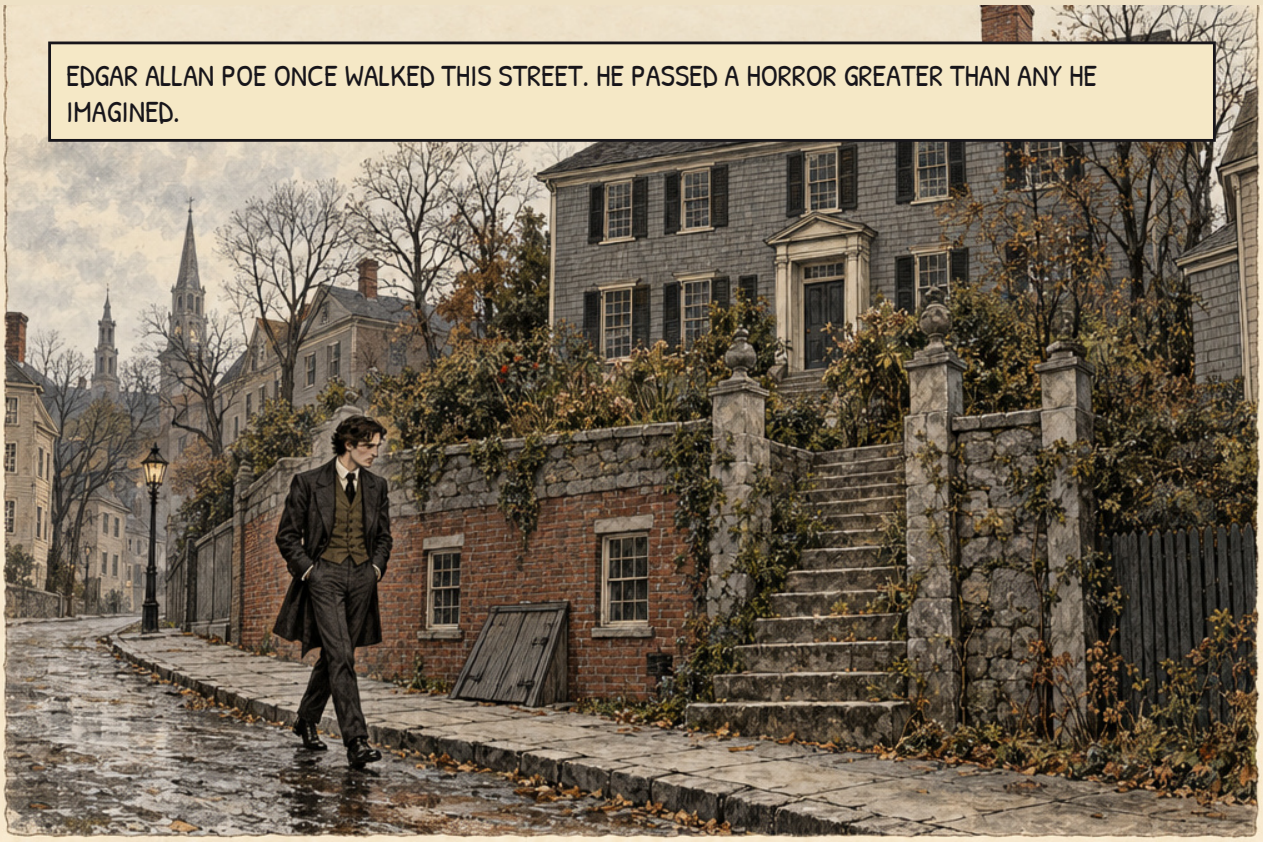
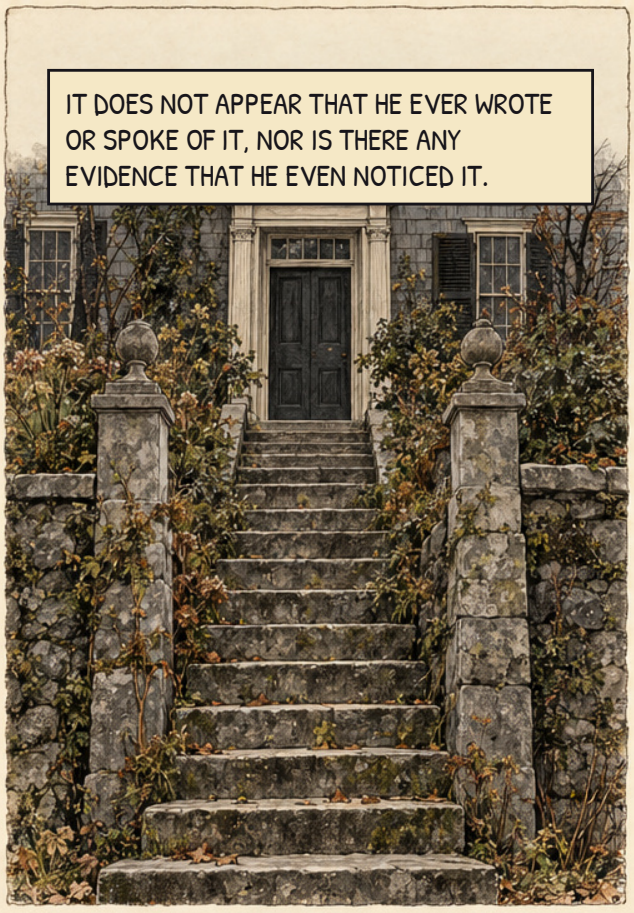
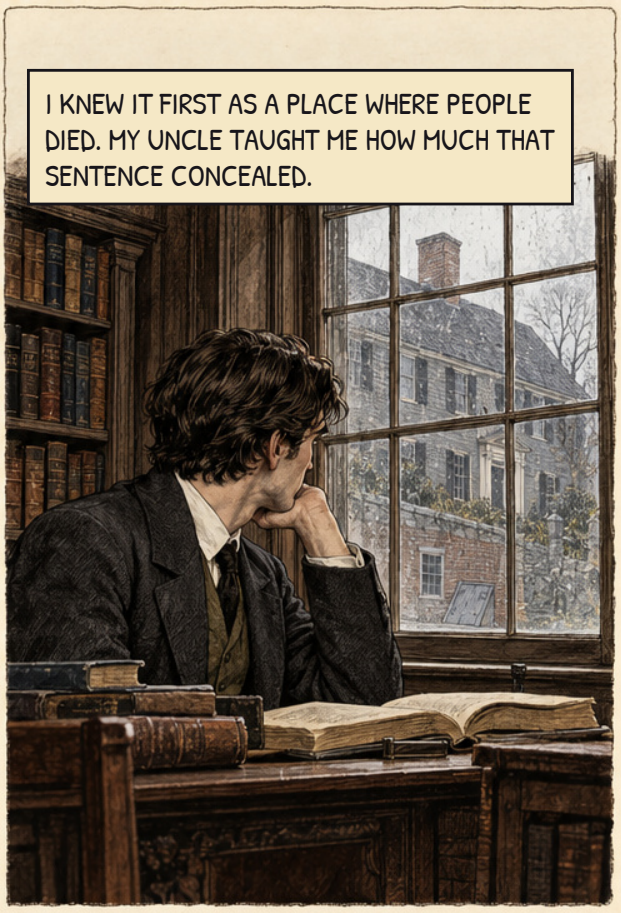
H. P. LOVECRAFT

