his ease, Martense succeeded in cutting the tension somewhat.

"I wish you'd heeded my warning when you first arrived in this country, Mr. Holmes," began our reluctant host. "Oh yes, my agents got wind of your intended American voyage in London. I knew you could be crossing the Atlantic for only one purpose."

Martense sighed, petted his moustache and resumed.

"At first I meant to frighten you, so I sent a couple of my boys around to Clinton Street — to dissuade you from your quest. It appears that they didn't make the message clear — or else they were interrupted by the fortuitous appearance of Messrs. Lovecraft and Long before they could convey it properly..."

Perhaps, I thought, Mr. Holmes had been in one of his distracted moods when accosted by those ruffians.

"Then I changed my mind," continued Martense. "I don't care to use violence when I don't have to — especially against such an eminent personage as yourself. I decided to wait and see how you would proceed. Let me compliment you on how well you've done in figuring out my 'game' in these past weeks. You've done remarkably for a man of your years..."

Throughout this discourse Sherlock Holmes had remained expressionless. If he were feeling any discomfiture, he didn't show it.

"You should realize, Mr. Holmes, that I'm one of your greatest admirers. A most devoted fan of your adventures. Possessing these letters of yours to the late Irene Adler 'of dubious and questionable memory,' so revealing of that passionate side of your nature that your loyal biographer has so brilliantly concealed, gives me supreme satisfaction. They are the crown jewels of my collection."

My mouth nearly dropped a foot at this stunning revelation. I began to feel acutely embarrassed, and dared not look at Howard.

"Rest assured that I would never in a thousand years reveal the existence, let alone the contents, of these most sensitive epistles. It is in the mere possession of them, the fact that I am one of the very few persons in the world who is privy to their secret — in this lies my joy. To share the knowledge would only diminish the pleasure. What the world would give to know! But the world will never know. Please believe me when I say that I have no wish to tarnish that austere image of the cold, perfect reasoner for posterity..."

Sherlock Holmes had gone quite pale, and a slight tremor may have seized his limbs, but with a sudden effort he steadied himself and spoke.

"Yes, yes, that's all very well," he said huskily. "I

appreciate your gesture of discretion. But, to get back to the main point, will you return the letters? Their sentimental value to me is incalculable..."

"I understand your impatience, Mr. Holmes. I confess your threat of exposure does present problems. If it were a matter of me alone, it might not matter so much. But someone else is involved—my bride, Miss Garrison."

For an instant I considered offering my congratulations, but I kept quiet.

"Cordelia and I are to be married in a quiet ceremony tomorrow afternoon at my family's old Dutch church in Flatbush. Thence we will depart on a Cunard Liner for our honeymoon. As my wife, she will no longer practice her arts as a medium. She's retiring entirely from the business, so you'll have nothing to fear on that score..."

"As for the liquor trade, I don't plan to wind it down at any time soon. If that tribe of bluenoses, prigs, and old women hadn't snuck the Volstead Act through Congress while we red-blooded men were in France fighting the Hun... Well, maybe someday this country will come to its senses and repeal this crazy law and I'll be out of business."

I wondered what HPL was thinking of Martense's pronouncements on Prohibition and the World War. His attempt to enlist in the army in 1917 had been thwarted by his mother, who had gotten him disqualified from the Rhode Island National Guard on the grounds of his chronic ill health. This was an episode that my friend didn't care to talk about.

"At least you have to give me credit," continued Martense, "for importing the genuine article. That's real Scotch whiskey in those crates. You can't accuse me of cooking up and poisoning people with home brew..."

Home Brew, the magazine that ran Howard's "Herbert West: Reanimator" and "The Lurking Fear" before he discovered **Weird Tales**. Funny how such idle thoughts hit one in the most dire circumstances.

