



## The House of Endless Mourning featuring the Harlem Globetrotters

It was in my thirty-fourth year that I first laid eyes upon S--- House, though by then my spirit felt much older. Perhaps it was this weariness that accounted for my failure to intuit the true nature of the place. In those months the whole of sensation seemed to be veiled by a gauzy pallor. Knowing what I do now, I can only marvel, aghast, at the extent of my numbness, which must have been extreme to have concealed the horror in which I would soon enshroud myself. Indeed, today my recollection of it comes with such forceful clarity that I would be only too glad to reclaim my obliviousness. Sleep eludes me: upon closing my eyes all I see are the rough, wan boards of the manse; its unwholesome and rambling gardens; the chalky cliffs descending to sharp rocks draped with fetid algae and pale, gurgling crabs. Above all I can still feel, to my bones' pith, the miasmatic air, cold and damp, that laid upon and pervaded everything, sparing

neither the house nor the gardens nor the Harlem Globetrotters' tour bus, which was parked in front.

But in those days I saw none of this, preoccupied as I was. My beloved Alice was not five months buried, and staggered as I was by the loss, I could barely manage the drearily quotidian details of my suddenly changed circumstances. I ruminated upon them as I walked the empty lane leading to S— that the stationmaster had, with a reticent and paternal concern, at last directed me toward.

The railwayman had brought to mind Alice's father, if only through the contrasting nature of his small show of compassion. It was upon the memory of our last meeting that I dwelt as my tread scuffed the macadam. The old man had been my relentless foe, railing against both our union and our plans to bring comfort to the afflicted in those benighted and disease-ridden parts of the world that men such as he prefer to ignore. On that day, with all lost and his fears utterly vindicated, I had screwed up the last of my strength to once again face his hoary calumnies. But he had lost his fire and daughter both, and he barely met my gaze as he whispered that Alice's trust would go to the church, and that he did not suppose we would meet again. The encounter left me so dazed that it was some hours later before I realized how drastically my fortunes had changed.

If I had kept my wits about me on that day, if I had found the right entreaty, would I still have found myself trudging up that pocked gravel path? Impossible to say. But this desolate place and the quiet isolation it promised were now my only attainable prospect for recuperation from the poverty and febrile despair that had steadily consumed me in a house, in a city, in a world without my Alice.

The day's gray light quailed at the threshold; the foyer was wretchedly dark, and I had rung the bell before I saw that the landlady was already before me.

"No need for that, young man! You are Mr. S----, yes? The doctor's letter did not say when you might arrive, as usual for him," she said.

"I am indeed, madam, but, er--usual, did you say?"

"Yes, for convalescent cases such as yours. Oh, mind you may trust that the doctor is always discreet. But I am sure he would suffer me to say that he often recommends our house. The place would not be what it is without him."

"There are others here, ah, recuperating, then?" I did not wish to betray alarm, but the promise of solitude was the only part of this dreary ordeal for which I held any hope.

"Presently not--it is best to host one of your number at a time. I am sure we will see more before long--" She stopped herself. "But you must be tired. You will excuse me to finish preparing your

room. Perhaps you would care to pass time in the parlor? You will find several members of the Harlem Globetrotters there.”

“The Harlem Globetrotters, madam?”

“Indeed. They are staying here, too.”

## New Friends & Strange Dreams

The parlor bore an air of abject exhaustion, of cushions worn to thread and left to stiffen in stale years of lonely disuse. Some low coals crumbled in the grate, permitting wisps of flame up the flue and vaulting shadows along the ceiling. Yet despite this enervated air I found the chamber inviting, and this by virtue of the company it offered. The landlady had been right, at least partly: two enormous gentlemen stalked about the snooker table, clad in splendid nylon tracksuits of crimson, blue and teal. The smaller of the pair (though I must make pains to convey their stature was uniformly impressive) was composing what looked to be a particularly elaborate shot, involving several banked angles, no small amount of juggling, and, for reasons I can no longer recall, a step-ladder.

Upon my appearance, all this was abandoned. “What’s up, Stretch?” the smaller man asked, seemingly unperturbed by my interruption of his masterful exhibition. Most would call my stature diminutive, and so I found myself speechless (I later understood his greeting to be ironical).

“Name’s Curly,” he continued, graciously ignoring my confusion. “And this here’s Geese. How you doin’?”

I replied that I was doing well; I introduced myself; and I enquired as to whether they were, in fact, the world-famous Harlem Globetrotters.

“That’s a fact,” Geese affirmed. “The whole team’s here.”

I could only marvel! One might imagine the presence of celebrity phenoms to be the worst intrusion imaginable upon my desired solitude. And yet this was not at all the case. By virtue of their affable warmth and boundless jocularity, I found myself cheered while in the presence of these Globetrotters, my spirits lifted for the first time in a span I couldn’t name. They went on to explain that they were preparing for a game against their sometime rivals, the Freeport Whalers.

“How our manager found this crazy old house I’ll never know,” lamented Geese. “I can’t believe we’re stuck out in the country with that spooky old landlady.”

I averred that this was unfortunate. But I also expressed my hope that there might be some part of the property that could be found congenial, and at this they relented, though perhaps, I suspect, from good humor more so than genuine agreement.

We continued in this pleasant manner for some time, and passingly the two men invited me to join their game of snooker. At one point Curly retrieved a basketball from the chez and, mimicking a pass, sent it whirling around my head and back into his hands. A trifle for him! But to my rattled nerves the ball's dizzying ephemerality evoked too much: mystery and disappearance, the betrayal of one's own senses--I was overcome and had to sit.

It pained me to see the distress my disorientated state caused my new friends, so that when Geese secured the sideboard's decanter of port and proffered a snifter, I was eager to accept it graciously, even though I knew my grief-wasted body to be worryingly susceptible to spirits. My new friends scrupulously declined to join me, citing their rigorous training regimen. But soon I felt fortified. And, reflecting that I myself was likely facing a period of enforced abstemiousness at my (as-yet unmet) doctor's orders, it occurred to me that I had the better part of a phial of madak snouf in my breast pocket, obtained from an herbalist I had encountered during my peregrinations between healers and holy men as I sought relief from my loss. That man had proven to be a charlatan--we need not dwell upon the particulars--but whatever its prescriber's faults, I had found the powder's effects salubrious. Having futilely offered some to my admirably ascetic companions, I indulged freely.

The evening softened and blurred as Curly and Geese recounted their team's seemingly boundless exploits. Had I read such stories I might not have believed them; having met these gentlemen, I could hardly doubt them.

But upon arising from the settee for more refreshment the softened evening tilted and lurched. I staggered and caught myself, heard jostling glass. Strong hands grasped my shoulders as worried voices spun away from me and up into the darkening sky.

I do not know when I awoke. It was still night. My head pounded, enflamed. A collectible souvenir cup of water had been thoughtfully left upon the bedside table; I took it at a draught. Slowly, I apprehended my surroundings. The room's lamps were dark, but moonlight poured through the garden window, tracing the chamber's outlines in shadowy silvers. A desk, a chest, a *chaise longue*. A gas flame hissing, low and blue, in the grate. The moon bestowed an icy majesty to what it touched, but soon I saw the shabbiness of my surroundings: the stains of the wallpaper, the mangy velvet of the chaise. All seemed worn, excepting a vase of royal myrtle flowers at the window, and the bed I occupied. Its four regal posts bore an inky patina of unfathomable years. And the bedclothes upon it were so white as to effloresce. The starched tightness of the sheets seemed to grasp and hold me down, even as the canopy flowed diaphanously in some unseen eddy of nocturnal air.