THE SHUNNED HOUSE







WE BOYS DARED ONE ANOTHER TO ENTER. THE PALE GRASS AND GNARLED TREES SEEMED ALMOST AS UNHEALTHY AS THE BUILDING.



BUT AFTER ALL, THE ATTIC WAS NOT THE MOST TERRIBLE PART OF THE HOUSE.



THE CELLAR WAS DIFFERENT. A BUSY SIDEWALK LAY JUST BEYOND ITS THIN DOOR, BUT IT FELT IMMEASURABLY FAR AWAY.



I RETURNED AS A MAN. THE SAME WHITE FUNGI ROSE AFTER RAIN, GLOWING FAINTLY AS THEY ROTTED.



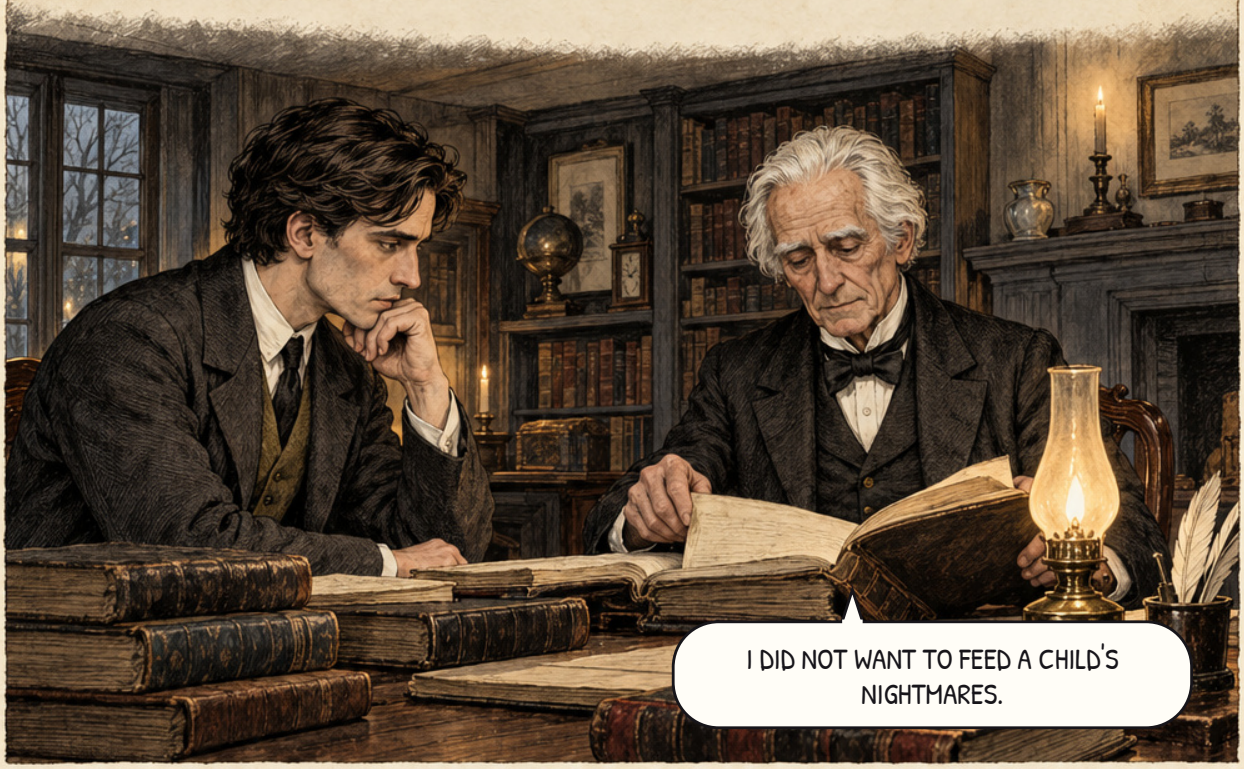
THE MOULD STILL SUGGESTED A CROUCHING BODY. AS A BOY, I HAD ONCE SEEN A YELLOW BREATH RISE FROM IT.