"As for the human cargo you've no doubt beheld during your tour, neither is my traffic in this commodity easily ended. Until our lawmakers relent on this ridiculous quota system set up by the Johnson Act... In this department, gentlemen, you must grant that I've done some good. Can you blame me for trying to help these poor souls, driven by prejudice and poverty from their native lands, only to run up against our discriminatory racial quotas? The Statue of Liberty should cover her face and lower her torch in shame!"

This reference struck a personal chord. My grandfather, Charles O. Long, had been the building contractor to construct

the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. He'd served as its superintendent for many years.

"Here in this underground way-station," said Martense, waxing grandiloquent, "I see to it that they receive some medical care, the rudiments of an education—in particular instruction in English—in short, the basics to get a fair start in this country. Our church building serves as a social center. Need I remind you, sirs, that we are a nation of immigrants, and it behooves us whose ancestors were among the first settlers (as mine were in this city) not to begrudge a chance to those who've come later, whatever their race or color or religion.

"Of course, there's a bit of profit to be made in all of this, but they've been off lately and it's unlikely that I'll continue in this line indefinitely."

Howard may have been on the verge of responding with his opinions on these matters, judging from the almost apoplectic expression on his face, but Sherlock Holmes held up a restraining hand. He was evidently fast losing patience with Martense, though for other reasons.

"Yes, come, come, Mr. Martense, these are commendable sentiments," said the detective, "but are you going to give me the letters or not?" He moved his hand towards the pocket with the revolver.

"Ah, well," said Martense. He sighed again. "I concede. I'll freely give you what you want. If you can hold on a second longer, I'll get them for you."

He put down the butt of his cigar, got up from his chair, and went over to one of the museum cases. He opened the door of the cabinet beneath, revealing the door of a safe. After a few deft turns of the tumbler, the door swung open and Martense withdrew a thick packet of yellowed envelopes, secured with a faded violet ribbon.

"Here you are, Mr. Holmes," he said, handing them over. The detective quickly riffled through the pack, seeming to count, then pulled one letter from its envelope as if to verify the contents. He shook his head with a satisfied nod.

"Thank you, Mr. Martense, for your cooperation," said Sherlock Holmes. "I am much touched by your magnanimity..." While this last remark had its grudging edge, I sensed an underlying tone of sincerity.

"Now, gentlemen, if you'll pardon me, but I have a little more work here to see to before I go home. Must be fresh for one's wedding day, after all..."

Martense rose, ushered us out into the corridor, through a door that opened into a basement, and then up a flight of what

one might describe as "evilly worn" stairs to a shabby parlor room. There a couple of seedy-looking fellows, stationed by the front door, eyed us with ill-concealed disdain. Martense grunted a few foreign syllables at them, as if to explain our unexpected presence. Most non-alien guests, it would seem, entered the premises through this dingy room.

"I imagine you'll be able to locate your friends somewhere nearby," said Martense as he held open the door for us. "Good night." He didn't wait for our acknowledgment, but turned away and abruptly shut the door behind us.

"Come, let us not waste any time, in case Mr. Martense should have a change of heart," said Sherlock Holmes. The three of us scurried across the dismal stretch of Parker Place, proceeding in the gloom until we emerged into some slightly less oppressive thoroughfare. We paused to catch our breath in the damp spring night air, so welcome after the fetid vapors of the unwholesome Tartarus we'd lately quitted.

"Pray, my dear friends, please keep to yourselves the nature of the highly personal revelations you have heard tonight," said the detective. "I do not feel the other Kalems need be informed of the identity of my 'client'—only of our success in retrieving what we set out for."

Howard and I swore we'd never tell a soul. We resumed our rapid pace, and shortly we entered the street where Leeds and Kleiner were waiting by the Ford. Our comrades greeted us heartily, and we assured them that all had gone well as we scrambled into the car. Kleiner gave the crank a couple of turns and we were off. First we drove to the wharf region where we picked up McNeil and Kirk, who reported having seen row boats plying from a freighter moored about a quarter-mile away in the channel to the wharves—and disappearing underneath them! We filled in the gang on the course of our adventures, leaving out only certain details of our interview with Jan Martense. As we approached the area of the dance-hall church, our last stop in Red Hook, I realized that we were going to have a tight fit. Kleiner's Ford would resemble, with all of us stuffed in, one of those crazy vehicles out of the comedies of the Keystone Kops. The "Keystone Kalems," I thought, in the jubilation of the moment.

