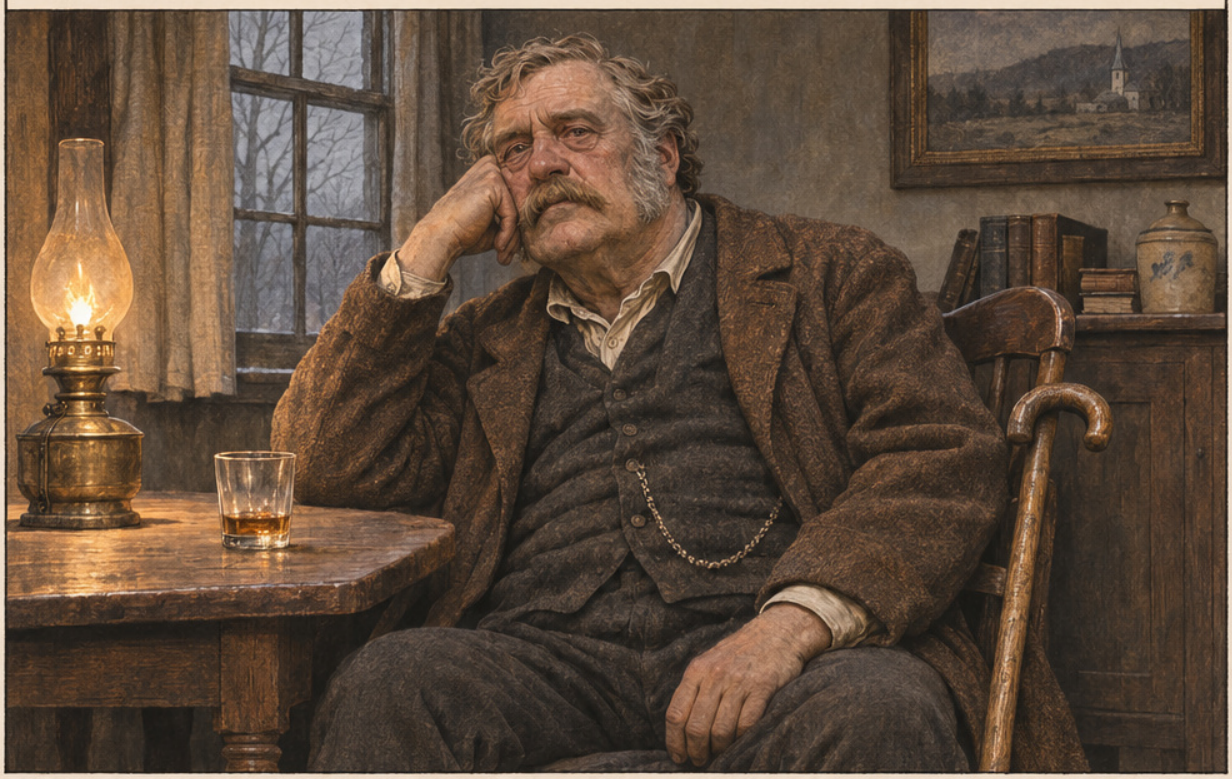
IN THE VAULT

GOD KNOWS, THOUGH, THAT THE PROSY TALE WHICH GEORGE BIRCH'S DEATH PERMITS ME TO TELL HAS IN IT ASPECTS BESIDE WHICH SOME OF OUR DARKEST TRAGEDIES ARE LIGHT.



BIRCH ACQUIRED A LIMITATION AND CHANGED HIS BUSINESS IN 1881, YET NEVER DISCUSSED THE CASE WHEN HE COULD AVOID IT.



...IN THE COLD DECEMBER OF 1880, WHEN THE GROUND FROZE AND THE CEMETERY DELVERS FOUND THEY COULD DIG NO MORE GRAVES TILL SPRING.



NEVER DID HE KNOCK TOGETHER FLIMSIER AND UNGAINLIER CASKETS...



...DISREGARD MORE FLAGRANTLY THE NEEDS OF THE RUSTY LOCK ON THE TOMB DOOR WHICH HE SLAMMED OPEN AND SHUT WITH SUCH NONCHALANT ABANDON.



...THE NINE SILENT HARVESTS OF THE GRIM REAPER...AFTER HAVING LAID BUT ONE MORTAL TENEMENT TO ITS PERMANENT REST. THAT WAS DARIUS PECK, THE NONAGENARIAN...



...ACTUALLY POSTPONED THE MATTER FOR THREE DAYS, NOT GETTING TO WORK TILL GOOD FRIDAY, THE 15TH.



ON THE AFTERNOON OF FRIDAY, APRIL 15TH, THEN, BIRCH SET OUT FOR THE TOMB WITH HORSE AND WAGON TO TRANSFER THE BODY OF MATTHEW FENNER.



THE DAY WAS CLEAR, BUT A HIGH WIND HAD SPRUNG UP...



...THE DAMP, ODOROUS CHAMBER WITH THE EIGHT CARELESSLY PLACED COFFINS...



...RECALLING HOW KINDLY AND GENEROUS THE LITTLE OLD MAN HAD BEEN TO HIM DURING HIS BANKRUPTCY FIVE YEARS BEFORE.



HE GAVE OLD MATT THE VERY BEST HIS SKILL COULD PRODUCE...



...TO USE IT WHEN ASAPH SAWYER DIED OF A MALIGNANT FEVER. ... MANY STORIES WERE TOLD OF HIS ALMOST INHUMAN VINDICTIVENESS...



IT WAS JUST AS HE HAD RECOGNISED OLD MATT'S COFFIN THAT THE DOOR SLAMMED TO IN THE WIND...