All this I perceived as fevered blood pounded through my enervated brain. But by degrees the wages of my overindulgence surrendered to the room's implacable calm. My brow cooled and at last my agitation wilted back into me, drawing along with it an exhaustion that left me senseless.

I have told you I cannot recount the time of my first waking. So, too, my second; nor indeed if I awoke at all. I could guess I slept an instant, but for my senses' newly crystalline clarity. My motions felt effortlessly languid as I rose from the bed. I was not dazed, not muddled. Rather, I was serene, my mind as perfectly placid as a winter pond. I noted my movement toward the window with the distant interest of an astronomer.

The cold of the pane drew warmth from my lips and it returned me to myself. Below, the garden's paths cut beams through the vegetation, which sprawled blackly in the moon's thin light. All was silver and shade, a daguerrotype set in gelid lunar emulsion.

Or nearly all. For at the corner of my eye a yellow flame seemed to curl to life. Turning my head I saw it was not a flame but a figure. A woman, her bare long arms gracefully descending from that fiery yellow dress whose broad straps bound a comportment meting grace with strength. Something in my chest rose and caught, my composure instantly matching the apprehension I saw in the woman below me. She was waiting for someone, scanning the garden. It occurred to me that she must be terribly cold.

I thought to fetch a blanket and meet her but before I could move she turned and met my gaze. Something happened then. Her face was beautiful and grew more so with each fractionate second as it blossomed into greeting, and welcome, and even relief. The thing in my chest burst beyond its confines and raced to fill the universe. A champagne warmth ran the length of my spine. A laugh escaped my lips as I grasped the surety that my struggle would cease; I had now only to allow myself to be borne toward a fate that was inevitable and right. A revelation in an instant.

But then she smiled, and demurely lowered her head, and crossed the garden and beyond my sight. For a second time that night my blood began to cool. But this time it was not exhaustion I felt. I was ashamed. I owed my Alice more than this. Yes, even her memory deserved a greater tithe. It was not that another woman had captivated me—that was a disgrace, yes, but merely a disgrace as earthly as the flesh that occasioned it. My Alice's neck had not been carved in the same elegant lines as the woman in yellow, her bodice had never bloomed with such vigor, her arms had never held such elegant poise. But she would have been glad to tell you this herself. It was the thing in my chest, the thing that had grown and leapt—that was what only Alice's shining eyes had called forth, that was the thing that was hers. That was what I knew I was charged to hold in trust until I could join her and return it.

Now my blood was more than cool. I reeled with despair. I wept. Sleep must have come, but not soon enough.

## Dawn Arrives

By morning my sorrow was spent. The day was clear and bright through the draperies' gauze. So, too, was my own perception. I performed my ablutions and dressed with an inert blankness betrayed only by my softly shaking hands.

At the bottom of the stairs I nearly collided with the landlady as she raced from the kitchen, across the foyer, and into the dining room. "Good morning Mr. S— and begging your pardon! We are feeding an army these days!"

"Of course, Madam. The fault is mine—" I began. But she was already gone. I followed her into the dining room, and beheld an amazing tableau.

My new friends were there, Geese and Curly. Their teammates, too—the men I would later know as B.J. and Gip and Pablo, encircling the formidable dining table, arrayed as satellites into whose orbits plunged waffles and buttered toast, coffee and juice, bacon and porridge, sausage and hash, and all of these at alarming speed and volume. But this complex and frantic traffic paled, reduced to a mere clockwork by the blazing glory of the figure in its midst, the sun at the center of this jentacular orrery. Meadowlark Lemon: captain, leader, star.

"Take a seat, friend," he suggested, almost idly, but with an authority that was irresistibly gentle and deep. His limpid gaze had found me as soon as I entered the room. It would have been impossible to refuse; indeed, it would have been impossible to feel anything but eagerness to assent.

I had barely sat before a commotion sounded from the vestibule as the door opened, admitting the sounds of boots and a few swirling leaves. "Dr. A---," came the landlady's voice. "I did not expect you to return so soon."

"Nor I," came the brusque reply. "Yet I find myself able to travel no farther than Essex."

"Ah. Not long, then."

"No, not long. Is S---- here yet?"

"Indeed, you will find our guest Mr. S---- at breakfast. In the adjacent chamber."

A pause, then: "Ah." And with that, he strode into the dining room.

The doctor cut a striking figure, his robust frame jacketed like a rifle cartridge clad in pinstripe wool. His face was no less handsome for its years, and the light in his eyes evinced a keenness of

observation. Below them a very fine moustache conveyed an authority that all must easily comprehend. It was simple to imagine such a man ordering a regiment to their deaths, and unlikely that such instruction would be questioned.

Yet for all his formidability, the doctor paused at the threshold of the room, as the Globetrotters' presence became apparent to him. His eyes immediately went to Meadowlark. I wondered if perhaps he was accustomed to that seat at the table. Now I wonder if he was simply uneasy in the presence of an equal.

"What's up, doc?" Curly offered, unhelpfully.

"Gentlemen," the doctor allowed, with a slight inclination of his head. He turned to me and brightened. "Mr. S---, I am so pleased to finally meet. I trust your journey was agreeable?"

"Yes, doctor. A pleasure to meet you as well."

"Very good. Well, I am sorry to excuse myself so quickly, but I must situate my effects--naturally I shall be staying at the house to supervise your treatment, sir."

"Ah! Indeed. I am glad. When shall we confer as to that?"

"Soon enough, soon enough. Perhaps this evening. We have ample time."

"Er... yes, doctor. I should perhaps mention that I have awoken feeling markedly worse this morning." Across the table, Lemon's brow furrowed. "Would it not be wise to consult in private? Perhaps after you have settled yourself?"

"It is only natural that your complaints have intensified," replied the doctor. "Now that you are in an environment conducive to recuperation, your physick may finally admit the extent of the insult it has suffered. I should not be overly concerned. All you must do is rest. Sleep is the thing."

"I see. And therefore should I not exert myself? I had thought to walk the grounds..."

"Ah, yes. That will be fine, I'm sure. It matters not. Sleep! Only be sure you are sleeping."

I thanked him, and with a last glance at the Globetrotters he quit the room, retrieved his valise and coat, and ascended the stairs.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well, friend," offered Meadowlark, with a mix of discretion and genuine concern.

"Thank you, sir. I am sure I will improve soon."

His gaze remained on me, measuring something. “Why don’t you hang with us today? We’re planning to take the bus to town--see the arena, maybe find something to eat. What do you say?”

I thanked him, but said I must decline--though refusing his invitation, even one so gently put, engendered an immediate sense of regret. “I hope to see the grounds, Mr. Lemon. I am unfamiliar with this part of the country, and should like to know more of its character.”

That same pause. Then an easy smile crossed his Appollonian features. “Alright, friend. You do that. Maybe we’ll see you around.”

I thanked him--thanked all of them--and took my leave. Fortified by the lion’s share of a *cafe au lait* I felt an urge to move, even as the hallway mirror showed my complexion was still rather wan. I thought to head to the door, but was promptly waylaid by the landlady, who emerged from the kitchen and who, I thought, must surely have been waiting for me.

“Ah! Mr. S----. I am so pleased to have caught you. I could not help but overhear your intention to stroll the grounds. A fine idea, very fine. Alas, you have arrived past the full glory of our autumn, but the path along the sea cliffs is bracing in any season. A word, though, sir: I must advise you to keep your own company. Oh! I do not mean the Globetrotters; of course I do not mean those gentlemen. But what few servants this house retains are a lowly sort, and their coarse manners make fevers all too common among them. Surely in your condition the doctor would advise against such associations, would he not? It is best to leave them be.”