But as we coasted to a halt near the dance-hall church, Morton and Loveman were nowhere in sight. "Where the deuce could they be?" muttered Sherlock Holmes. With some difficulty he opened the car door and clambered out onto the sidewalk.

"Want one of us to go inside with you and get them, Mr. Altamont?" asked Kirk, leaning out the window.



At that moment, however, our two missing comrades sauntered out from the entrance to the church, each with a pretty girl on his arm. The girls were giggling.

"Hello there," cried Morton, waving in cheery fashion. "Is it time to go? The band's just starting up again. Give us another minute..."

"Good Lord, are they fool enough — " sputtered the detective. What further he might have said about Morton and Loveman's laxity on the job will never be known, because suddenly a mob of toughs swept out from around the far side of the church, headed straight for our car. Mr. Holmes swiftly drew out his revolver — but his grip wasn't secure (we watched for agonizing seconds while he fumbled with the weapon) and the horde was upon him before he or any of us could react.

The efforts of Leeds, Kleiner, Kirk, McNeil, Howard and myself to struggle out of the cramped confines of the vehicle to rush to our British friend's aid proved in the event futile, for we were almost immediately surrounded by a bevy of ruffians who blocked our exit at both doors and shook menacing fists through the windows. Fortunately, they made no attempt to force the doors or break the windows, evidently content to keep us penned in while their fellows dealt with Mr. Holmes. A surging mass of bodies, glimpsed in patches near the hood of the Model-A, gave us hope that the detective was putting up some sort of valiant fight, despite the overwhelming odds. Loveman and Morton and their companions had disappeared from the top of the church steps, but whether they had joined in the fray outside or fled inside the church no one could tell.

Suddenly a shot went off close at hand, then a whole series of shots in quick succession—at some indeterminate distance.

"This is the police. Put down your arms!" yelled a commanding voice.

At this welcome cry the gang of toughs scattered, apparently unarmed and unwilling to confront this new and formidable adversary. Perhaps also, I thought with a sickening feeling, they had reclaimed their prize from Sherlock Holmes. We all tumbled out of the Ford, now that the siege was lifted, anxious to attend to our fallen friend.

"My God, Mr. Altamont's been hit!" croaked Leeds, who was the first to reach the crumpled form of the detective, lying unconscious on the pavement. "He's bleeding from the head!"

As we huddled over Mr. Holmes, a tall, heavily built man with a smoking pistol cocked warily in his hand came around the front of the car. Morton and Loveman, bereft of their

lady friends, appeared from the direction of the church.

"What's going on here? Everyone all right?" asked the man, who was dressed in nondescript civilian clothes.

"Our buddy's been shot, mister," quaked Ev McNeil.

Our deliverer regarded us closely and hesitated, as if unsure whether to trust us or not. Our pleading looks must have persuaded him we weren't about to jump him, because he tucked his pistol inside his coat and crouched down to examine the detective. We waited anxiously for his verdict.

"He'll be okay — it's only a flesh wound — though he'll have a nasty bump and a killing headache when he comes to," said the man. "I suggest you get him to a hospital without delay in any case. You can't be too careful, an old geezer like him with a concussion..."

Under this authoritative man's direction, Leeds, Kirk, Loveman, and I gently hoisted the limp frame of Sherlock Holmes off the street and into the backseat of the Model-A.

"Say, what's this?" exclaimed the heavily built man, who'd been poking around the gutter and now held up by the end of the barrel a familiar-looking revolver. He sniffed at it. "This .38's just been fired. Is this your friend's?"