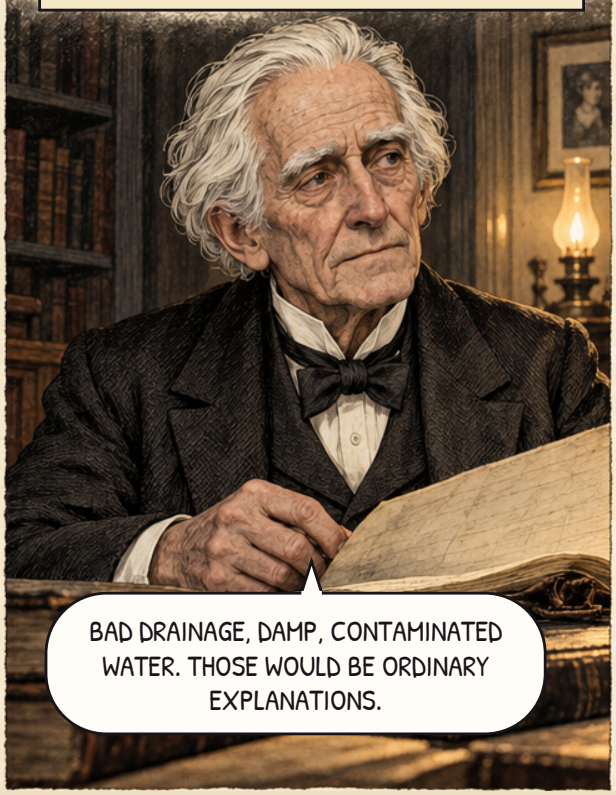
MY UNCLE REMEMBERED MY CHILDHOOD TALE. HIS GUARDED SMILE TOLD ME THERE WAS MORE TO LEARN.



NOT TILL MY ADULT YEARS DID MY UNCLE SET BEFORE ME THE NOTES AND DATA WHICH HE HAD COLLECTED CONCERNING THE SHUNNED HOUSE.



HE WAS A PHYSICIAN AND HISTORIAN, CAREFUL WITH FACTS AND IMPATIENT WITH FOOLISHNESS.



BUT THE PATTERN IN HIS PAPERS WAS FAR FROM ORDINARY.



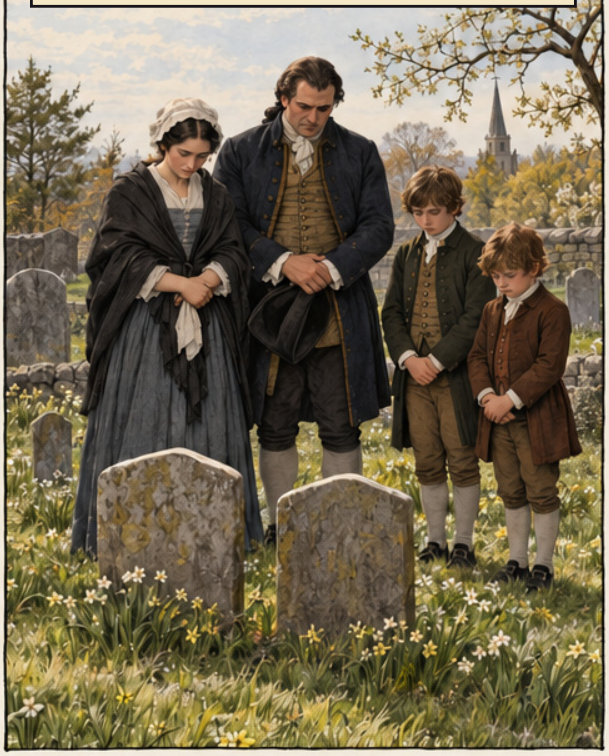
IN 1763, THE MERCHANT WILLIAM HARRIS BROUGHT HIS WIFE RHOBY AND THEIR FOUR CHILDREN TO A NEW HOME.



THAT CHILD, A BOY, CAME IN DECEMBER; BUT WAS STILL-BORN. NOR WAS ANY CHILD TO BE BORN ALIVE IN THAT HOUSE FOR A CENTURY AND A HALF.



BY THE FOLLOWING SPRING, ABIGAIL AND RUTH WERE DEAD. A SERVANT FOLLOWED THEM IN JUNE.




WILLIAM HARRIS DIED IN 1765. HIS WIDOW RHOBY WAS LEFT WITH THE TWO BOYS.


WHEN THE ELDEST BOY DIED TWO YEARS LATER, RHOBY'S MIND GAVE WAY. HER SISTER MERCY CAME TO CARE FOR HER AND WILLIAM.