I averred that it might be--in truth I did not know what to make of this. I could only surmise that perhaps she had a maid in her employ who had suffered other guests’ lecherous advances, and balanced the insult I felt at the implication against her commendable efforts to protect a subordinate. In my bafflement I considered whether to assure her that I was a gentleman above all, but this train of thought brought a more pressing question to mind:

“Madam, is there a young lady at the house? Your daughter, perhaps?”

At once, the concern left her face. With twinkling eyes she replied, “My daughter? No, no, sir. I am this house’s last daughter!”

“I thought to ask only because--”

“But sir, you must take your exercise! You will want to capture the day’s best light. The shadows grow quickly this time of year.” She handed me my coat. “Do enjoy, sir. We shall see you at supper.” With that, she nearly pushed me out the door.

# A Confounding Constitutional

The gravel of the drive crunched beneath my feet as I strode toward a small hillock and surveyed the grounds. The grounds abutted the ocean--only a few dozen yards behind the house, cliffs descended to crashing waves and wheeling gulls. But the building's entrance faced a vast and rolling expanse of scrub and grasses, whose golden-gray stalks bent in windswept whorls across narrow game trails, which wound toward the woods that encircled the periphery. The field seemed cold and lonely under that day's blank white sky. But I was intent on good cheer, and guessed that the area might provide excellent shooting (in truth I am not much of a sportsman).

I thought to remove myself from the steady wind, and the southwestern woods seemed nearest. Selecting a path in that direction, I struck out, and soon made my way into the forest.

All was quiet here: a soft layer of pine needles blanketed the forest floor, absorbing the sound of my gait into muted ocher. Their uniformity betrayed no sign of any trail, but the trees were not so densely placed, and it was easy enough to discern the sea cliff's presence to my side, as the forest in that direction ended and admitted more light. So oriented, I pushed forward in a line, thinking to trace the coast at my present remove--safely away from that wind--and then later return the same way. By the simplicity of my path I hoped to relax my attention, and allow the stillness of the natural world to soothe my still-frantic mind.

And so it did, at first. But soon--it could not have been more than a quarter hour--I found myself emerging from the woods into a vast field. And in the distance, to my considerable consternation, lay the great house.

Annoyed with myself, I resolved to a more deliberate path. Turning back toward the woods, I set off once again, this time scrutinizing my gait for any sign of deviation from the line I had set. But it is difficult to find the defect in any one stride. They must have accumulated in a way I could not discern, for I soon found myself once more at the woods' edge, this time considering the mansion's northern aspect.

I was frustrated. But I reflected that my self-censure served little purpose. I had, at least, progressed around the field's edge, clock-wise. My stamina had not yet failed (though I was acutely aware of my heart's beat). I could not be far from the road to town, and I reasoned that if I headed in its direction I must unavoidably intersect it, and thence be able to use it to guide my exploration of the woods. Satisfied with my plan, I turned from the field and began again.

Here, far from the sea, the forest was more varied, admitting deciduants and tangles of thorns. These trees were bare, but newly so: the leaves they had shed were still crisp, heaped airily upon

each other. At times they pushed up to my knees. I trod happily through this crunching detritus. I felt as though I could march on this way forever.

And so I did for an hour, perhaps more. The sky remained a blank white slab; I could not judge the hour by the sun. I had expected to find the road by this time, but was not troubled. My path was clearly marked by the furrow I cut through the leaves, leaving little doubt that I could retrace my steps.

I did not need to. The leaves thinned, the wind rose, and once more I saw that lonely house, now all but lost across the gust-addled expanse of downy grass. I was at the field's far edge. I did not understand how I had missed the road. And, having ceased my exertions, I presently became aware of the creeping tendrils of frigid air climbing up within my overcoat. The silence and coldness of that impassive sky pressed down upon me, and the cooling sweat at the base of my spine portended a worry that, I suddenly understood, I should have been attending to all along.

I realized I was hungry. I realized I did not know the hour. My breaths frosted in the air before me, and it occurred to me that I must marshal each one. The house could be seen--some of its windows were now illuminated against the gloom--but it seemed very far away, across a tangle of paths I did not know. I had already proven my infirmity at orienteering. It was not so far, I told myself. But I was worried.

I had nearly summoned the courage to begin across that expanse when I detected a sound. Something percussive and repeating, but muffled at each blow. An axe? I turned to it, facing the shadowy woods, and saw that a finger of smoke curled up from the trees not far from where I stood. If I could just warm myself... I hastened toward it.

## The Woodsman

The woods here had once been coppiced, but their long neglect was apparent. Stems as thick as my wrist erupted from each stool, yearning for the sky. It was as though the copse formed the hands of a desperate crowd, outstretched in entreaty. But for what, I could not say.

Between those arbored palms I espied my object: a small fire and hut and, I soon saw, a rustic who lumbered about them. At first I mistook this figure as a crone: there was something about its gait as it moved about the fire, shrouded though it was in tatters, that suggested such. So too the face, when presented to me: soft and beardless, but with eyes that blazed as they observed their owner's work: flinging a hare's corpse across a rack; skinning it with a swift stroke and pull; gutting it; spitting it; and finally placing it by the fire. All this while the figure's hands traded places mechanically, one always clasping a filthy blanket of raw wool draped about its shoulders, the other attending to the unfortunate rabbit with expert and unfeeling industry.

This task completed, the figure spared a moment to appreciate its work, stepped back, and froze, eyes suddenly locked upon me. “Ey! Ey thar, away!”--at these first words I immediately knew the figure to be a man, and an angry one. “Away with ye! Tis naught here for ye! Cease yer tramping abot an’ begone. Back over t’ hedge with ye, here’s privet lands. I pray ye, scram!”

“Begging your pardon sir,” I began, “Is this not the property of the estate?”

“Th’state!” he snorted. “Th’state! Aye these lands are such. It matters not! Th’state oughtn’t have no strangers, an’ those as it finds oughtn’t’ve been found. Must I give ye a reason? Better mine thin others! Now away with ye--away! Or first collect th’ thrashin I’d offer, an thin away!”

What parts of his speech I could comprehend were quite mortifying. Nevertheless, I met this abuse with even temper. “Sir, you misunderstand. I am a guest of the house.”

At this he seemed quite abashed. His eyes drifted and he staggered back, biting his knuckle. He raised his stricken face to the blank white sky and gazed for a long, searching moment. Then, with a pained whimper, he bowed his head. When he faced me again his features were quite transformed. What had been a furious mask was now all pitiable compassion.

“Ah yung sur ahm sorry fer that. Ay, most sorry indeed. I might’ve noan as sich; aye, p’raps I did. Com’n sit, warm yerself. Such as us must take what comforts as ‘e can.”

I thanked him, settled upon a log at the fire’s edge, and considered my surroundings. It was obvious that the man lived upon this patch of land. The ground was well-trodden, and small bits of woodcraft revealed themselves as I looked about. The hut was small, just large enough to sleep in. Its mossy boards had been fortified with tarpaulins, branches and leaves in a way that suggested it was subsiding into the landscape itself. But despite this sylvan decay and the eeriness of the coppiced branches, all was tidy and well kept.

I held my hands before the fire and felt both warmth and relief--that ancient surety that a hearth will keep the worst at bay. The woodsman had disappeared into the hut as I sat. I heard a chaotic rustling of tin and glass, and then he emerged holding a thick and perfectly clear bottle in which chestnut liquid sloshed and floated.

He proffered the bottle and, noting my hesitation with a quiet “ah!”, quickly returned to rummage about the hut. He soon emerged with two mismatched pewter cups, each of which received a cursory scrub of his sleeve and then a measure of spirits.