None of us denied it. With a sad heart I realized Mr. Holmes had been wounded by his own gun.

"Wait, there's something else down here too," he continued. He picked up what at first appeared to be a small bundle of papers, but when revealed in the light of the Ford's headlamp turned out to be — to my inexpressible joy — a packet of letters tied with a dirty violet ribbon.

"Ahem, I'll look after those, if you don't mind," said HPL, almost snatching the packet out of the man's grasp. He gave Howard a hard look, then simply shrugged.

"Okay, buddy," he said, "but I think I'll hold on to the .38 for the time being... Take it easy, I'm acting unofficially here — I'm not out to make trouble for you boys. But I would be curious to hear what happened, if you'd be kind enough to give me a ride out of Red Hook — on the way to the hospital. I can show you the way to the nearest one."

Again, we didn't argue with the man's request. Somehow we all squeezed into the Model-A, which Kleiner had gotten started while we had settled "Mr. Altamont" in the back. With relief we were at last on our way out of Red Hook.

"I appreciate the lift," said our new friend, who soon showed himself to be entirely agreeable. "I've spent more than enough time hanging around this Godforsaken slum for one night." In this sentiment I heartily concurred.

"But tell me, purely off the record understand, what were

you guys doing outside Red Hook's infamous dance-hall church, dressed up like foreigners? At first I figured you were rum-runners, run foul of a rival gang—but from talking to you I know you aren't. You all speak regular American, and I bet that's greasepaint smeared on your faces. What gives?"

Credit must go to Loveman for thinking up a half-way credible story in reply. He explained that we had disguised ourselves in order to "crash" the dance at the church. As white men, we would have been unwelcome outsiders. As it was, regrettably, some of the males at the dance had seen through our deception, and because they didn't like us "messing with their women" had been trying to persuade us to leave when our deliverer had arrived on the scene.

"Lower-class gals, especially if they're of Latin or Mediterranean or some other dark-skinned type, can be very attractive," commented Morton. "I've heard a lot of the swells like to hang out at the dime-a-dance dives and meet the tarts. One of our most noted young critics, in fact, makes it a habit ____"

"Please, Morton," interrupted Howard, "this sort of sordid talk we can do without. We haven't yet found out what our rescuer was doing tonight—indeed, sir, we don't even know your name..."

"The name's Mahoney," the man replied "Detective Thomas F. Mahoney. I'm an undercover cop from out of state—on special assignment. I can tell you no more than that I'm investigating certain criminal activities centered in the Red Hook district..."

Without incident we reached Brooklyn Hospital, guided also by Howard who'd gotten to know the place well from his frequent visits there the year before when Sonia was hospitalized with her nervous trouble. We checked in the still unconscious Sherlock Holmes under the name of John Altamont. Detective Mahoney flashed his badge, and assured the on-duty nurse that our patient had injured himself accidentally while cleaning his gun. There would be no legal complications. Howard thanked him for covering for us, and Detective Mahoney said he would keep in touch and gave Howard his card, marked with a Brooklyn address.

Howard and I elected to wait until we received definite word on Sherlock Holmes' condition, while the rest of the Kalem and our new detective friend left for their respective homes in Kleiner's motor-car. In less than an hour of restless waiting we heard that all was well—the patient was in a

state approaching normal sleep.

"I'm afraid you'll have to pick up your own clothes another time," said HPL at the entrance to the subway station near Borough Hall where he was leaving me off. "I don't have a key to Holmes' room."

"My parents will have been long in bed by the time I sneak in," I said. "I'll be able to change and wash up before they see me."

"As for bed, I feel as if I could sleep a week! At least I can retire with the satisfaction of our ultimate victory, however near-run a thing it was. Gawdelpus, what a night! You know, Belknapius, I'd hate to see any of the letters I wrote to Sonia fall into the wrong hands.* I'll call you when and if I ever wake up. So long, Kidlet!"

