THE TERRIBLE OLD MAN

THIS OLD MAN DWELLS ALL ALONE IN A VERY ANCIENT HOUSE ON WATER STREET NEAR THE SEA, AND IS REPUTED TO BE BOTH EXCEEDINGLY RICH AND EXCEEDINGLY FEEBLE...



IT WAS THE DESIGN OF ANGELO RICCI AND JOE CZANEK AND MANUEL SILVA TO CALL ON THE TERRIBLE OLD MAN.



...BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN A CAPTAIN OF EAST INDIA CLIPPER SHIPS IN HIS DAY; SO OLD THAT NO ONE CAN REMEMBER WHEN HE WAS YOUNG...



...A STRANGE COLLECTION OF LARGE STONES, ODDLY GROUPED AND PAINTED SO THAT THEY RESEMBLE THE IDOLS IN SOME OBSCURE EASTERN TEMPLE.



...ON A TABLE IN A BARE ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR ARE MANY PECULIAR BOTTLES, IN EACH A SMALL PIECE OF LEAD SUSPENDED PENDULUM-WISE FROM A STRING.



...ADDRESSING THEM BY SUCH NAMES AS JACK, SCAR-FACE, LONG TOM, SPANISH JOE, PETERS, AND MATE ELLIS...



...WHENEVER HE SPEAKS TO A BOTTLE THE LITTLE LEAD PENDULUM WITHIN MAKES CERTAIN DEFINITE VIBRATIONS AS IF IN ANSWER.



...A TOTTERING, ALMOST HELPLESS GREYBEARD, WHO COULD NOT WALK WITHOUT THE AID OF HIS KNOTTED CANE, AND WHOSE THIN, WEAK HANDS SHOOK PITIFULLY.



...NO ACCOUNT AT THE BANK, AND WHO PAYS FOR HIS FEW NECESSITIES AT THE VILLAGE STORE WITH SPANISH GOLD AND SILVER MINTED TWO CENTURIES AGO.



MESSRS. RICCI, CZANEK, AND SILVA SELECTED THE NIGHT OF APRIL 11TH FOR THEIR CALL.



MR. RICCI AND MR. SILVA WERE TO INTERVIEW THE POOR OLD GENTLEMAN, WHILST MR. CZANEK WAITED... WITH A COVERED MOTOR-CAR IN SHIP STREET...



...ALTHOUGH THEY DID NOT LIKE THE WAY THE MOON SHONE DOWN UPON THE PAINTED STONES THROUGH THE BUDDING BRANCHES OF THE GNARLED TREES...



SO THEY MOVED UP TO THE ONE LIGHTED WINDOW AND HEARD THE TERRIBLE OLD MAN TALKING CHILDISHLY TO HIS BOTTLES WITH PENDULUMS.



THEN THEY DONNED MASKS AND KNOCKED POLITELY AT THE WEATHER-STAINED OAKEN DOOR.



...HE DID NOT LIKE THE HIDEOUS SCREAMS HE HAD HEARD IN THE ANCIENT HOUSE JUST AFTER THE HOUR APPOINTED FOR THE DEED.



FREQUENTLY HE CONSULTED HIS WATCH, AND WONDERED AT THE DELAY.



THEN HE SENSED A SOFT TREAD OR TAPPING ON THE WALK INSIDE THE GATE, HEARD A GENTLE FUMBLING AT THE RUSTY LATCH...



...HIS COLLEAGUES WERE NOT THERE AT ALL, BUT ONLY THE TERRIBLE OLD MAN LEANING QUIETLY ON HIS KNOTTED CANE AND SMILING HIDEOUSLY.



MR. CZANEK HAD NEVER BEFORE NOTICED THE COLOUR OF THAT MAN'S EYES; NOW HE SAW THAT THEY WERE YELLOW.



...THE THREE UNIDENTIFIABLE BODIES, HORRIBLY SLASHED AS WITH MANY CUTLASSES, AND HORRIBLY MANGLED AS BY THE TREAD OF MANY CRUEL BOOT-HEELS, WHICH THE TIDE WASHED IN.



AND SOME PEOPLE EVEN SPOKE OF THINGS AS TRIVIAL AS THE DESERTED MOTOR-CAR FOUND IN SHIP STREET...



BUT IN THIS IDLE VILLAGE GOSSIP THE TERRIBLE OLD MAN TOOK NO INTEREST AT ALL.



BESIDES, SO ANCIENT A SEA-CAPTAIN MUST HAVE WITNESSED SCORES OF THINGS MUCH MORE STIRRING IN THE FAR-OFF DAYS OF HIS UNREMEMBERED YOUTH.