Wary of the past night’s excesses and the enervation that followed, I had intended to take only a small sip, yet still found myself gasping (through watery eyes I saw the woodsman’s grin). Collecting myself, I pressed on.

“I take it you reside upon the estate, sir? Are you its groundskeeper?”

His smile vanished and he spat. "I dwell as far from that house as I might. If'n 'ats 'pon wot they call their'n, tis no surprise--what warn't they to claim? It's all thars, if ye're fool enuf t'ask'm, all fer the takin'. As fer yer oth'r query -- I've kept all manner o'things fer this place, an' lost more besides. Aye, I speak as I wish, fer my duty's done an' done. Done an' then sum! I'm well paid up."

He shook his head and continued. "Ach, lad. Yer account's only jes op'ned. The ledger's half-marked, eh? It pains me t'see."

"Sir, you needn't worry on my behalf. I do not know your circumstances, but the doctor has been most generous to me, refusing all fees." My tongue loosened by the liquor, I confessed further that this was something of a relief, as I had encountered progressively less savory members of his profession as I pursued increasingly economical treatment.

He spat again and erupted. "Th' monteebank! Eel cost ye more than all'm quacks togeth'r! Mark thus!"

His fire quickly faded and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Or don't, son--ye'll have time t'think pon all o'this. Ye needn't add to wot yeel pond'r in them long nights. Ferget it. Only hark to thus!" He came next to me, and his eyes achieved an even greater intensity than before.

"Lissen, son. All's not lost. I don't speck ye t'heed it, but lissen, man, lissen. There's still time. Ye got haf what ye need in yer hand--or a tinth of a haf, ennywise. A clean flat blade: she'll make the pair. Aye, don't blanch--are my wards too corse? We ken speak as men o'reason: an Orkney enemy, wots the doctor'd say, wor he t'say anything to ye tall. Ay, he knows wot perscrimshin would suit ye; only he knows wot suits him, too! More's the pity, but lad: it needn't be. Ye can act. Don't content to float thar adrift an' unmann'd... Though unmann'd ye must be."

I did not know what to make of his ravings, and so we sat in silence. I searched for a new path for our discourse; and he searched my face, peering at me with sympathy and curiousness, as if, rather than an incomprehensible tangle of speech, he had just imparted great wisdom and wished to gauge its effect.

Mercifully, a conclusion to this awkward stalemate soon presented itself, as the copse was lit with the amber rays of the sun, which had at last slipped below the day's stolid stratum of cloud. The sky that had seemed a flat gray sheet was now revealed to be a vast web of filigreed hillocks, brilliantly golden in the icy distance.

Here, among the trees, the light was but a thin orange glow, already too-easily cut by the long shadows of the woods. Yet it was quite beautiful; I remarked so, and noted that it was getting late, and that I must presently be on my way.

“It’s as ye say, son. Th’ geldin’ hour’s upon us; aye lad, if only ye’d promise me it woud be! To have ye join me in the twilight--I kent rightly know what t’faver. I awt not t’ inflict ye with my comp’ny no moar, but better at’n those ‘ud take yer’n. We shall do what we ken, then? Save what ye might, I prithee, despite th’ cost. I wish ye well.”

Although my puzzlement remained, this satisfied me that we would part amicably. I thanked him and took my leave.

## An Evening Passed in Company

I hastened across the field as the sun dropped toward the sea. Here, in the open, my progress was unshuffled. Some reticent beast had worn winding, narrow paths through the desiccated grasses--their filigree traced in amber, then copper, then vermilion in the declining light--and I followed these wilsome ruts until I reached the lane. The grasses’ fronded glume were reduced to sulking coals as I approached the house, the evening’s chill fingers now fully threaded through my overcoat.

The mansion’s windows blazed with the promise of warmth. At one of them I saw Meadowlark, wearing *pince nez* and seemingly lost in some tome--perhaps the volume of Seneca I had espied at breakfast. Above his window I found my own, easily marked by the myrtle bouquet, its brilliance reduced to a wan rose in the failing light. As I watched, Meadowlark raised his eyes, removed his glasses and gazed out at me, a look of deep contemplation and concern framing his noble features. But I do not think he could have seen me from his brightly lit room; my own position was quickly slipping into darkness.

I dressed for dinner and returned downstairs, only to find the table being cleared. “The gentlemen have dined,” the landlady informed me, testily. I begged her pardon and prevailed on her to indulge my tardiness. The day’s exercise had left me as ravenous as a stevedore, as she could surely see. Presently she relented, and furnished me with some broth and a rusk of bread, with which I was well satisfied. “When you have supped, you will find the others in the study,” she confided.

I ate quickly and, feeling restored, I sought the study. I had not familiarized myself with the larger part of the house. By now the sun was well beneath the sea’s far edge, taking with it what wisps of light I might have used to find my way. Given the expanse of the place and its lonely desolation, I understood why my hostess had elected not to light those long corridors. Across the hall, a lantern shone eagerly at a table by the foot of the stairs that led to my room. But that was all. In a place like this, overwhelmed by some unspoken dark sorrow, its entreaty seemed as clear as it was urgent: ascend quickly, sleep soundly, and await the sun’s reinforcement.

But I was eager for fellowship after my unnerving intercourse with the woodsman. I retrieved a taper from the sideboard, lit it at the lantern and then, screwing up my nerve, I entered the corridors' wainscoted speleology.

The air in those halls was so still that I could hear the candle wick's prickling combustion. I was glad for its steady flame—not only to be enveloped in a modest globe of light, but for the fact that its brilliance rendered my eyes insensate to the morose and alien architecture through which I passed. To one side, I dimly perceived a sitting room, its furnishings preserved beneath sheets like corpses under winter snow. I was startled by an ebon bust in an adjacent alcove, its tenebrous features stubbornly obscure against my candle's meager radiance.

Next to the alcove hung a painting of a young woman, and I paused before it. The candle light rendered the unnamed painter's emulation of life in jaundiced monochrome; it felt too clearly an inert sheet of lacquer and canvas. Though finely rendered, it nevertheless struck me as a poor likeness (how I could judge this I cannot say). And yet I could feel it prompting half a memory...

My reverie was broken. In the distance: a burst of light, a popping sound, a curse. A susurrations of voices. It was only by this return of sound that I understood the perfect stillness in which I had been enveloped. Shielding my flame against the swiftness of my gait, I hurried onward. Rounding a corner, I nearly toppled over. A man in an evening jacket knelt before me, his head fully within a piece of cabinetry along the wall, about which he was rummaging vigorously.

"Pardon me?" I began.

The figure's shoulders abruptly tensed and froze, then the head smoothly withdrew and turned to me. I saw at once that it was the doctor.

"I'm sorry to intrude," I continued. "I had only meant to find the study..."

"You are not intruding," he replied. "In fact you have arrived just as your presence is most needed. I am always pleased to meet a light-bringer!"

"Oh! Yes, the candle. Can I be of help?"

"Shine it there—yes. Aha!" He raised a paper box, rattling it in triumph. "Finally. This way—" he bid me onward, into the gloom of the room beyond, before loudly addressing the shadows: "Lady and gentlemen, I offer apologies on behalf of this house's decrepit wiring. With our friend's help I have located the fuses, and in a moment—there!"

Filaments reluctantly rose to duty, their glass fixtures tinkling softly from the concomitant wash of heat. Curly, Geese and a third Globetrotter—I would soon know him as Bobby Joe—blinked, stumbled, rubbed their eyes. Meadowlark sat *en fauteuil*, impassive as the newfound light swept over him like dawn across a mountain. His eyes were as keen as ever.

