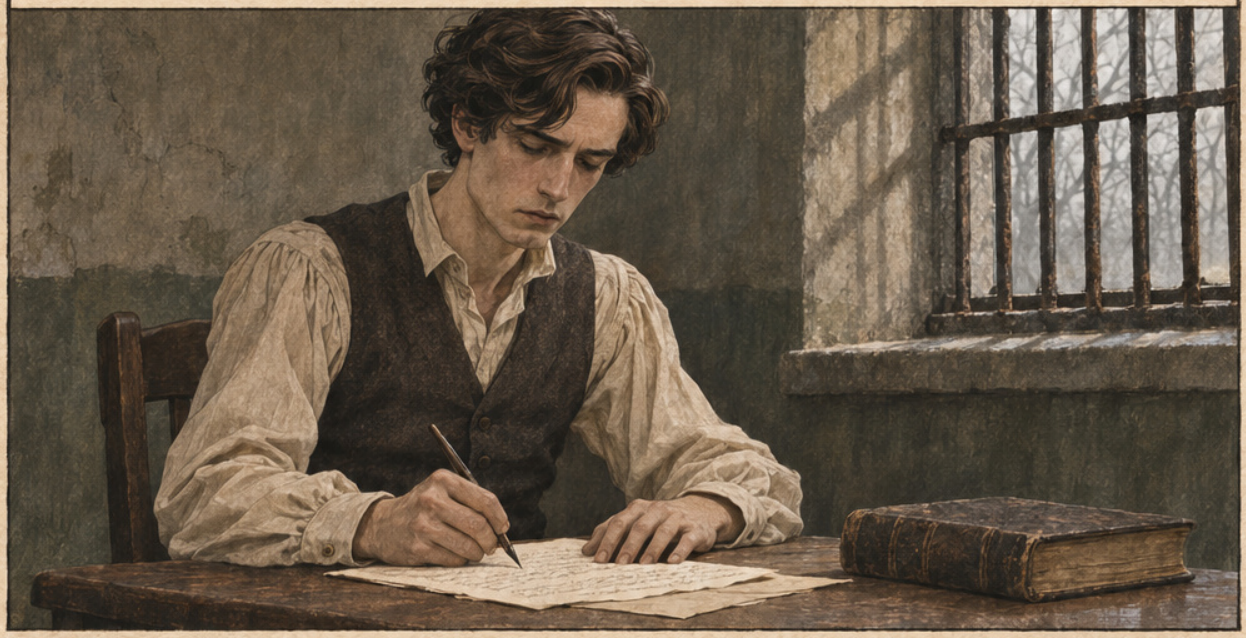
THE TOMB

IN RELATING THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH HAVE LED TO MY CONFINEMENT WITHIN THIS REFUGE FOR THE DEMENTED, I AM AWARE THAT MY PRESENT POSITION WILL CREATE A NATURAL DOUBT OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF MY NARRATIVE.



MY NAME IS JERVAS DUDLEY, AND FROM EARLIEST CHILDHOOD I HAVE BEEN A DREAMER AND A VISIONARY.



CLOSE BY MY HOME THERE LIES A SINGULAR WOODED HOLLOW, IN WHOSE TWILIGHT DEEPS I SPENT MOST OF MY TIME; READING, THINKING, AND DREAMING.



IN YEARS A CHILD OF TEN, I HAD SEEN AND HEARD MANY WONDERS UNKNOWN TO THE THRONG; AND WAS ODDLY AGED IN CERTAIN RESPECTS.



THE DOOR, A PONDEROUS AND FORBIDDING SLAB OF STONE, HANGS UPON RUSTED IRON HINGES, AND IS FASTENED AJAR IN A QUEERLY SINISTER WAY BY MEANS OF HEAVY IRON CHAINS AND PADLOCKS...



...I HAD SWORN TO THE HUNDRED GODS OF THE GROVE THAT AT ANY COST I WOULD SOME DAY FORCE AN ENTRANCE TO THE BLACK, CHILLY DEPTHS THAT SEEMED CALLING OUT TO ME.



