

BRETT J. TALLEY

THAT
WHICH
SHOULD
NOT BE



That Which
Should Not
Be

By

Brett J. Talley

JournalStone

San Francisco

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*"We live on a placid island of ignorance in the black seas of infinity,
and it was not meant that we should voyage far."*

The Call of Cthulhu

Prologue

Mr. Charles,

Enclosed please find a document which I believe you will judge most intriguing. It was discovered among Mr. Weston's personal belongings sometime after his disappearance. In fact, it was the only document located in the wall safe in his office. The contents are most fascinating, and despite the order and coherence thereof, I fear they raise grave concerns regarding Mr. Weston's sanity in the last days of his life. In order to ensure that Mr. Weston's will is probated post haste, I would recommend destroying this document at once lest it fall into vicious hands. I recognize this course may seem rather dramatic, but I believe once you have reviewed what can only be described as the feverish imaginings of a broken mind, you will agree it is better for all involved, not the least Mr. Weston himself, that it never sees the light of day.

Always,

David Ashton
Lovecraft, Hartford & Shanks

Part I
Chapter
1

Carter Weston:

The day has come, that day I always knew would, and my time is short. But I must protect the Book. I will not surrender it, no matter what the cost. And if my life is to be forfeit, then I shall die as I have lived, standing against the black tide that would cover us all.

I suppose this could be called my final testament, for my family should know why I've spent the better part of my life in the dark corners of the world, why I have dedicated myself to the unspeakable horrors that lie beyond civilized man's imagining. I have hunted them from hell-blasted planes to yawning chasms that know no end, from the moonlit towers of fallen temples to demon-haunted ruins of unimaginable antiquity. But never defeating them. Nay, would that it were so. Merely holding them at bay, as best I could, postponing what may well be their inevitable conquest. No, one cannot kill what can forever lie in repose. Sleeping. Waiting. And I fear the time of their awakening is upon us.

I hope my family can forgive me. I hope they can understand why I have lived my life as I have. I hope this testament will give them that comfort. For it was not always to be so. I had never expected to live in the shadows. There was a time when my interests lay with quainter things.

Those were younger, brighter days. My father was a Harvard man, and in his mind, so was I. It broke his heart, I suppose, when I chose Miskatonic University of Arkham, Massachusetts, instead of that ivy-gabled institution. I think back often now on that choice and I wonder what paths my life might have roamed had I listened to him instead. Ah, but regret is a broken road that is better not taken. Still, how things could have been different.

I arrived with no more extravagant dreams than that of the life of an academician. And so I embarked upon a degree in history with a focus on the folklore of New England, a rich but narrow subject in which I intended to establish myself as the foremost expert. It was in this pursuit that I made the acquaintance of Henry Armitage.

Henry was a brilliant mind, and even as a young man he was keenly interested in the occult and the role it played in the tales and myths of the common man. He came to Miskatonic to understand the dark shadow of man's desires. The myths, I believed, at that time at least, leapt fully formed from primordial man, conjured merely to explain those things he did not understand. I was surprised to learn that Henry did not share this view. He believed there was more than a grain of truth embedded in those superstitions and ancient fears.

Perhaps in another environment the learned men of the University would have shattered such a faith, crushed it with the hammer of science. But not at Miskatonic. I heard the whispers, the rumors of the shadow that hung over the town of Arkham. Miskatonic was witch-haunted

ground, and there were those who spoke of nameless rites echoing through its darkened halls. I pushed such talk aside. I would brook no opposition to my chosen University. In honest moments, though, I could face the truth, or at least the image of it. I belonged at Miskatonic and not in a trivial, romantic way. It called to me, pulled me, and since before I knew its name, I longed to be there. In truth, I never felt at home until the day I arrived on its grounds.

But I digress now, and I must focus on the tale at hand. My time is short; I know that now. The stories I could tell would fill volumes, but the sands in the hourglass run thin, and I must ration my words.

It was Henry who suggested I study under Dr. Atley Thayerson. It surprised me at the time, but for reasons I couldn't quite describe. It was entirely appropriate I should take Dr. Thayerson's class on Folklore and the Occult. In fact, I suppose it would have been surprising to anyone familiar with my academic studies if I neglected to do so. Yet, there was something inside of me, buried deep, that recoiled at the thought. Not for any rational reason, none that I can articulate. I had steeled myself against the growing sense of inevitability involved. But somehow, Henry's simple suggestion of the thing defeated my apparently unimposing defenses.