Lastly, in the corner, an unexpected member of our company: a small woman, elderly but vigorous, whose crescent spectacles and baggy blue jersey hung loosely, as if they could scarcely keep their hold on a body so full of defiant energy.

“Hey Stretch!” offered Geese, with earnest enthusiasm. “Grab a seat. Granny here was just tellin’ us how our bus only makes left turns now.”

“Left turns my foot! I’ve been driving you all over tarnation for ages, Geese, and you *know* full well I never get lost. I’m telling you there’s something fishy happening.”

“Maybe you missed a sign?” offered Curly.

“A sign! There weren’t any signs drivin’ in, and I didn’t expect any driving out. Nor hardly any turns! I tell you, I was driving out to town, and then I wasn’t.”

The doctor broke in. “The roads here are notoriously confusing, madam. Please don’t be alarmed—many other estimable visitors have faced this same frustration. I am sure the difficulty could be overcome. But why travel at all in such a dreary season? This house is well-stocked for your every need, I assure you.”

“I was trying to fetch some pain medicine for Geese—says his wrist’s acting up again!”

“That’s right, Granny,” averred Geese. “Never been the same since we got that flat tire on account of that crazy kangaroo jewel thief...”

The doctor interrupted again. “Ah! Well, if you’ll excuse my boldness: you have at your disposal ample medical resources—not least of all myself. Rheumatic complaints have an interesting history, you know...”

He moved toward the bookshelves, which I now considered for the first time. They were impressive not only for their scope, which consumed a full wall of the room, but for the remarkable carving that ran along their edges. The work depicted a tree, each branch extending as if to support a row of volumes. Its nature changed across its latitudinal span. It was at first roughly hewn, the blade strokes coarse but amply evocative of a glut of berries, buds and leaves in spring. But as my eye traveled its length the refinement of the carving increased as the depicted seasons passed. The branches grew full and heavy, then withered and gnarled, until at last they ended in roots entwined with the skeletal remains of some unfortunate woodland creature. The impressionistic nature of the engraving diminished over the work’s course, until this last feature, which was depicted in such striking verisimilitude that it might easily have been retrieved from somewhere in the chill woods beyond the room’s starkly black window glass. The illusion was remarkable.

“Ah, here.” The doctor selected a tall, pale volume. “The *Wushi'er Bingfang* attributes joint complaints to wind and dampness, which might be dispelled with certain herbs—”

“And Galen attributes those complaints to our ignorance.” Meadowlark did not speak loudly, but at once the room’s attention was his to command. “Does he not? Rest, Geese. Like we talked about.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Geese averred.

“Of course—rest,” added the doctor, with an unctuous smile. He turned his eyes to me. “I recommend it myself.

“I hadn’t realized you were a student of medicine, Mr. Lemon,” he continued. “Surely you’ll agree that there is knowledge to be gained from traditions beyond our own.”

“Not a student of it more than I am a student of anything else, doc. But yes. Sure. Plenty of knowledge to be had. Maybe some wisdom, too.” He turned toward the bookshelves.

“Interesting library you got there.”

The doctor brightened. “Yes, thank you. I’ve collected esoterica since my first days at school.” He crossed to the sideboard and began decanting an amber liquid into cut crystal glasses. “Almost at once I sensed that remarkable truths might be learned if one listened to those brave enough to stray from the safe, well-trodden paths. Bacon, del Rabina, Agrippa, Al Hazrad... Madam, will you join us?”

“Just a cream sherry, if you please.”

“Naturally. Some of these volumes do carry a reputation—mostly gross exaggerations of course, and often outright calumnies. Still, I’ll wager you’ve never seen a collection quite like this.”

Meadowlark’s reply was measured but insistent: “I’ve encountered collections like this before. And their collectors.”

The doctor paused as he handed Bobby Joe a glass. “Indeed? Well, I suppose it’s vanity to imagine oneself an iconoclast, or to consider obscurity to be laudable in itself. You must forgive me. I’m sure you will agree that a library’s merits can only truly be judged by its effect on its readers.”

“I do, though I’m sorry to say so.”

The doctor’s eyebrows raised, the eyes beneath them gleaming with a new coldness. But he did not respond. Finishing his rounds about the room, he placed a coupe of sherry before Granny, who drained it at once, smacked her lips, and said to “Keep it coming, young man.”

Although the lady seemed perfectly unperturbed, I felt that an unbearable tension had descended upon the room. I could not reconcile the innate good nature that I sensed in Meadowlark with the reticent antagonism I had just witnessed. I knew there must be something I did not comprehend. From the confused and awkward looks of the other Globetrotters, I guessed I was not alone.

“Doctor,” I offered, desperate to say something but not sure of what, “Surely you do not travel with such an extensive collection?”

“Of course you are right, sir. Satisfying my curiosity has carried the cost of an itinerant life, one hardly suited to the safekeeping of such treasures (even as it lends itself to finding them!). In this respect, at least, I am fortunate to have the long association of the ladies of this house, who suffered me to keep my collection here.”

“Ladies, sir?”

The corner of his mouth curled as he considered his response. “It is a remarkable thing to find anyone with whom to share your... affinities—whether those be impatience with convention or some other thing. All the more so when it occurs in the impetuosity and ignorance of youth, when it might shape everything that is to come. I say not good or bad, mind you; only remarkable.”

I did not know what to make of this answer. The doctor must have known he was being cryptic. But he clearly felt no obligation to make himself better understood. Across the room, Meadowlark seemed to no longer be listening. He made a show of scenting the brown liquor, frowned, and returned it to the table beside him.

“Is it not to your taste, Mr. Lemon?” the doctor asked.

Meadowlark did not hide his disdain. “None of this is to my taste.”

The doctor exhaled sharply, smiling as if in disbelief. “I must say, Meadowlark, I am surprised by this truculence. Your reputation belies it. But even apart from that, those of us who bear the caduceus are, frankly, accustomed to a bit more deference.”

“Cadushawhat?” asked Curly.

“He means the doctor symbol,” offered Bobby Joe. “You know, the stick with the snakes.”

I saw that I could resolve the confusion. “The physician’s symbol is the Rod of Asclepius. The caduceus is often mistaken for it, since both feature entwined serpents—begging your pardon,

doctor, it's a very understandable error. But in fact the caduceus is the symbol of Mercury, a messenger god, known for swiftness, speed, and—

“Expediency,” finished Meadowlark. “But Bobby Joe is right. Snakes either way.”

## Stranger Dreams

I excused myself after this exchange. I did not understand what had unfolded around me, but the rancor that had descended upon the room was clear enough, and I was eager to escape it. I can still recall with perfect clarity the scene as I slid closed the pocket door: Meadowlark seated, somehow both placid and furious; the doctor, standing at the sideboard and projecting, with perhaps more effort than he intended to betray, a sense of bemused indifference. I felt esteem for both of these men, which only deepened my confusion at their antipathy. I could only trust that they had sound reasons for the intensity of their feelings, whether I could understand those reasons or not.

I did not know it then, but that evening would be the last time I saw those paragons together. Or nearly the last, I suppose. Though in those later matters I hesitate, even now, to claim that I truly saw what I will relate.

I do not know what happened next. Those doors seemed to slide closed on both the study and my memory. I retain impressions only: of halls' vast shadows, stilled with the cottony silence of a gray winter sky. Of stairs passing beneath me, disconnected from my own delirious stride. In my medical searchings I had encountered men who, unable or unwilling to supply the nostrums I sought, instead offered banal facts and theories to fill our appointments. One particular anatomist had tested my patience with his account of neural ichors, and how a shock—physical or otherwise—might disrupt their natural coagulation into memory within the cerebral canals. But what injury could account for my disorientated state?