THE ABODE OF THE RACE WHOSE SCIONS ARE HERE INURNED HAD ONCE CROWNED THE DECLIVITY WHICH HOLDS THE TOMB, BUT HAD LONG SINCE FALLEN VICTIM TO THE FLAMES WHICH SPRANG UP FROM A DISASTROUS STROKE OF LIGHTNING. ... ONE MAN ONLY HAD PERISHED IN THE FIRE.



ONCE I THRUST A CANDLE WITHIN THE NEARLY CLOSED ENTRANCE, BUT COULD SEE NOTHING SAVE A FLIGHT OF DAMP STONE STEPS LEADING DOWNWARD.



...A WORM-EATEN TRANSLATION OF PLUTARCH'S LIVES... READING THE LIFE OF THESEUS, I WAS MUCH IMPRESSED BY THAT PASSAGE TELLING OF THE GREAT STONE BENEATH WHICH THE BOYISH HERO WAS TO FIND HIS TOKENS OF DESTINY WHENEVER HE SHOULD BECOME OLD ENOUGH TO LIFT ITS ENORMOUS WEIGHT.



THIS LEGEND HAD THE EFFECT OF DISPELLING MY KEENEST IMPATIENCE TO ENTER THE VAULT, FOR IT MADE ME FEEL THAT THE TIME WAS NOT YET RIPE.



I WOULD SOMETIMES RISE VERY QUIETLY IN THE NIGHT, STEALING OUT TO WALK IN THOSE CHURCHYARDS AND PLACES OF BURIAL FROM WHICH I HAD BEEN KEPT BY MY PARENTS.



...SQUIRE BREWSTER... THE UNDERTAKER, GOODMAN SIMPSON, HAD STOLEN THE SILVER-BUCKLED SHOES... THE SQUIRE HIMSELF, NOT FULLY INANIMATE, HAD TURNED TWICE IN HIS MOUND-COVERED COFFIN ON THE DAY AFTER INTERMENT.



...MY OWN MATERNAL ANCESTRY POSSESSED AT LEAST A SLIGHT LINK WITH THE SUPPOSEDLY EXTINCT FAMILY OF THE HYDES.



BY THE TIME I CAME OF AGE, I HAD MADE A SMALL CLEARING IN THE THICKET BEFORE THE MOULD-STAINED FACADE OF THE HILLSIDE...



THE NIGHT OF THE FIRST REVELATION WAS A SULTRY ONE. I MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP FROM FATIGUE, FOR IT WAS WITH A DISTINCT SENSE OF AWAKENING THAT I HEARD THE VOICES.



I BARELY FANCIED THAT AS I AWOKE, A LIGHT HAD BEEN HURRIEDLY EXTINGUISHED WITHIN THE SUNKEN SEPULCHRE.



UPON RETURNING HOME I WENT WITH MUCH DIRECTNESS TO A ROTTING CHEST IN THE ATTIC, WHEREIN I FOUND THE KEY WHICH NEXT DAY UNLOCKED WITH EASE THE BARRIER I HAD SO LONG STORMED IN VAIN.



IT WAS IN THE SOFT GLOW OF LATE AFTERNOON THAT I FIRST ENTERED THE VAULT ON THE ABANDONED SLOPE.



AS I CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND ME AND DESCENDED THE DRIPPING STEPS BY THE LIGHT OF MY LONE CANDLE, I SEEMED TO KNOW THE WAY...



LOOKING ABOUT ME, I BEHELD MANY MARBLE SLABS BEARING COFFINS, OR THE REMAINS OF COFFINS.



IN A CONSPICUOUS ALCOVE WAS ONE FAIRLY WELL-PRESERVED AND UNTENANTED CASKET, ADORNED WITH A SINGLE NAME WHICH BROUGHT TO ME BOTH A SMILE AND A SHUDDER.



AN ODD IMPULSE CAUSED ME TO CLIMB UPON THE BROAD SLAB, EXTINGUISH MY CANDLE, AND LIE DOWN WITHIN THE VACANT BOX.