Henry and I enrolled together, and it quickly became apparent to Thayerson that we were to be his star pupils. I devoured the class and, in doing so, felt the birth of an obsession — the occult was to become my passion. This will, of course, come as no surprise to those who know me; I have made the study of that subject my life's work. But at the time, it was a revelation.

In any event, I requested, and Dr. Thayerson eagerly granted, the opportunity to work more closely on the professor's many and varied studies. It was then that my eyes began to open to the dark forces that move in the uncultivated lands beyond the borders of the world we know. But this was just the beginning for me, and my studies were merely that — an academic exercise. I spent my weekends and every free moment traveling about the Massachusetts countryside, as far into the wild as the roads would take me. Sometimes farther. To ancient towns and villages peopled by simple folk to whom even Boston was a far away Xanadu of modern wonder. I listened to their stories, obscure tales of late night visitations, of strange creatures that walked beneath darkened moons, of sleeping evils that invade men's dreams. I dutifully recorded these tales, and I smiled inwardly at the horrified looks on the simple villager's faces as they relayed them. I believed myself wise, and in my skepticism my wisdom was confirmed. But I had no faith.

No, I found the occult fascinating in the way that folklore had always held my thoughts. The study of myth helped mankind to understand truth. It offered no such truth itself. And then came that day in late January of my second year at Miskatonic when everything changed.

Chapter

2

The air was as crisp that day as any other in January, but there was an unnatural chill in the wind that portended the coming of a storm. The iron gray clouds that crept across the sky hung low, as if full to bursting with winter snow. I was perusing Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World* in front of the lighted hearth in my room quite contentedly when there was a sharp knock on my door. It was Henry.

"Sorry to bother you, Carter. I met Dr. Thayerson today, and he seemed rather anxious to see you."

I remember placing a marker on my page. I did not return to that book for many years. I was confused. I had seen Thayerson only a day before, and he had seemed as relaxed and convivial as always. I could not imagine what could have provoked his anxiety to speak with me, yet again, so soon.

"Did he say if something was wrong?" I asked Henry as I slipped on my boots and heavy coat.

"He did not, just that I should find you and send you straightaway. He would say no more, and I admit I was concerned. I certainly hope nothing has happened."

I could see the anxiety in Henry's face. He did not, on that day, possess the iron temperament that time and bitter experience has gifted him with.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Armitage," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. "I fear Thayerson is getting a little senile in his old age. He probably just forgot I saw him only yesterday. Besides, what could have come about in a single day that is so important?"

I left Henry there. He did not seem convinced, but obviously there was no time to tend to his concerns. I made my way across Arkham Green to Putnam Hall. I found Dr. Thayerson pacing his office in what can only be described as a fevered state. Upon my arrival, though, his expression suddenly changed, as if he wished to present the impression to me that nothing of any terrible significance weighed on his mind.

"Ah, Mr. Weston. Do sit down."

As I took the seat opposite him, Thayerson stretched his arms out across his desk and clasped his hands. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Weston, I have a favor to ask of you, and in the interest of complete honesty, it is no minor one."

I listened intently as he spoke, and I had already decided that whatever he asked I would do.

"Are you familiar," he said sternly, "with a book known as the *Incendium Maleficarum*?"

"*The Witch's Fire*?" I responded with some surprise. "Well, yes, Professor, of course. It is a book of some legend, if I remember correctly. I never studied its history directly, but I was under the impression it was merely a legend. No such book ever really existed."

“Oh, it exists,” he said in the way men do when they speak of what they are sure. “I would also take issue with your translation. It is better to say it is the *Inferno of the Witch* or the *Flame of the Witch*.”

As Thayerson spoke, the only fire was the one in his eyes.

“It means passion, total subjugation of oneself to the dark arts, to turn over body and soul to their devices. It is the most ancient of all books of witchcraft, the grimoire of grimoires.”

“But, sir,” I said, drawing on my limited knowledge of the subject, “what of the *Necronomicon* then?”

I watched as the color drained from Thayerson’s face at the mention of that dread tome, inked in blood and bound in human flesh. In my youth and foolishness, it meant nothing to me to speak of it, though now I would no doubt react in the same way.

“The *Necronomicon*,” he whispered, though with great effort, “is altogether different. It is no common spell book, or even an uncommon one. Its purpose is . . . how to say it . . . otherworldly.” Thayerson now paused. “The *Incendium Maleficarum*, on the other hand, deals squarely with the forces ruling this world. The two books are dualistic, you see, and it is impossible to understand the one without the other. And when the two are brought together, the properly initiated is said to wield untold power over this world and beyond.”