MERCY WAS A PLAIN, RAW-BONED WOMAN OF GREAT STRENGTH; BUT HER HEALTH VISIBLY DECLINED FROM THE TIME OF HER ADVENT.
I CANNOT STAY. SOMETHING TAKES MY BREATH AT NIGHT.


RHOBY CRIED OUT IN FLUENT, COARSE FRENCH, THOUGH SHE HAD SCARCELY LEARNED THE LANGUAGE.
KEEP IT AWAY! ITS TEETH!
SHE SPOKE OF A GLASSY-EYED THING THAT BIT HER. HER SCREAMS DROVE WILLIAM TO STAY WITH COUSINS.
AWAY FROM THE HOUSE, HE GREW STRONGER. BACK INSIDE, THE WEAKNESS RETURNED.

MILITARY SERVICE RESTORED WILLIAM'S HEALTH. HE RETURNED WITH A WIFE IN 1781 AND FOUND MERCY ALMOST UNRECOGNIZABLE.



ANOTHER CHILD WAS STILLBORN. THEN MERCY DIED.



IN 1783, WILLIAM LEFT FOR GOOD. THEIR SON WAS BORN IN A DIFFERENT HOUSE.



A PRACTICAL RELATIVE IGNORED THAT WISH. A HOUSE, HE THOUGHT, SHOULD EARN ITS KEEP.

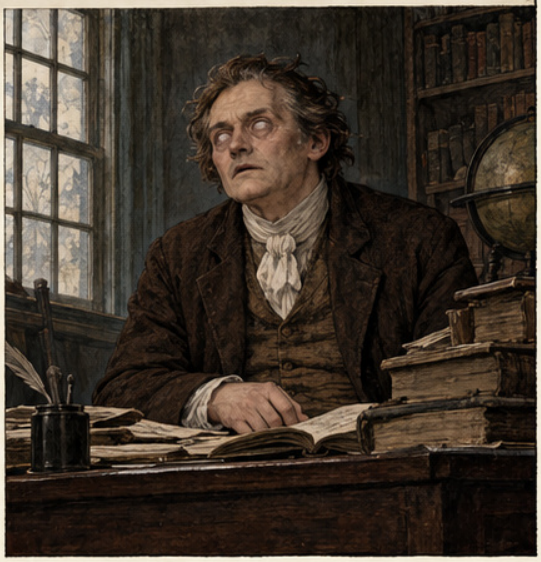


TENANTS SICKENED. IN 1804, AFTER FOUR DEATHS, THE TOWN ORDERED FUMIGATION. THE DEAD HAD STRANGELY LITTLE BLOOD.



IN 1815, AND AGAIN IN 1845, DYING TENANTS TRIED TO BITE THE DOCTOR AT THEIR BEDSIDE.





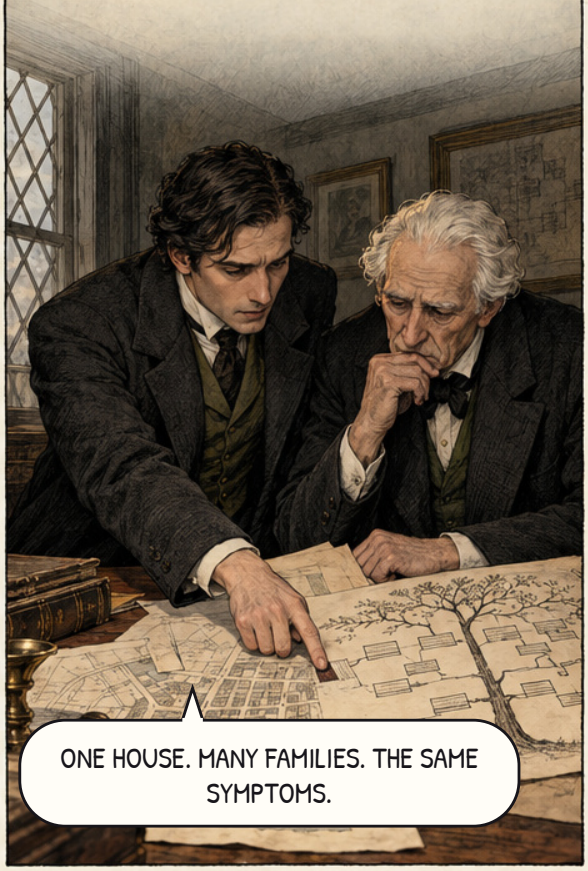
OTHER DOCTORS RECORDED THE LAST DEATHS IN 1860 AND 1861. SOME PATIENTS RAVED IN FRENCH THEY HAD NEVER STUDIED.



AFTER THAT, NO ONE WOULD RENT IT. THE WAR AND THE PASSING YEARS SWALLOWED THE STORIES.



THE HARRIS FAMILY FLOURISHED ELSEWHERE. THE SICKNESS BELONGED TO THE PLACE.



A SERVANT NAMED ANN WHITE HAD OFFERED AN EXPLANATION: SOMETHING BURIED BELOW WAS FEEDING UPON THE LIVING.



LOST BREATH. MISSING BLOOD. THE CELLAR. THE SAME DETAILS RETURNED IN ACCOUNTS MADE DECADES APART.