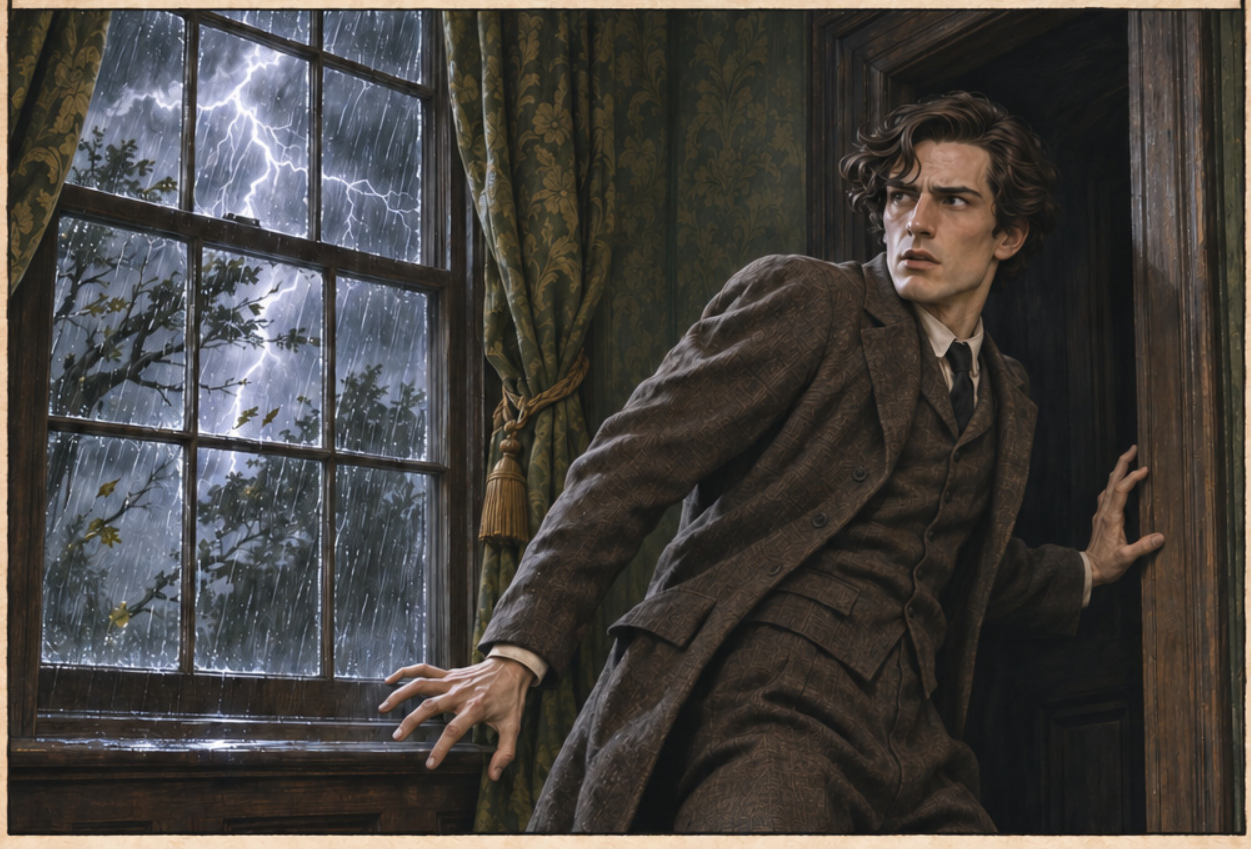
IN THE GREY LIGHT OF DAWN I STAGGERED FROM THE VAULT AND LOCKED THE CHAIN OF THE DOOR BEHIND ME. I WAS NO LONGER A YOUNG MAN, THOUGH BUT TWENTY-ONE WINTERS HAD CHILLED MY BODILY FRAME.



ONE MORNING AT BREAKFAST I CAME CLOSE TO DISASTER BY DECLAIMING IN PALPABLY LIQUORISH ACCENTS AN EFFUSION OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BACCHANALIAN MIRTH...



ABOUT THIS TIME I CONCEIVED MY PRESENT FEAR OF FIRE AND THUNDERSTORMS.



ON ONE OCCASION I STARTLED A VILLAGER BY LEADING HIM CONFIDENTLY TO A SHALLOW SUB-CELLAR, OF WHOSE EXISTENCE I SEEMED TO KNOW...