I watched as Thayerson spoke, and as he wove his tale I noticed that his hands were shaking.

“Well sir,” I said calmly, “then I suppose it’s good this book, even if it did exist as you have said, has now been consigned to the pages of history.”

Thayerson leaned back in his chair and sighed. He looked at me with his deeply hooded eyes and said, “It appears a copy has been found.”

I sat forward quickly in my seat. Even though this was not my area of interest, a find such as this would be an invaluable artifact, a glimpse into an ancient religion both long dead in its real form and deeply distorted by error and myth in the form it exists today.

“Where?” I exclaimed more than asked.

“Very near here,” Thayerson said solemnly, “in a port town called Anchorhead.”

I was shocked at this revelation. I had heard of the place. Its central point was a hill overlooking the port. The village cemetery had been placed on that hill. Death was ever-present there. That the markers of death could be seen by everyone from every part of the town at all times only helped to reinforce the knowledge of how dangerous living by the fruit of the sea could be. Then, Thayerson provided yet another shock.

“Carter,” he said in an unexpected breach of formality, “I need you to retrieve that book. I need you to go to Anchorhead, acquire it by whatever means necessary, and return it here, to Miskatonic.”

For a moment we sat in silence as I remained dumbfounded by this request. It was the last thing I had expected.

“It cannot remain out in the open,” Thayerson continued. “We must keep it here in our library, safe from those who would use it to do evil.”

“But, sir,” I said, leaning forward, “if I may ask, if this book is of such importance, shouldn’t you be the one to retrieve it?”

Thayerson visibly shuddered.

“I fear,” he began, “that word of the book’s existence is known outside these four walls, and not all that seek it do so for noble purpose. But I suspect, strongly, they do not yet know its location.”

Now he paused, and I watched as certain calculations were conducted in his mind. Then, he made a decision.

“I believe, Mr. Weston, I’m being watched. It is expected by certain parties that I will make an effort to retrieve the book. It is, therefore, imperative that I not attempt it.”

“I see,” I said, though in truth I felt even more mystified than before.

“Do we know where the book is located in Anchorhead?”

Thayerson sighed, showing me the palms of his hands in a sign of helplessness.

“I do not. I know only it is said a copy of the book has come to that town. By what means, I’m unaware.”

I glanced skeptically at Thayerson. He saw the doubt in my eyes.

“I assure you this intelligence comes from a most reliable source,” he said. “I would not send you if I doubted it. I know this is a difficult charge, Mr. Weston. But in truth you are the only one I trust. Not even Armitage. His heart is too close to the dark arts. You, and you alone, must go to Anchorhead and seek out the book. I would ask you to be discreet, to use the natural charm with which you have been gifted to your advantage. Spare no expense, and stay as long as it takes. I will deal with your affairs here. Good luck, Carter,” he said, rising and extending his hand. “I’ve already purchased you a ticket on a north-bound train. It leaves Arkham Station in a little over an hour.”

I took his hand and shook it firmly. He handed me a ticket, and I turned hurriedly to leave. As I did, Dr. Thayerson issued a final warning.

“Carter,” he said, “be careful. There is much in this world far beyond your present imagining. And not all of it is harmless.”

I simply nodded my understanding from the doorway and turned to go.

Chapter

3

As I stepped out onto the Green, a fierce north wind met me. With it came a smattering of snow flurries, harbingers of more to come I had no doubt. I returned to my room to find Henry waiting. He rose quickly to meet me upon my entrance.

“Well, what did the old man say?”

I gave him a wary look as I unwound the scarf hanging tightly to my throat. I had never lied to Henry before, but it appeared now was the time for firsts.

“He needs me to collect something for him,” I said vaguely. Henry was my closest companion, and I trusted him completely, no matter what Thayerson said. But on the off chance Thayerson’s paranoia proved to possess a grain of truth, I thought the less Henry knew or suspected, the better for his sake, as well as mine.

I packed quickly and light. I could not know how long I would be away. I assumed it would take some time to locate those individuals most familiar with the object in question. But as I knew little of what I was about to begin, I thought it best to avoid burdening myself with too much baggage. As I walked to Arkham Station, I barely noticed the strengthening north wind or the snowflakes falling in greater and greater quantity.