...THE LONG-NEGLECTED LATCH WAS OBVIOUSLY BROKEN, LEAVING THE CARELESS UNDERTAKER TRAPPED IN THE VAULT, A VICTIM OF HIS OWN OVERSIGHT.



THE THING MUST HAVE HAPPENED AT ABOUT THREE-THIRTY IN THE AFTERNOON. … A HAMMER AND CHISEL SELECTED…



HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN MUCH FOR A LANTERN OR BIT OF CANDLE; BUT LACKING THESE, BUNGLED SEMI-SIGHTLESSLY AS BEST HE MIGHT.



...THE NARROW VENTILATION FUNNEL IN THE TOP RAN THROUGH SEVERAL FEET OF EARTH...



...THE HIGH, SLIT-LIKE TRANSOM IN THE BRICK FACADE GAVE PROMISE OF POSSIBLE ENLARGEMENT TO A DILIGENT WORKER...



THREE COFFIN-HEIGHTS, HE RECKONED, WOULD PERMIT HIM TO REACH THE TRANSOM; BUT HE COULD DO BETTER WITH FOUR.



FINALLY HE DECIDED TO LAY A BASE OF THREE PARALLEL WITH THE WALL...



...TWO LAYERS OF TWO EACH, AND UPON THESE A SINGLE BOX TO SERVE AS THE PLATFORM. ... LEAVING ONE FREE TO BE PILED ON TOP...



IN THE SEMI-GLOOM HE TRUSTED MOSTLY TO TOUCH... SINCE IT TUMBLED INTO HIS HANDS AS IF THROUGH SOME ODD VOLITION...



THE TOWER AT LENGTH FINISHED, AND HIS ACHING ARMS RESTED BY A PAUSE DURING WHICH HE SAT ON THE BOTTOM STEP OF HIS GRIM DEVICE...



...STOOD ABREAST OF THE NARROW TRANSOM. THE BORDERS OF THE SPACE WERE ENTIRELY OF BRICK...



AS HIS HAMMER BLOWS BEGAN TO FALL, THE HORSE OUTSIDE WHINNIED...



DUSK FELL AND FOUND BIRCH STILL TOILING. ... NEWLY GATHERED CLOUDS HID THE MOON...



HE WOULD NOT, HE FOUND, HAVE TO PILE ANOTHER ON HIS PLATFORM TO MAKE THE PROPER HEIGHT...



IT MUST HAVE BEEN MIDNIGHT AT LEAST WHEN BIRCH DECIDED HE COULD GET THROUGH THE TRANSOM.



...UPON REACHING THE TOPMOST ONE, HE HEARD THAT AGGRAVATED CRACKLE WHICH BESPEAKS THE WHOLESALE RENDING OF WOOD.



...THE ROTTING LID GAVE WAY, JOUNCING HIM TWO FEET DOWN ON A SURFACE WHICH EVEN HE DID NOT CARE TO IMAGINE.



...THE WAITING HORSE GAVE A SCREAM THAT WAS TOO FRANTIC FOR A NEIGH, AND PLUNGED MADLY OFF THROUGH THE NIGHT...



...HE COULD NOT SHAKE CLEAR OF THE UNKNOWN GRASP WHICH HELD HIS FEET IN RELENTLESS CAPTIVITY.



INSTINCT GUIDED HIM IN HIS WRIGGLE THROUGH THE TRANSOM...



HE COULD NOT WALK, IT APPEARED...



...HE WAS ALONE AND ALIVE WHEN ARMINGTON, THE LODGE-KEEPER, ANSWERED HIS FEEBLE CLAWING AT THE DOOR.



ARMINGTON HELPED BIRCH TO THE OUTSIDE OF A SPARE BED AND SENT HIS LITTLE SON EDWIN FOR DR. DAVIS.



OH, MY ANKLES!



...HIS HANDS SHOOK AS HE DRESSED THE MANGLED MEMBERS; BINDING THEM AS IF HE WISHED TO GET THE WOUNDS OUT OF SIGHT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.



...ABSOLUTELY SURE—OF THE IDENTITY OF THAT TOP COFFIN OF THE PILE...



...INSIST AT ALL TIMES THAT HIS WOUNDS WERE CAUSED ENTIRELY BY LOOSE NAILS AND SPLINTERING WOOD.



HIS FRIGHTENED HORSE HAD GONE HOME, BUT HIS FRIGHTENED WITS NEVER QUITE DID THAT. HE CHANGED HIS BUSINESS, BUT SOMETHING ALWAYS PREYED UPON HIM.



...THE LATCH OF THE GREAT DOOR YIELDED READILY TO A TOUCH FROM THE OUTSIDE.



HE CRIED ALOUD ONCE, AND A LITTLE LATER GAVE A GASP THAT WAS MORE TERRIBLE THAN A CRY.



THEN HE FLED BACK TO THE LODGE AND BROKE ALL THE RULES OF HIS CALLING BY ROUSING AND SHAKING HIS PATIENT...



IT WAS ASAPH'S COFFIN, BIRCH, JUST AS I THOUGHT! I KNEW HIS TEETH, WITH THE FRONT ONES MISSING ON THE UPPER JAW—NEVER, FOR GOD'S SAKE, SHEW THOSE WOUNDS!



...I BELIEVE HIS EYE-FOR-AN-EYE FURY COULD BEAT OLD FATHER DEATH HIMSELF. GOD, WHAT A RAGE!



...YOU ALWAYS DID GO TOO DAMNED FAR! ... YOU KNEW WHAT A LITTLE MAN OLD FENNER WAS.



YOU KICKED HARD, FOR ASAPH'S COFFIN WAS ON THE FLOOR. HIS HEAD WAS BROKEN IN...THOSE ANKLES CUT NEATLY OFF TO FIT MATT FENNER'S CAST-ASIDE COFFIN!