For a few moments before descending to the platform I watched the lean figure of my friend hasten in jerky strides towards Clinton Street. His energy was truly extraordinary. I myself was exhausted, both physically and emotionally — there'd been many shocks in the past several hours. And yet I, too, felt cause to be pleased by the results of our labors. Little could I imagine as I rattled back to Manhattan on an empty IRT car how short-lived our triumph would prove.

*After their divorce in 1929, Sonia destroyed all of HPL's letters to her—a trunkful. [Ed.'s note.]

VIII

I stayed in bed most of Sunday, taking my meals on a tray while propped up with pillows. Confused and uncomfortable thoughts troubled me as I could not help but reflect on last night's astonishing revelation regarding the private life of Sherlock Holmes. My parents concluded that the Blue Pencil meeting must have been especially heated, their son a victim to strain brought on by too intense debate.

Monday I felt much improved both in body and spirit—well enough to read some Swinburne and even attempt to write a poem myself. Late in the morning the 'phone rang, and my mother called from the hall to say that Howard was on the line and did I feel well enough to speak with him. Of course, I sprang out from under the bedclothes and rushed to seize the receiver, eager to hear how my friend was faring in the wake of our adventure.

"Frank, I've got some bad news," choked Howard, his agitation evident in every syllable. "While I slept my dressing-room alcove was entered, either through the door to the next room or through the door by someone having a key; and **all** my suits except the thin blue, my Flatbush overcoat, a wicker suitcase of Sonia's and Loveman's radio material have been stolen! This would be devastating enough, but whoever it was also took the old jacket of Holmes' I was wearing—with the packet of letters still in the pocket. Heaven alone knows what I'm going to tell him!"

HPL's description of this catastrophe hit me like a bucket of cold water in the face. What a blow! All I could get out in response were a few strangled words of general sympathy.

"Maybe they were petty thieves who didn't realize the value of what they inadvertently took," I offered lamely.

"Let's hope so, Sonny, and not the long arm of Jan Martense at work; but I fear the worst. Though what he could want with my wardrobe Nyarlathotep only knows..."

To clothe his arriving aliens? I wondered—but didn't voice the opinion.

"And to top it all off," continued Howard, "I read a notice in this morning's Brooklyn **Eagle** of Martense's wedding. He was leaving today on his honeymoon — three months in South America."

I couldn't think what to say to this.

"Well, I was going to walk over to the hospital now to visit Holmes anyway. If he's in any kind of shape to bear the shock, I'll have to tell him... To Hades with everything. I'm so sick I could curse the atmosphere blue!"

Four days later I saw the great fictional detective for the final time, in the company of Howard on the Cunard pier shortly before embarkation for the return voyage to England. Our small party, though not as demonstrative in our farewells as other groups of well-wishers, was no less emotionally charged. Sherlock Holmes was dressed in a smart herringbone suit, which hung loosely on his gaunt and stooped frame. He seemed almost to have aged another decade since my last view of him, and yet the spark in his gray eyes remained undimmed. A cloth cap covered much of the bandage at the side of his head. The wound was healing nicely and the doctor had given his consent to travel.

"Once again, Holmes, I apologise," said Howard. "If only I had taken more care..."

"Please, my dear fellow, please," protested the detective, raising a narrow, claw-like hand. "You must not blame yourself. You did your best on the behalf of a vain old man. Indeed, you have done better than you know. I may have been humbled by a few physical knocks, but I have not — not, I say — been defeated."

So saying, Sherlock Holmes smiled and withdrew from his suitcoat a packet of letters — a packet of letters tied with a violet ribbon!

"O, Gawd, O Montreal!" cried Howard.

"Are those... are those **the** letters, Mr. Holmes?" I stammered.

"Yes, these are the letters — the real letters," said our friend, as he slipped them back out of sight, with a furtive glance at the surrounding crowd. "I have after all collected the final and decisive trick. Game and match are mine."