I cannot say. I can only relate the next moment that I recall with certainty. I was in my room, lying atop the bed, fully dressed, and suddenly conscious of myself. I was not alone. The woman in the yellow dress sat on the chair in the corner. She stared ahead, her expression perfectly blank until she saw me stir, at which she brightened.

“You wake!” she exclaimed, her eyes crinkling with dewy joy. “Oh sir, I have been waiting for so long. I hope you will not think me too forward for visiting you here. It's only that I knew you might be unwell. And anyway isn't it silly to pretend to formality, when we will soon know each other anyway? I feel I am too old for that charade.”

None of this made sense to me. To begin, she could not have seen more than a score of years. And how had she learned of my circumstances? But perhaps the former was affectation. “You spoke to the doctor—?” I managed to croak.

“What? Oh, no. Henry and I—the doctor, I mean—we do not speak much, these days. It is difficult. Oh, you mustn’t think he has betrayed your confidence! I only presumed from experience. But let us not dwell upon that. Let me see to you... let me see you!”

She crossed to my bed, her gaze never leaving me, sat demurely on its edge, and began to scrutinize my features as I struggled to sit up.

“Well,” she went on, “I should say I have never been one for brawn. I shouldn’t want you to worry about that. It’s rather primitive, isn’t it? Hardly a foundation for a match. Ah! I’m so glad you’re here! It has been terribly lonely. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to complain—what must you think of me? But it has been, it *is*. And oh, it’s so good to have someone, at last, to understand. I have thought much on it, too much, really; and I see now that sometimes the price of one’s happiness is borne by their kin. And that is simply the way of things, neither good nor ill, and so I suppose I can be the one to pay—oh, but you do think they’re happy, don’t you? Surely they are still happy... for this price... the interest compounds, it grows to feel like too much to bear.” She paused. “I can’t believe you’re *here*!”

Her features had leapt with animation throughout this speech, an effect all the more striking for the preternatural stillness of everything surrounding them. The frigid air, the silent house, the pale flowers at the window—my own body beneath the bedclothes! All evinced an anxious rictus, reminding me of nothing so much as a mouse cringing under furnishings, about to be discovered. I stared back at her helplessly, even as with each successive word my confusion deepened.

Her speech paused, but her gaze only intensified, full of inexplicable admiration. She leaned toward me—she felt weightless against my leg—and raised her palm to my face. She stroked the orbit of my eye, my cheek. Pins and needles erupted along the line of her touch, the chill burning of circulation returning to a numbed limb. But was this an eruption of sensation or its retreat? I recalled the longing I had known when I first saw her, felt its flame spark back to life in my chest. I managed to say *My Lady* before her fingers trailed to my mouth; a singular event, an incomprehensible stimulus, my lips instantly alien to me.

“I know we shouldn’t,” she said. “But what harm? Surely we might steal a kiss when we’re well promised what we’re owed... Or any other trifle...”

I felt only vague pressure as her lips reached my own. But the little fire in my chest—the modest flames that had been timidly building—these suddenly found purchase, an accelerant, and they erupted outward in a blue-hot hell of analgific consummation. My nerves were lost to me, stray lengths of fuse cord ignited in an obliterating shockwave that expelled the air from my lungs. Desperate to breathe, I tried to gasp through a mouth I could no longer feel. In panic, I opened my eyes. But my suffocating terror only grew: my lover’s hair drifted before me in a languid tidal current, bands of moonlight lensing across bits of coral entangled in its filaments. I could not see

anything else; I struggled but could not escape, succeeding only in abrading pulpy, deliquescent flecks into the water from something bloated, white, and terribly close.

I screamed, and felt sensation—finally—as something sliced into the dulled flesh of my lips. A hot and salty taste flooded my mouth and carried me at last to waking. Much was different: I was alone; light streamed past dust motes dancing by the window; and dim scuffs and murmurs could be heard from somewhere beneath the floorboards. Yet I was unchanged, gasping for breath as brine filled my sinus. In a panic, I reached up to feel what I thought must be my ruined lips. But they felt whole, warm, fine. My relief was short-lived. As I drew my hand back I saw blood, so much blood. I felt its warm pulse cascading down my philtrum. I saw it pollute the tangled nest of bedclothes around me like pigment from a brush.

I grasped my face to stanch the flow. I knew I must get to the basin and mirror to understand this crisis, but as my feet touched the boards my strength failed, my legs folding under me. I was suddenly aware of my body's ruin: aching joints, petrifactive tendon. The preceding day's exertions seems to have taken an unimaginable toll. I crawled, dots of blood popping into existence on the wood before me, running along the grain and into its fissures. At last I hauled myself to the mirror.

I saw that the blood issued from my sinus. I told myself to be relieved—that it was not such an unusual complaint after all, particularly in a new clime. But a panicked part of me did not believe it. I held the washcloth to my face and slid down the wall. Was this too much blood? I grew weary, I grew cold. The pulsing slowed, and there, crabbed on the floor, I fell back into a mercifully dreamless slumber.

Something dragged me back to waking. I had little idea how long I had slept, but I felt the grit of dried blood as I tried to flex my hands. The joints were stiff, fibrotic. Movement was impossible. My gaze was fixed on the cracked paint of the wall, the bubbles in the window glass, the cream petals of the bouquet. I was utterly sapped of both strength and will.

“For heaven's sake,” said a woman's voice, disgusted. Footsteps receded. I pondered the cracking paint that was now the whole of my dimming sensorium, watched it twist and swim toward nothingness like a jet of ink poured into the ocean.

The voice returned: “--ittle choice. We must move him before the Globetrotters return. Good lord, look at him. Well, they won't have gotten far, then. Quickly now—no, not—lift *here*, you wretched woman, you—I simply... He can't weigh more than eight stone!”

Dreamily, I knew it was the doctor's voice uttering these angry oaths as I was conveyed back abed. It was his features that loomed over me, though they drifted and decohered in a vertiginous eddy. I tried to speak, but managed only the barest alveolar pulse. Still, this proved enough to attract his startled attention, and he addressed me in slow, strident tones as some other set of hands hurriedly daubed at the dried blood on my lip.

“Rest, my friend!” the doctor insisted. “You have had a fall. All is well. It is just as expected. Rest for to-day; and then you will be called for. Yes, I think you will be called for soon.”

A part of me must have known that something was amiss. But it was lost in the obscure recesses of my mind. The balance of my spirit craved surcease, desperately weary from clinging to my body like a shipwrecked sailor. Given leave to relent, it could only accede and slip into the obliviate sea.

## The Cliffs

I dreamed again, but differently. This dream lacked the clarion chill of the prior nights'. By comparison, it was a shambles. I was entering our home—Alice and mine, I mean—to give her something. I knew it was important, but I couldn't remember what it was, and yet for some reason I would not look between my cupped hands. I had just ascended the stairs from my childhood home—but that was absurd, that house would have been leagues and years away, had it even still existed. My earlier dreams had rendered time and space with keratome precision, and I worried that this jumble was further proof of my addled mind's deterioration.

But then here was Alice, seated at our table, cocooned in that old chenille jersey, a steaming mug before her. She looked up from her reading and saw me, and was not surprised, but seemed abruptly melancholy, though her smile did not waver.

“You cannot come to me like this, my love,” she said, as if reciting a simple matter of fact. She turned back to her book. And then I woke.

I was still in my room. By the golden rhombus grazing the ceiling, I instantly knew the day's light was nearly spent. My mind sped through propositions and conclusions with a ferocity that surprised me. But this was less startling than the pounding of my heart, which now beat with a strident vigor that I had never felt before. I was a clockwork overwound, sprung to fierce action, my spindles and pinions rattling and straining as their mechanism spent its last charge and in the process tore itself apart.