I needed a story, a cover for my intentions. As I took my seat in the railway car, I realized the difficulty of my position. I was no detective, and nothing in my academic career had prepared me to imitate that profession. It struck me that the people of Anchorhead were perhaps, and even likely, unaware of the significance of what they possessed. In that event, it might be as simple as finding the local librarian and inquiring as to artifacts of interest.

Of course, that begged yet more questions. Was the book in the possession of an individual? Was it held by the town in some collective capacity? If Thayerson was aware of its existence, would there be others on the trail, seeking it out, as well? If so, was I in danger? The last question fell upon me with a particular violence; it was the first time I had considered the possibility this exercise could end badly for me. I didn’t think on it long, however, as the sudden jerk of the train’s hesitant first steps out of the station jolted me from my thoughts.

For the moment, I allowed myself to forget the challenges ahead as I gazed out of the car window. I could see very little. The snow was now falling in torrents, and I realized this was no ordinary storm. It had all the markings of a nor’easter. Now, I was traveling to a town with which I was practically unfamiliar, with night having already fallen, in the midst of a coming blizzard. It was as if dark forces were conspiring to defeat me already.

My mind drifted, and I found myself thinking back to the earliest days at Miskatonic to one of the nights that defined my relationship with Henry. Henry would occasionally host parties to which he would invite those fellow students with whom we were particularly close. He was always a charming fellow, and I often noted people were drawn to him like metal flakes to a magnet. But in him also was an eccentricity, a fire that burned for those un-nameable creatures from beyond. And I knew that many of our so-called friends appeared only in the hopes that

Henry would broach his favorite topic. His eyes would sparkle with a peculiar flame. One ever knew what tales he might conjure.

So it was that night. After much wine flowed and the conversation meandered from professors to classes to the young ladies of Hampstead that lies across the Miskatonic River, Henry spread his arms wide on the table, and I saw that particular light come into his eyes.

“Did anyone read the *Times* today?”

I glanced at the five men seated around the table. I saw in their faces the answer was no. I could not help but smile. I had read the *Times*, and I had no doubt of what Henry would speak.

“Then, I suppose,” he continued, “that you did not see the story regarding Dr. Charles Ashcroft?”

“I did not read the story,” said an unremarkable boy whose name has long since escaped me, “but all of New England knows he has gone mad.”

“Yes, yes,” Henry said, waving him off, “but let us not get ahead of ourselves. That Ashcroft is mad is beyond doubt, but does one not wonder how a man such as he could lose his mind?”

“Why don't you tell us, Henry,” I said.

“Oh, I shall, my good Carter, if only you will stop interrupting me.”

The other men at the table laughed, and Henry smiled wickedly at me. I could not help but grin.

“Four months ago,” Henry began, “Dr. Ashcroft left Boston, as I am sure you no doubt saw in the papers, on a scientific expedition for the ages.”

Henry removed a pipe from his jacket pocket and struck a match. We all watched as he lit the tobacco within, waiting patiently for him to continue.

“He arrived,” he said, extinguishing the match with a flick of his wrist, “on the northern shore of the continent of Antarctica with forty men, as many dogs, and a month's worth of supplies and provisions.”

He then glanced up, looking at each man, starting with the one nearest him and moving down the table, as if to make sure we understood. He knew we were all well aware of Dr. Ashcroft's fate.

“Three months later,” he continued, “a British whaling ship came upon a man on the far western shore of the continent. The sailors on board described him as a wild savage. Alone. Starving. And no doubt completely mad. We were all horrified, of course, to learn this man was none other than Dr. Ashcroft himself.”

Henry paused and sipped his wine. The others looked around the table. They were anxious to hear the rest. Word of Ashcroft's fate had reached Arkham, but not the details. Henry appeared to have them, and their curiosity was irrepressible.

“The British,” he continued, “passed Ashcroft off to an American clipper ship rounding the Horn from San Francisco en route to Boston. The ship's doctor attempted, as best he could, to learn what had befallen Ashcroft and his men. To learn the fate of the thirty-nine who had set out across that ice-locked desert. But whatever ailed Ashcroft was beyond his feeble talents, and

the words that streamed from his gibbering lips were as ineffable as the shroud of horror that hung like a mask upon his face.”

“Tell me Henry,” I said, interrupting, “how is it that you know of all this? I have followed the news of Ashcroft’s disappearance and rescue and learned no more than the barest details. Yet, you seem to know it all.”