"But how... what?" said HPL, clearly still as much at a loss as I was.

"Pray accept once more my apologies, but I did warn you that I had not informed you of every detail of my plot. Before departing England, I took the precaution of preparing a

counterfeit set of the purloined epistles, in case opportunity should present itself for effecting a discreet switch with the genuine letters. Hence they were among the items I brought with me the evening of our Red Hook jaunt.

"In the event, as you witnessed, I never had to make recourse to this ruse. I was carrying both packets on my person at the time I so foolishly was drawn into that scuffle outside the dance-hall church; and it was only by the sheerest good fortune that the bogus bundle fell into the street and not the other with it. (You can imagine my relief when upon regaining consciousness in hospital I was able to search my clothes and ascertain that at least the real letters were in my possession.) I daresay, Lovecraft, that Martense's henchmen observed you retrieve the letters, and accordingly Martense arranged for their uninvited visit to your rooms the following night.

"I like to think that he had no time to examine the letters carefully after their 'return' to him. Perhaps, preoccupied as he surely was with his imminent honeymoon, he gave them no more than a cursory look. Still and all, as the immortal Capablanca has said, the good player is always lucky."

If Sherlock Holmes seemed pleased with himself, Howard's long expression indicated that he was in no mood to rejoice.

"Forgive me, Lovecraft, for not telling you before this moment, but I had to assume Martense's agents continued to have us all under close surveillance; even now on this teeming dockside his men may be watching. Had I revealed the happy fate of the actual letters to you, I daresay you would have been hard pressed to maintain a suitably downcast countenance until such time as I had recovered. Any hint of the true state of affairs may have aroused suspicion, and I simply lacked the strength to do battle from my sickbed in case they elected to call upon me.

"And, too, you must allow an old showman the pleasure of one final, grand deception. It is usual that the audience comes away all the more satisfied for having been so thoroughly mystified."

Howard declined to comment on this remark. Possibly sensing HPL's discomfiture, Mr. Holmes made haste to change the subject.

"As for the deeper issue of how I came to write these letters, I believe I owe you at least a general explanation. Again forgive me if I am not too specific. Some memories are painful and time grows short. As a young man, just about your age, Frank, I was a dashing rake; and it is only thanks to Dr. Watson's discretion and concern for my image before the



public that this phase of my career has been suppressed. After the fire of my youthful ardour burnt itself out, I led a life of exemplary moral virtue—with only an occasional lapse into licentiousness. Once on a previous American assignment, I admit to you with no little shame but few regrets, I seduced a pretty young married woman, a Yankee of old New England stock, she assured me. This was late in 1889, as I recall. She said her husband was a travelling salesman away a great deal from home — whom she suspected of consorting with the basest sorts of her sex. I think she was swayed to submit as much by a desire for revenge as by my manly charms... But that is another story, and I ramble on."

From his jacket the detective withdrew two envelopes, and gave one to each of us. "Here, some small compensation for your services. Perhaps not quite as generous as I would like to be, but then I had not anticipated hospital expenses... If nothing else, I imagine this episode might provide material for a new story for **Weird Tales**."

"I have to say I've been giving it some thought—'The Red Hook Horror,' or some such," said Howard, perking up slightly.

"But, mind you, do not make it too closely autobiographical. Pray leave out the character of the ridiculous old detective, if you please."

Sherlock Holmes shook our hands for the last time, said good-bye, and tottered up the gangway. When he reached the top he turned and lifted his cap, a last bow before disappearing inside the giant vessel. A whistle sounded; remaining passengers hurried to board. The boat would soon be easing out of its berth.

We opened our envelopes. The sum of money in mine was not overly generous, just as the detective had confessed. From Howard's long face and slackened jaw I could tell his share was not going to cover the cost of replacing his suits.