WE DID NOT ACCEPT THE OLD VAMPIRE TALES. BUT WE COULD NOT DISMISS WHAT THE WITNESSES AGREED UPON.



ARCHER HARRIS AND HIS SISTER CONFIRMED THE FAMILY HISTORY. NEITHER COULD EXPLAIN THE FRENCH.



ALICE REMEMBERED AN OLD NURSE, MARIA ROBBINS, WHO HAD HINTED AT A SECRET IN MERCY'S LAST MOMENTS.



LIVING MEMORY HAD FAILED. I TURNED TO THE DEEDS AND TOWN RECORDS.



THE LAND HAD ONCE BELONGED TO JOHN THROCKMORTON. HIS FAMILY GRAVES HAD ALL BEEN MOVED.



THEN I FOUND A LEASE FROM 1697: A SMALL PLOT GRANTED TO ETIENNE ROULET AND HIS WIFE.



THEIR GRAVEYARD LAY EXACTLY WHERE THE HOUSE NOW STOOD. OF THOSE GRAVES, THERE WAS NO RECORD OF REMOVAL.



THE ROULETS WERE FRENCH REFUGEES. ETIENNE STUDIED STRANGE BOOKS; HIS SON PAUL LEFT DARKER RUMORS.



A RIOT ENDED THE FAMILY'S STORY. THE RECORD WAS CONFUSED, AND PREJUDICE HAD CLOUDED IT FROM THE FIRST.



ANOTHER ROULET WAS TRIED IN FRANCE IN 1598 AFTER A WOLF ATTACK. THE NAME AND PLACE MATCHED, BUT I COULD PROVE NO CONNECTION.



WITH CARRINGTON HARRIS'S PERMISSION, I HAD A KEY MADE FOR THE CELLAR DOOR AND SHOWED IT TO MY UNCLE.



I SEARCHED EVERY INCH. THE OPEN DOOR AND THE PASSING PEOPLE MADE THE PLACE SEEM ALMOST HARMLESS.



THEN MY UNCLE SUGGESTED I RETURN AT NIGHT.



AT MIDNIGHT, THE MOULD HAD TAKEN ON ITS CLEAREST SHAPE. A YELLOW VAPOR TREMBLED ABOVE IT. I FELT, ABSURDLY, THAT IT WAS WATCHING ME.



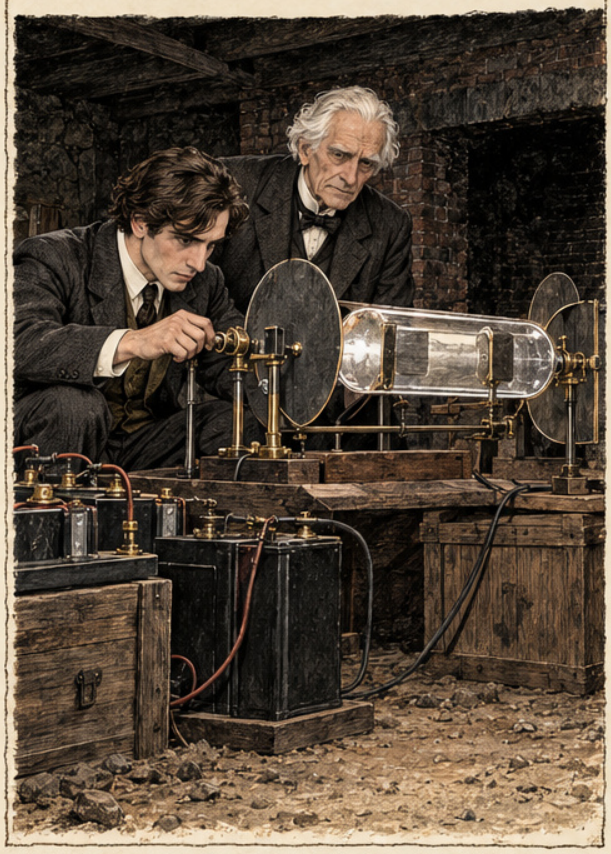
MY UNCLE LISTENED IN SILENCE. THEN HE MADE HIS DECISION.



JUNE 25, 1919. WE BROUGHT A COT, TWO CHAIRS, AND INSTRUMENTS OBTAINED IN SECRET.



FOR AN INTANGIBLE FORCE, WE PREPARED A POWERFUL CROOKES TUBE.



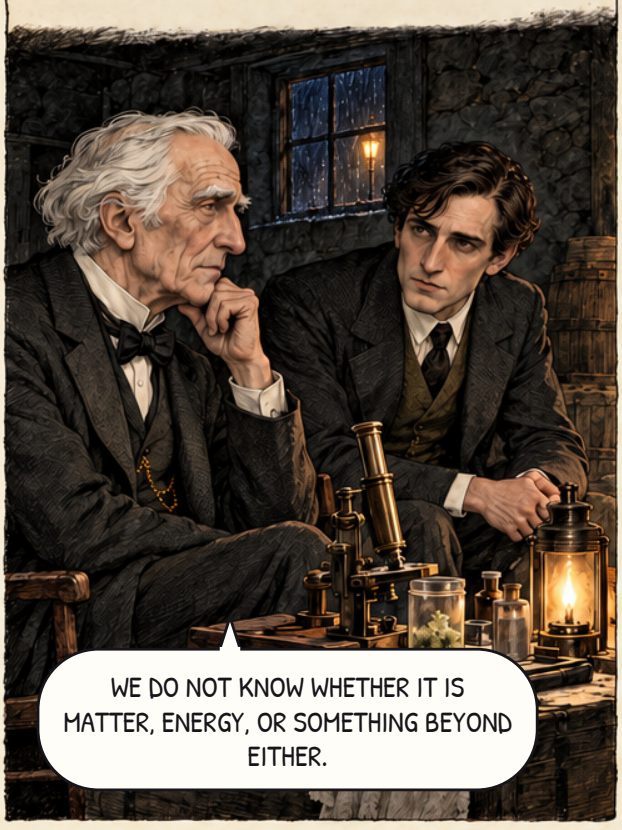
FOR SOMETHING MATERIAL, WE HAD FLAME-THROWERS. AT EIGHTY-ONE, MY UNCLE DIRECTED EVERYTHING.