I tried to move, but this immediately proved the limits of my revitalization: once more my legs folded under me as though I were a marionette. I collapsed, bit my tongue, watched more drops of blood manifest on the floorboard. This time I was undeterred, resolute. By degrees I pulled myself up and staggered to the window.

I do not know what I hoped to see. But there, along the cliffs, was the figure of the woodsman. I knew I must reach him. I could not say why.

I clasped the bedquilt about my shoulders and stole down the staircase, somehow remaining undetected despite my clumsy gait. Slipping into the silent kitchen I found a door, fumbled at the knob, and gained egress.

My pounding heart was soon twinned with burning lungs. My lurching stride scuffed the chalky path. My knuckles swelled, my lacerated tongue thickened. I knew I could not sustain such labors for long. But I pushed on, lashed by strands of dune grass that glowed like vacuum filaments in the failing light.

At last I gained the summit of the gentle hill above the cliffside trail. The woodsman stood along it, gazing out to sea. I meant to hail him, but managed only a wet gasp. This proved enough: he turned, cried out, rushed to my side, and helped me to sit.

“Sur! Ah yung sur, ye mussint be abot. Dwell as a man while ye mite, yeev no need t’ see th’ sea—tho’ I mite admit asmich. Drawn to the mare, eh? Ay, we’re both well groomed. Sur.. ah, sur. Et pains me to see ye sich.”

We sat together for a long moment as I tried to think what to ask. Below us, the crashing surf’s mists lingered in the cooling air and touched the last, outstretched fingers of the fleeing sun. They burned a brilliant ochre, scarlet, magenta; heatless flames erupting from the roiling saline cauldron below. He saw that I was staring into it, and leaned over to speak. Even amidst the coastal wind I could smell the spirits on him.

“Pond’rin what awaits below, yeh? Ahv dun asmuch. Ay, oft’n ahv dun, won ay range abot an’m confowndid t’find misself har. She calls still, y’see. Et’s jussat I tied meself to th’ mast an’ go no farth’r—a bare mast, unadarned, mind ye! But I mussn’t jest, fergive me sur. Ahv had a sip, fergive me. ‘Wot mite’v befell ye?’ I says. Hars wot I figger. Furst I think: mebbe marly drown’d, t’rot amung th’ clems’n crabs? T’be freed from et, t’neither wake nor rest—ah, lad. I wishet war so. Wharfore’d luck bless us at thus late awr? No, she’s got ‘er aims. So ask: mussit mean suffr’in? P’raps yood be a gentleman down thar’, a duke o’ th’ pit, an’ dance frolics ‘til she tars of yeel, an’ then find yerself a ‘nother dame? No? Ye think I jest? Say it then, sur, accuse me offit! Bot yer rite. Thar’s no grace we can ‘speck from sich wick’dniss. Nay, thar’s nawt cane be hoped fer ‘long thus accurs’d coast. Ah’d pretind oth’rways ef’n I cood, oven ef only fer yer sake, sur. Bot we both ken th’ truth offit, eh?”

“But why?”

He inspected me with bulging eyes, turning me over in his gaze like a puzzle box. “How is it aye wont oven anser when I spind m’days on nawt but bildin’m, an’ patchin’ th’hut, an’ snarin’ game? Ahm famish’d, an’ th’hut is yet a hovel, bit ahv bilt a zion out’ve ansers. Ah’d hand ye enny brick offit an’ say: har’s a fundashin for ye. Bit hark, I meen *enny* brick. Won’s good as enny oth’r. Hars a chann’l: frens at furst, an’ then lust, an’ lust ag’in, an’ betrayal b’twixt those’n b’twin ken b’sides. Har’s a plinth: thet pride demands ambishin, an’ wen folly coms et ‘er ujual

‘tinnerary, th’ainjirry’s awl th’ wurse fer it. Har’s th’ bullnose: ‘at won ‘unger coms ‘pon a body, ets feltas sumthin’ ‘e suffers, an impishishin, an’ wonce fed ‘e reckens ‘isself t’be freed offit, no mar a fleshly ting, soul wite as sun-beet linen, ‘stead o’ somethin’ dragged abot in clay; an ‘eel spar no mar thot t’its retarn thin th’spid’r spars as she’s a-spinnin’ mar webs. Take ‘em fer a pinny a block, enny of th’lot’ll sarv, tho eech couldint ‘ardly be mar common. An’ yet tho it be nawt bet ujual, th’fly mite still hate th’spider, an’ be right t’do et–lay that block down furst, ets stoutest of ‘em awl!”

There was much in this speech that I did comprehend, and yet I took his meaning. Tears came to my eyes. I required a moment to compose myself before asking, thickly: “Is there nothing to be done?”

Seeing my upset, he was abashed. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he said, “Th’ awr’s late, sur. Bot I shall pray fer thee.”

The mists were blue and violet now, escaping into vapor as the night’s wind rose and whipped them about. I considered their evanescence as I felt the chalky soil beneath my palms. How many marine animalcules had uncomprehendingly struggled along this patch of shore in their time, only to be inevitably overwhelmed and then, through the unknowably long years, transmuted and compacted into this calciferous earth? To be consigned to eternity’s crushing maw, obliterated and forgotten—surely this, at least, was owed to each living thing? But though I could not give voice to it, I sensed that I was to be cheated of even this meager inheritance (though how and why remained obscure). At this realization, a great dread overtook me.

So, too, my weariness. I wondered if I would ever rise from that hillock. But presently a cheerful and growing sound intruded upon my sorrow, a *pang pang pang* from up along the path, percussive and resonant. I turned to find a sight that now seemed wholly incongruous: Gip was proceeding toward us, dribbling a basketball with preternatural ease, a gentle smile upon his winsome countenance.

“There you are!” he exclaimed upon reaching us. “Doc was worried—sent us all out to find you.” He turned to the woodsman and casually added, “Hey, what’s up?”

“Ayo,” offered the woodsman.

“It’s kind of you to seek me out, Gip,” I began, “But truly, I do not wish to return to the house, nor to see the doctor.”

“Aw, don’t be scared! I don’t like going to the trainer myself—getting poked and prodded, lectured at, measured and stretched every which-way... But sometimes you’ve gotta do it. And you don’t look so good, man.”

“Nevertheless,” I insisted. But this prompted Gip to place hands on hips and raise an eyebrow in a pose of transparent impatience, and I was reminded that my gentle friend was a behemoth even by the vastly abnormal standards of his fellows. Sensing I would need to try another tack, I ventured to ask: “What does Meadowlark say to this?”

“Beats me. Cap’s shut himself up in that creepy library all day, we haven’t heard a peep. C’mon man, I can’t just leave you out here. Sun’s set and it’s getting cold.”

Gip’s indulgence of me was at an end. He placed his enormous hands under my arms and effortlessly slung me across his shoulder as if I were a bundle of straw. Retrieving his basketball from the woodsman with his free hand, Gip thanked him and strode backward to the house. Mortified, I entreated him to release me as we proceeded toward the manse, but Gip maintained his amiable implacability, pausing only to periodically refresh the motion of the basketball, which he spun, by turns, upon a finger.

Still, I trusted Gip, and with the aegis of such a friend and champion, it seemed as though I might find the allyship needed to escape my presumptive doom. I had just begun to insist that we must find Meadowlark when Gip began addressing someone else.

“You sure that’s necessary? He seems like he’s doing all right.”

The doctor’s voice replied: “Quite certain. If you will just hold him, please...”