"**Eheu, fugaces**," said Howard with stoic resignation. "Kirk has offered me a temporary job addressing envelopes; he's letting me have his entire stock of envelopes with his old address. And maybe that assistant curator job with Morton will come through, the gods of Pegana willing..."

"Did you by chance get Mr. Holmes to investigate your robbery?" I asked, as we wandered away from the pier.

"Ah, Belknap, I didn't have the heart to trouble the old gent about it, occupied as he was as soon as he was released from the hospital with packing up both his Manhattan and Brooklyn abodes. I did, however, get in touch with Detective Mahoney, who's been by for a look—though he could discover no clues. He's a bright fellow for a Mick, a Dublin University man..."

Reminded of his recent grievous loss, Howard began to speak of his plans for the culprit.

"If I ever catch the ----- thief, why by -----, I'll smash his ----- with one fist whilst I pulverize his ----- with the other, meanwhile kicking him posteriorly with both feet in their most pointed shoes and manner!—i.e. if I catch him."

"Do you think you'll actually write a story based on our adventures with Mr. Holmes?" I asked, to deflect my friend from these painful ruminations on revenge.

"Yes, I think I might. I've been reading an article on witch cults and devil worship in the **Encyclopaedia Britannica** which could provide a potent background. I suppose I could change a few names, make up a real 'hero' for the thing, throw in some lurid supernatural colouring...

"But I'm not ready to hit ole Farnie with a hell-raiser of mine just yet. For now I must persist with more mundane grubbing to keep this wreck animated... I promised Kirk I'd show up at his shop an hour ago. Well, back to the ----- envelope addressing!"

AFTERWORD

by ROBERT BLOCH

It's always pleasant to read about old friends, and surely Frank Long, H. P. Lovecraft and Sherlock Holmes are friends of mine—even though I've only met Long on a few occasions, knew HPL solely through correspondence, and haven't set eyes on Sherlock Holmes in years.

But I'm glad to learn of their exploits together, and further gratified by how accurately the author has succeeded in capturing the individual essence of their diverse and complex personalities.

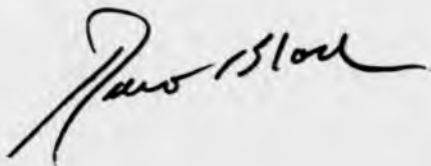
I'm further intrigued by the introduction of the late Harry Houdini in this account, though if you'll permit a small cavil, I'm inclined to question the rendition of his speech.

From two people who knew him personally—the late Buster Keaton, whose acquaintance extended back to his babyhood in vaudeville and medicine-shows—and my own mother, who visited with him in Milwaukee at the home of mutual friends during the 1905-1916 period—I learned that Houdini was not a polished or erudite speaker. His stage dialogue was memorized and his writing (as in the case of **Imprisoned With the Pharaohs**) was almost invariably ghosted or "touched-up" by editorial hands. He **did** read extensively and his library of magic is, of course, famous in prestidigitous circles. But Houdini himself was a man of limited formal education. Like many of his "show biz" contemporaries, he picked up and used—or misused—

any number of scholarly phrases and developed an impressive professional **persona**, reflecting his keen intellect. Nonetheless, he frequently fell victim to the grammatical lapses of one whose childhood had been spent in a household where a foreign language was spoken. One recalls the famous anecdote of his attendance at a seance where the medium obligingly summoned up the spirit of his dead mother, who conversed with Houdini for some time. Asked if he had any questions for her he said, "Yes, only one. When did you learn to speak English?"

Houdini himself **did** speak English; it's just that his ordinary mode of communication sometimes betrayed his lack of schooling. Of course most people judge him by "his" writings and "his" stage pronouncements and lectures, so in that sense he is accurately portrayed here.

And this — like the story itself — is part of the magic.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul Block". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Cannon has written a number of articles on the connection between H. P. Lovecraft and Sherlock Holmes. He is an assistant editor at a major lower midtown book publisher in New York.

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