OUR VIGIL BEGAN AT TEN. RAIN BEAT AGAINST THE STREET OUTSIDE.



WE SPOKE OF FORCES THE KNOWN SCIENCES MIGHT NOT YET DESCRIBE.



OUR CONFIDENCE HAD ONE PRACTICAL LIMIT.



PAST MIDNIGHT, I PERSUADED HIM TO TAKE THE FIRST TURN ON THE COT.



BESIDE A SLEEPER, A MAN IS ALONE. SOMETIMES MORE ALONE THAN HE KNOWS.



I OPENED THE DOOR FOR CLEAN AIR. THEN I RETURNED TO THE WAITING.



HIS BREATHING CHANGED. HIS FAMILIAR FACE SEEMED TO STRUGGLE TOWARD OTHER EXPRESSIONS.



THEN HE BEGAN TO MUTTER IN FRENCH.



AT LAST, HE WOKE.



HE HAD DREAMED HE LAY IN A PIT, WHILE ANGRY FACES LOOKED DOWN AT HIM.



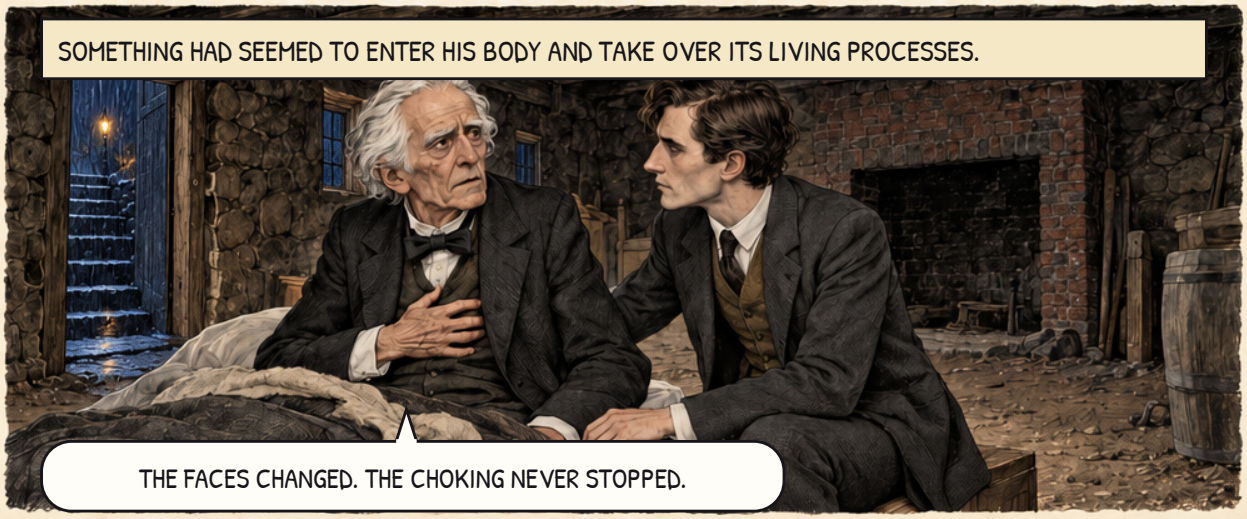
THE PEOPLE CHANGED. THE ROOM CHANGED. TIME HAD LOST ITS MEANING.



THEN ROOMS AND CENTURIES SLID THROUGH ONE ANOTHER. HE RECOGNIZED FACES FROM THE HARRIS PORTRAITS.



SOMETHING HAD SEEMED TO ENTER HIS BODY AND TAKE OVER ITS LIVING PROCESSES.



THE FACES CHANGED. THE CHOKING NEVER STOPPED.

WE TALKED UNTIL THE TERROR SOFTENED. THEN I TOOK MY TURN TO SLEEP.



I FELT, IN MY VISIONS, A COSMIC AND ABYSMAL LONENESS; WITH HOSTILITY SURGING FROM ALL SIDES UPON SOME PRISON WHERE I LAY CONFINED.



MY UNCLE SCREAMED.



A YELLOW CORPSE-LIGHT ROSE FROM THE EARTH. MY UNCLE WAS INSIDE IT.



