



454 ANGELL

by Anthony Pearce

It is as the ebullient glow of August subsides, hiding once again behind the encroaching reign of autumn, that I lay down this annual tome, expecting not that it will be believed, but that it shall fulfill the geas enforced upon me by a looming headmaster.

With each new submersion into submission, it has been forced upon me, this recollection of events, which - though not truly within the auspice of your authority - it is impingent upon me to make a full recounting. What joys or sorrows occupy the vacuum which nestles betwixt our slavish months to these brownstone halls, should be the province of my heart and mind alone. But never can it be said that a figure of authority, particularly a yardstick wielding, martinet such as these instructors, should know the parameters of their intrusion, or the borders of their student's privacy.

And so here do I lay down a retelling of such events as occupied my winsome window of freedom book-ended by the joyful jettison of birthing June bugs and the simmer of a sweltering September.

It was at my mother's side that the first few sunsets of the long holiday found me, lounging languidly on one end of the chaise on which she stretched her adult frame to its length. Each of us gave the fullness of our focus to an engrossing tome. Mother, curving the upper corner of each page with a slowness that invoked the slippery, sliding of slugs in the garden. Myself, I hungrily devoured a fanciful tale, which ushered my cerebral escape from the vast, incapacitating exclusion, which filled my waking days.

At length a sibilant shushing crept to my awareness and, realizing my mother was dozing - book hooked crookedly in the delta of her arm - I dismissed it as the passive breathing of her pre-twilight slumber. However, noting the oscillating tide of her chest

and the true murmur ushering from her barely parted lips, I experienced a gradual dawning that the sound I heard - or believed I heard - did not emanate from her.

My head turned, like a vane perched about a rooftop apex on a still and windless day. Curious as my young heart was, it remained yet balanced against a tinge of terror. This reflected perhaps my mind's desperate measure at wisdom beyond its ken and a determination - for its own sake - not to know. Likewise, my eyes, cresting the arm of the chaise as they searched for the sound's origin, refused to find focus. Despite these unconscious defenses, still I made pictures of my world.

The gas lamp was not hissing.

Neither was there any audible emission from the steam vent in the wainscoting. These were not the source. What was, I wondered.

Adjacent to our sitting room ran the anterior hall, connecting the downstairs provinces. Low pillars flanked each terminus, four in all. They rose roughly to my shoulder and were topped with carved busts, poor recreations of family members long since returned to earth and ash. It was on the nearest of these that my gaze landed. The base of the pillar, abutting the contours of the wainscoting, made for a sliver of relief betwixt the sculpture and the wall against which it stood. Just beyond this, a narrow door, all red oak mounted within a regressed cherrywood frame, hung ever so slightly ajar, so that a black slice of shadowy interior hovered, revealed.

My eye would not have discovered it were not the blackness in such stark contrast to the pale pillar and the muted tones of the aged wallpaper in the hall. This, coupled with the barest of movement, as if some unseen hand was rocking the door to and fro in absent nonchalance. Squeezed as my perspective was, the Scythian darkness and bobbing portal

gave, to my innocent eye, a sense that the onyx sliver was changing shape, beckoning me...into the cellar.

There was no further revelation this day as my first daring attempt to rise stirred my mother, who awoke all peckish. But that evening, as I settled into the enveloping veil of sleep, I heard from somewhere in the house, a scratching. It seemed at first to be perhaps the branches of the old willow in the court, swaying aimlessly, ushered by the winds of night. However, a glance to my window affirmed that the dusky garden was still, and the scraping sound both persistent...and indoors. I will not profess falsely that I dared follow the audible intrusion to its source that night. Rather, I gripped tightly to downy bedcovers, turned my back to the noise and, after a fitful time without measuring, succumbed to sleep.

The sounds met me there.

I do not recall pictures of those dreams, a comfort which was to change decidedly throughout those sadly brief months of summer. I only remembered on waking, the lap of waves, and knocking of wood to wood, as if the periodic kiss of dock from dinghy. There were murmurs, nearly lost to winds, which, while having the hint of speech about them, were not of a language or cadence either clear or familiar. These, I was left with when I awakened. Nothing more.

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The next few days were pleasant enough, beset with no intrusions or terrors, but my gaze fell ever to the cellar door, closed presently, but now filled with knowing. It was on the following Friday that my mother received a telegram from my Aunts who were away. All aflutter, she made her apologies, packed hurriedly with some assistance from

servants, and departed in a hansom. I was left alone, but for a minimal staff who prepared meals, dressed linens and the like, and departed, always before nightfall.

The first such night was perhaps the worst, knowing not what remained in the house with me as the latch turned with the servants' exeunt. They wasted no time and indeed, the click of the door was met with, what to my ear, sounded like a wafting chuckle from the cellar.

My imagination, it was not. Accompanied as it was by a sting to tongue and sinus akin to salty sea air.

I have never liked the beach. I do not feel at all at home beside the sea and its denizens do not appeal, even when prepared and served at my table. There was no escape within the house from the assault of sound and smell. No surcease, as I hurried from room to room seeking some barrier which would separate me from those foul intrusions upon my senses. The longest night I can recall, I was rewarded with no sleep until morning and my eyes must have lit like the dawn when first I heard a key in the latch. Excitedly I raced to meet my Mother's return, but found myself instead wrapping my arms embarrassingly about the waist of our cook....