MY PARENTS, ALARMED AT THE ALTERED MANNER AND APPEARANCE OF THEIR ONLY SON, COMMENCED TO EXERT OVER MY MOVEMENTS A KINDLY ESPIONAGE…



MY KEY TO THE VAULT I KEPT SUSPENDED FROM A CORD ABOUT MY NECK, ITS PRESENCE KNOWN ONLY TO ME.



ONE MORNING AS I EMERGED FROM THE DAMP TOMB AND FASTENED THE CHAIN OF THE PORTAL WITH NONE TOO STEADY HAND, I BEHELD IN AN ADJACENT THICKET THE DREADED FACE OF A WATCHER.



IMAGINE MY DELIGHTED ASTONISHMENT ON HEARING THE SPY INFORM MY PARENT IN A CAUTIOUS WHISPER THAT I HAD SPENT THE NIGHT IN THE BOWER OUTSIDE THE TOMB...



MADE BOLD BY THIS HEAVEN-SENT CIRCUMSTANCE, I BEGAN TO RESUME PERFECT OPENNESS IN GOING TO THE VAULT; CONFIDENT THAT NO ONE COULD WITNESS MY ENTRANCE.



INSTEAD OF THE HILLSIDE TOMB, IT WAS THE CHARRED CELLAR ON THE CREST OF THE SLOPE WHOSE PRESIDING DAEMON BECKONED TO ME WITH UNSEEN FINGERS.



THE MANSION, GONE FOR A CENTURY, ONCE MORE REARED ITS STATELY HEIGHT TO THE RAPTURED VISION; EVERY WINDOW ABLAZE WITH THE SPLENDOUR OF MANY CANDLES.



WITH THIS THRONG I MINGLED, THOUGH I KNEW I BELONGED WITH THE HOSTS RATHER THAN WITH THE GUESTS.



INSIDE THE HALL WERE MUSIC, LAUGHTER, AND WINE ON EVERY HAND.



AMIDST A WILD AND RECKLESS THRONG I WAS THE WILDEST AND MOST ABANDONED.



SUDDENLY A PEAL OF THUNDER, RESONANT EVEN ABOVE THE DIN OF THE SWINISH REVELRY, CLAVE THE VERY ROOF AND LAID A HUSH OF FEAR UPON THE BOISTEROUS COMPANY.



RED TONGUES OF FLAME AND SEARING GUSTS OF HEAT ENGULFED THE HOUSE...



BURNT ALIVE TO ASHES, MY BODY DISPERSED BY THE FOUR WINDS, I MIGHT NEVER LIE IN THE TOMB OF THE HYDES! ... JERVAS HYDE SHOULD NEVER SHARE THE SAD FATE OF PALINURUS!



AYE! I WOULD CLAIM MY HERITAGE OF DEATH, EVEN THOUGH MY SOUL GO SEEKING THROUGH THE AGES FOR ANOTHER CORPOREAL TENEMENT...



AS THE PHANTOM OF THE BURNING HOUSE FADED, I FOUND MYSELF SCREAMING AND STRUGGLING MADLY IN THE ARMS OF TWO MEN...



MY FATHER, HIS FACE LINED WITH SORROW, STOOD BY AS I SHOUTED MY DEMANDS TO BE LAID WITHIN THE TOMB...