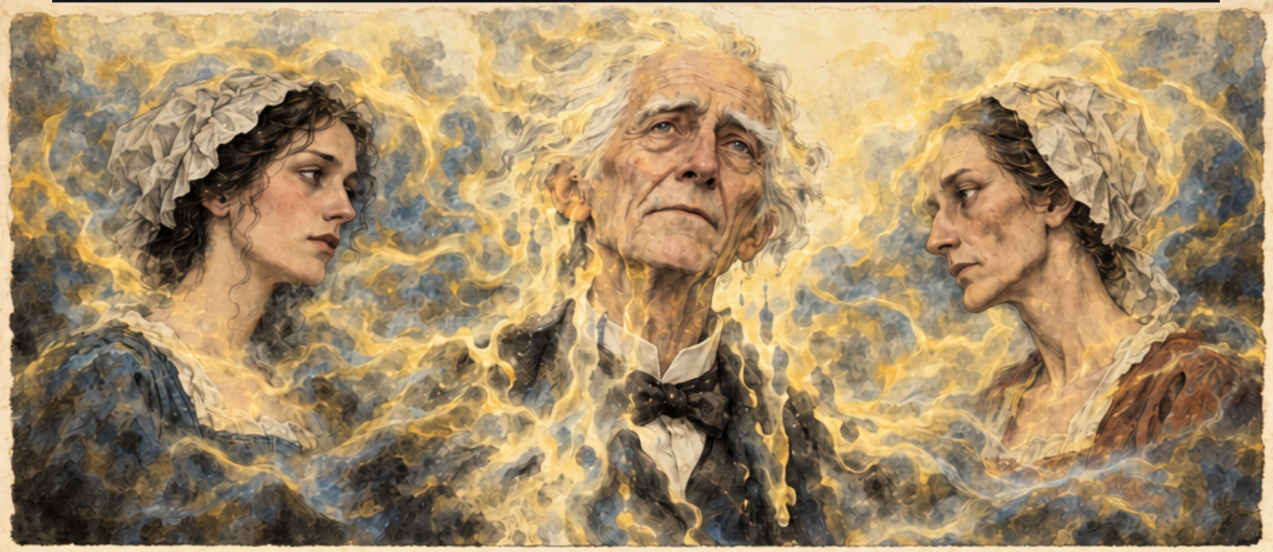
TRAINING KEPT ME MOVING. I SWITCHED ON THE TUBE.



THE VAPOR ONLY SEEMED DIMMER BESIDE THE BLUE LIGHT. THE RADIATION HAD DONE NOTHING.



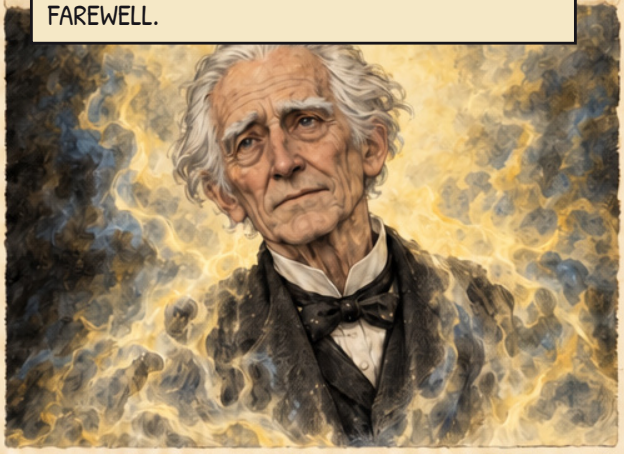
HIS FACE BECAME A MULTITUDE: OLD AND YOUNG, FAMILIAR AND STRANGE. THE HOUSE'S DEAD PASSED THROUGH IT.



A CENTURY OF STOLEN LIVES CROWDED INTO A SINGLE VANISHING FACE.



I LIKE TO THINK THAT HE EXISTED AT THAT MOMENT, AND THAT HE TRIED TO BID ME FAREWELL.



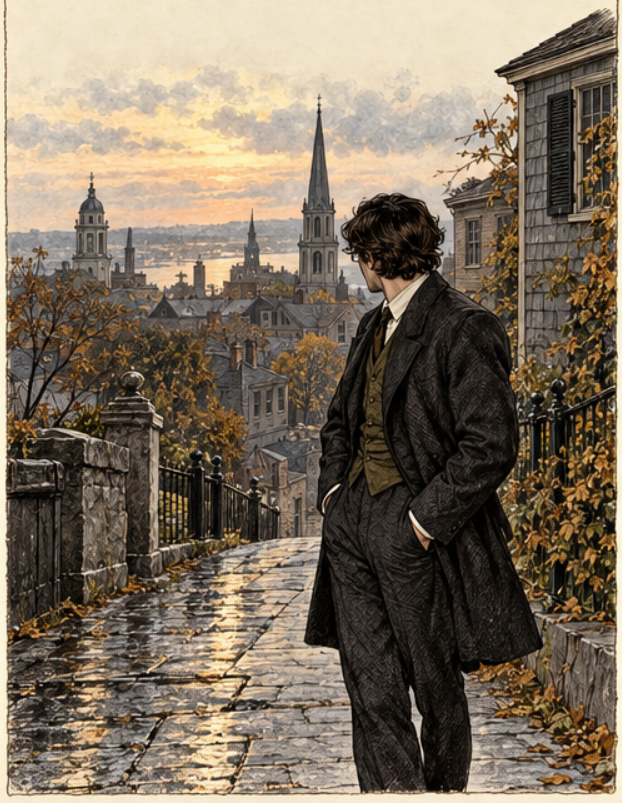
IT SEEMS TO ME I HICCOUGHED A FAREWELL FROM MY OWN PARCHED THROAT AS I LURCHED OUT INTO THE STREET...