Suddenly frantic, I struggled to slide to the floor. But Gip held firm, and I managed only a glimpse of the doctor’s needle before its pinch and burn spread through my veins and, for the last time, I was helpless before my adversaries.

## A Nocturnal Gathering; a Final Ordeal

The woman in yellow was beside me, pressed against me, her lips by my ear, the prospect of her favor as soft and inviting as a pristine snowdrift. “Come to me,” she said.

The doctor’s hands at my throat, tugging a lopsided Windsor knot into place. “That will do,” he muttered to himself. “It’s dark anyway.”

“What are you—”

“It’s time, young man.” He spoke with a directness that had been wholly absent in our earlier conversations. Our era of dissimulation had passed. “She is waiting.”

He plucked the myrtle bouquet—now desiccated to a papery whiteness—from its vase, thrust it into my hand, and hauled me, roughly, to my feet and then toward the door.

“Unhand me! I do not wish to go! This only worsens my ailment; think of your oath!”

“I have other oaths to consider,” he replied.

Bullied through the darkened house, I was at last thrust through an open doorway. I stumbled into a moon-flooded courtyard. Braziers lined its periphery, filled with billets that were already erupting with eager flames that popped and murmured like a flag in the wind. Their flickering light played across the cyclopean masonry at my back and sides, upon which black, leafless tendrils of some clambering vine ascended around each apse and doorway, branching like septic capillaries. Before me laid the columns and plinth of the breezeway, which traced rect-angles of perfect atrament. I could discern no feature amidst that blackness, but knew that as I gazed into it the line of my sight must pass above the cliffs, and the waves, and the distant horizon, and onward, into the unending loneliness of celestial night.

I perceived motion in the periphery of my vision and, turning, discovered the landlady. She was seated, with a strange sort of wooden instrument upon her lap. At once I understood that my enemies were more numerous than I had suspected, and my situation therefore even more dire than I had feared.

“Let’s get on with it, then,” insisted the doctor, testily, still clasping my arm in vicelike fingers.

At this, the landlady began to turn a crank extending from her instrument. A cacophonous wail erupted from its depths. Her gnarled took to the fingerboard, and the device’s emission bent toward a terrible and dissonant melody. At first, I could not place it, so awful and alien was the sound. But then, with steadily expanding horror, I understood: it was meant to be *Lohengrin’s* famed bridal processional.

“What will happen now?” I feebly asked.

The doctor’s and landlady’s eyes remained fixed on the breezeway as he answered. “We two shall greet an old acquaintance, and renew her forbearance. Then, with that obligation discharged, we shall return to our pursuits.” A gust of wind swirled through the courtyard, threatening to extinguish the braziers. He raised his voice and went on: “I am afraid that you may not be at such liberty. As to your situation’s specifics... Well, I’d rather not speculate. I am sure they will present themselves... vividly.”

The wind continued and increased, adding a low wail to the hurdy-gurdy’s noisome drone. It was this foul chord that announced our ghastly convocation’s last invited guest. A foot emerged from the pool of shadow we faced; a knee; a bodice; and, then, finally, I came to know the horrors that beset me in their fullness.

The ruined figure before us had been transformed by time and the sea. Her hair was sodden and lank, tinged green with algal infestation. Her flesh was turgid and bloodless, hanging tattered in places from the ravaging of some abyssinal arthropod. Her eyeballs were a gristly nacre, and as featureless as those of certain fish that reside solely in the twilight depths. And her dress, I saw now, was not the brilliant yellow cambric of my mind's eye, but rather woven from scores of tangled kelp fronds, blanched to a sickly jaundice in the way they become as they drift toward the shore, and death.

And yet this was unmistakably the same woman who had haunted my dreams.

The music faltered as the landlady beheld this ghastly visage, but quickly resumed, her cranking more panicked than before. The woman in yellow advanced toward us slowly. A flickering gurgle could be heard from the base of her throat.

“That’s enough.”

It rang throughout the courtyard, a voice like oak, recalling at once the finitude of the night above us and the goodness of the earth below. Meadowlark Lemon stepped out of the apse’s shadow, his eyes blazing with fury.

“This is not your concern, Lemon!”

“I don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into, doctor. But this man is my friend, and you’ll leave him alone.”

“You’re a fool—you have no idea what forces are at play. You cannot stop them!”

“Maybe I can’t,” Meadowlark admitted, albeit with no less resolution. But then, echoing from the other doorways’ recesses, lining the wall like trumpeting angels on a basilican facade, declaiming in jubilation, a celestial chorus:

“But we can!”

The other Globetrotters. Their intent announced, they were now silent as they stepped into the moonlight. In life, I knew these men to be full of laughter and lusty good humor. Exemplars, yes; but men all the same, unmistakably flesh and warm blood, a part of our various and fulsome human fraternity. But in this moment they had slipped beyond such mortal fetters and toward eternity. Limned by starlight, each Globetrotter held the aspect of a protean colossus. They flowed forth from their stations like shadows leaping across a dawn landscape. In an instant, Curly was at my side.

“I’ll take that,” he said, and plucked the half-remembered bouquet from my grasp.

At this, a fury erupted. “No!” cried the doctor. A gasp and a clatter came from the old woman and she stood and her instrument fell to the ground. But worst of all was the woman in yellow, whose mouth fell open with an awful hiss, revealing a ruin of jagged teeth. Her posture was suddenly hunched and animalistic, and she sprang toward Curly with an animal ferocity utterly unheralded by what had been her frail and deliberate manner.

Through this, the discarded hurdy gurdy’s still-roiling gears maintained its wail. But its fall seemed to have dislodged a portion of its mechanism, changing its timbre to one that, to my ear, seemed less discordant. Somewhere inside its wooden casement, the splintered clockwork popped and thrummed, emitting a haphazard new melody which, to my bafflement, I recognized: I would swear it was playing *Sweet Georgia Brown*.

The woman in yellow was a shrieking pyroclasm descending on Curly. But he was utterly unperturbed as he sent the bouquet whizzing across the courtyard with an effortless no-look behind-the-back pass. BJ plucked it from the air with matching grace as Meadowlark boxed out the desperately struggling doctor. The woman in yellow wheeled and flew toward her new object. But BJ, Gip, and Pablo confounded her utterly, flowing into a three-man weave by which they traded the myrtle branches at perfect intervals. Only the landlady seemed to have understood the Globetrotters’ object: as the Globetrotter’s braid approached the distant brazier, they found her before it in a defensive crouch. But this was no obstacle to Pablo, whose responding fakeout was as perfectly guileless as a child, but utterly broke the landlady’s ankles. The myrtle disappeared into the flames with a burst of cinders and at last all was quiet. The woman in yellow stopped, stood up, and regained something of her prior comportment. She spoke with a voice as terrible and distant as the deepest ocean trench.

“It was only a bauble; I do not know how I failed to see it. This man is no fit suitor.”

She turned to face the doctor and landlady.

“My dearests! My intimates! Let us forget our squabbles. It is I who suffered their insult, and so it is mine to forgive, and so I do. We will share a hearth once more, and remake our happy house-hold.”

She moved again with unnatural speed, carelessly seizing the other two, and before I understood what was happening, had dragged them out of sight and toward the sea, leaving only skittering gravel and desperate screams in their wake.

Those of us that remained were united in our desire not to countenance the house any further; we slept on the Globetrotters’ tour bus that night and, at first light, quit that cursed place forever.

Ever gracious, the Globetrotters invited me to accompany them the next day, and thus I was privileged to witness their triumph over the Freeport Whalers. The final score was 162 to 19, the consequence of a series of on-court events so fantastical that I will not venture to describe them.