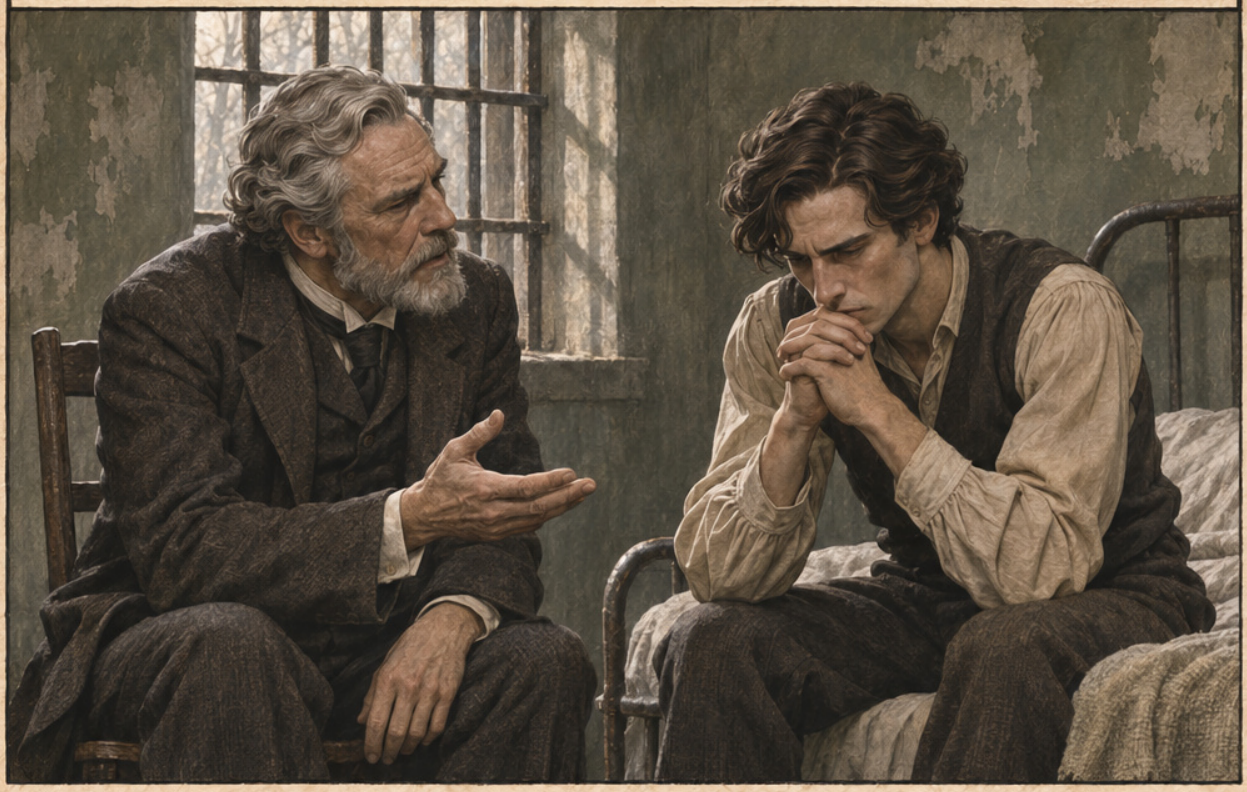
...A GROUP OF CURIOUS VILLAGERS WITH LANTERNS WERE PRYING A SMALL BOX OF ANTIQUE WORKMANSHIP WHICH THE THUNDERBOLT HAD BROUGHT TO LIGHT.



IT WAS THE PORCELAIN MINIATURE... AND BORE THE INITIALS "J. H." THE FACE WAS SUCH THAT AS I GAZED, I MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN STUDYING MY MIRROR.



MY FATHER... DECLARES THAT AT NO TIME DID I PASS THE CHAINED PORTAL, AND SWEARS THAT THE RUSTED PADLOCK HAD NOT BEEN TOUCHED FOR FIFTY YEARS WHEN HE EXAMINED IT.



AGAINST THESE ASSERTIONS I HAVE NO TANGIBLE PROOF TO OFFER, SINCE MY KEY TO THE PADLOCK WAS LOST IN THE STRUGGLE ON THAT NIGHT OF HORRORS.



HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR MY OLD SERVANT HIRAM, I SHOULD HAVE BY THIS TIME BECOME QUITE CONVINCED OF MY MADNESS.



A WEEK AGO HE BURST OPEN THE LOCK WHICH CHAINS THE DOOR OF THE TOMB PERPETUALLY AJAR, AND DESCENDED WITH A LANTERN INTO THE MURKY DEPTHS.



ON A SLAB IN AN ALCOVE HE FOUND AN OLD BUT EMPTY COFFIN WHOSE TARNISHED PLATE BEARS THE SINGLE WORD "JERVAS".



IN THAT COFFIN AND IN THAT VAULT THEY HAVE PROMISED ME I SHALL BE BURIED.