FAREWELL...

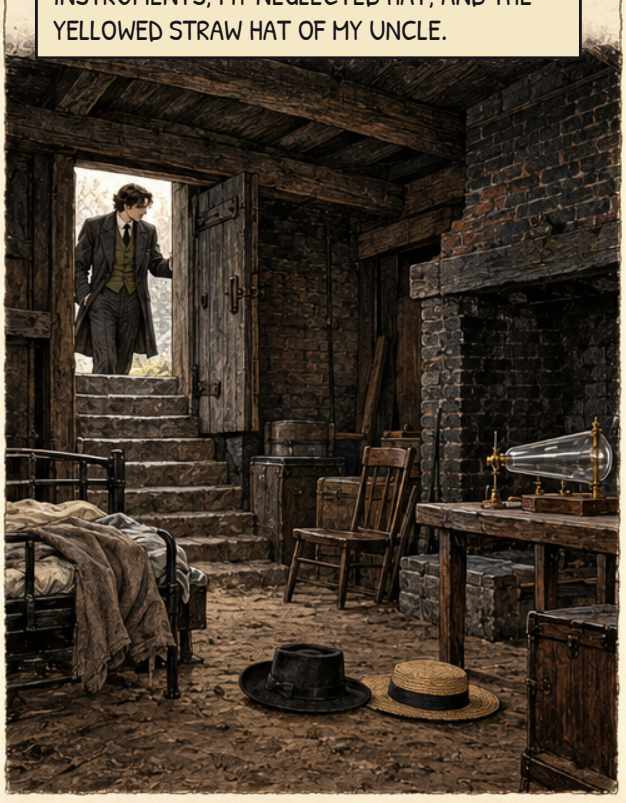
I WANDERED UNTIL DAWN, SEEKING COMFORT IN SOLID, MODERN STREETS.



BUT MY WORK WAS UNFINISHED.



I LOOKED AT THE COT, THE CHAIRS, THE INSTRUMENTS, MY NEGLECTED HAT, AND THE YELLOWED STRAW HAT OF MY UNCLE.



NEITHER MATTER NOR ETHER EXPLAINED WHAT I HAD SEEN. PERHAPS IT WAS AN EMANATION.



IF THE VAPOR ROSE FROM SOMETHING, ITS SOURCE MIGHT STILL LIE BELOW.



I ORDERED DIGGING TOOLS, A MILITARY GAS-MASK, AND SIX CARBOYS OF ACID. THEY WOULD ARRIVE THE NEXT MORNING.



AT 11 A.M. THE NEXT DAY I COMMENCED DIGGING. IT WAS SUNNY WEATHER, AND I WAS GLAD OF THAT.



THE DEEPER I WENT, THE STRONGER THE STENCH. SOMETHING HAD FED HERE FOR A CENTURY AND A HALF.



I PUT ON THE MASK AND ARRANGED THE CARBOYS WHERE I COULD REACH THEM.



THEN THE SPADE STRUCK SOMETHING SOFTER THAN EARTH. A GLASSY SURFACE. A FOLD. A CYLINDER NEARLY TWO FEET ACROSS.



...THE UNTHINKABLE ABNORMALITY WHOSE TITAN ELBOW I HAD SEEN.



I EMPTIED THE CARBOYS INTO THE PIT. A BLINDING VAPOR FILLED THE CELLAR.



PEOPLE LATER BLAMED FACTORY WASTE IN THE RIVER FOR THAT YELLOW DAY—AND A BROKEN MAIN FOR THE UNDERGROUND ROAR.



THE FUMES PIERCED MY MASK. AFTER THE FOURTH CARBOY, I KNEW NO MORE.



WHEN I WOKE, NO FRESH VAPOR ROSE.



THE LAST TWO CARBOYS PRODUCED NO ANSWER.



BY TWILIGHT, THE PIT WAS FILLED. THE FUNGI HAD CRUMBLED TO HARMLESS GRAY DUST. THE FEAR HAD GONE OUT OF THE ROOM.



AND AS I PATTED DOWN THE LAST SPADEFUL OF MOULD, I SHED THE FIRST OF THE MANY TEARS WITH WHICH I HAVE PAID UNAFFECTED TRIBUTE TO MY BELOVED UNCLE'S MEMORY.



I TOLD CARRINGTON HARRIS. HE HELPED ME WITH THE EXPLANATIONS THE WORLD WOULD ACCEPT.



IN THE CHURCHYARD POE HAD LOVED, I RAISED AN URN TO ELIHU WHIPPLE: A GENTLE MAN WHO FACED WHAT OTHERS WOULD NOT SEE.



THE NEXT SPRING NO MORE PALE GRASS AND STRANGE WEEDS CAME UP IN THE SHUNNED HOUSE'S TERRACED GARDEN, AND SHORTLY AFTERWARD CARRINGTON HARRIS RENTED THE PLACE... THE BARREN OLD TREES IN THE YARD HAVE BEGUN TO BEAR SMALL, SWEET APPLES, AND LAST YEAR THE BIRDS NESTED IN THEIR GNARLED BOUGHS.



THE HOUSE STILL STANDS. I LOOK AT IT WITH RELIEF—AND REMEMBER THE MAN WHO DID NOT COME HOME.