“Yes, Henry,” said one of the others, “is this just one of your stories? An imagined tale for our amusement?”

Henry looked up at me as he held his pipe between his teeth and smiled.

“My dear Carter,” he said between puffs of smoke, “patience is indeed a virtue you lack. But if you will allow me a moment, I will explain. This is no idle talk, and if you open your mind you may yet learn much about the ageless and ancient worlds that predate our own.”

I merely nodded, and he continued.

“I know of what I speak, my good friends, because Dr. Ashcroft was moved from Boston to the Arkham Asylum two weeks ago. He lies not three miles from where we now sit. The learned men of Boston could make nothing of his ravings, but those doctors of Arkham, bred and trained at fairest Miskatonic, their minds are not closed to the sprawling mysteries that engulf us. From Dr. Ashcroft’s seemingly mad ramblings, they drew forth a story, one which I will now relay.

“Dr. Ashcroft and his men set forth across the wasteland of the Antarctic with more than sufficient supplies to reach their goal, the southern pole. They would attempt a more southerly route than the expeditions before them, bypassing the Dome Argus where so many men have lost their lives. It was in that uncharted, cold waste that Dr. Ashcroft met his destiny. He should have known, he said, to turn back when he and his men came upon a mountain range where no mountains should be. He should have seen that something had gone horribly wrong. That the expedition had stepped into a world that presented impossibilities that ours does not hold. But when he viewed those peaks whose crest would look down upon the mountains of the Kathmandu, he saw nothing but an obstacle to be conquered. So he began his ascent, and his men began to die.”

Henry paused then, for his pipe had extinguished. He struck a match, and as it flared, the light illuminated the room which had gone dark, casting for a brief moment furtive shadows that seemed to be watching us before darting back into the darkness.

“Every day they would climb, and each night they would make camp on the slopes of those fearful mountains. And then the light of the pallid sun would peak over the Antarctic horizon to show a camp of fewer men than when it had left them the night before. Some would simply disappear, perhaps stumbling off to their death in the cold waste, driven mad by the chill that could be beaten back but never defeated. Strange, then, that they left no footprints to mark their passing. Unusual that their tents were in perfect order.

“But not all the tragedy that befell Ashcroft’s men was unexplained. Any attempting such an ascent would face mortal dangers. And on an uncharted slope those dangers were compounded by the unknown. How many fell into a yawning abyss, crevices that would appear

and then seal themselves in seconds, entombing the screaming man below in eternal silence? Only Ashcroft knows, I suppose. But what we know is this — within a week, Ashcroft was left alone with whatever infernal powers had sought and procured his men's undoing and left him behind. As if they wanted him to seek. As if they wanted him to find.

“There could be no turning back. Ashcroft was high upon the mountainside and far from the eastern sea. He pressed on, though he couldn't have done so with much hope. It was then that he came upon a cavern carved into the side of the mountain. He plunged into the Stygian blackness within, feeling his way as best he could. Stumbling often, he rose to his feet only because of the command he heard within his own mind to continue. So powerful it was that even though he wished death to come, he would not simply fall to the ground and let it take him. Then, a vision seemed to creep into his mind. One of light, just beyond his reach. He made his way towards it, sometimes on his feet, sometimes crawling on his hands and knees. It was no vision, but his salvation. An opening. He rushed towards it, but when he reached the precipice, he saw the thing that drove him mad.”

At that moment Henry fell silent, placing his once again extinguished pipe upon the table. My fellows sat leaning forward in their chairs, anxious to hear what maddening vistas opened up before Ashcroft. Only I remained relaxed, grinning smugly at Henry as he weaved what I assumed was an entirely manufactured tale. But then he continued.

“Who can describe properly what Ashcroft saw in the gray half-light in that valley? He could not. Not truly. Nor could his brain properly process it, as the very sight shattered his mind forever. What did he see? A citadel, nay, a city of unimaginable proportions and expanse, stretching forth in that hellish valley between the mountains. Cyclopean stone blocks of a hew and craftsmanship he could not know, cut from the earth eons before the Great Pharaoh raised his eyes to the plain of Giza and found it worthy of grandeur. Ruined towers and walled fortresses, dwellings of such size and dimension one might wonder if the mountains themselves did not call them home. All locked beneath solid sheets of ice. But it was not that which broke his mind. No, it was the thing that lurked in the titanic abyss, the infernal pit that lay in the center of that most ancient city. The thing that called to him in a voice that was not of man. The thing that, as he stood frozen in place from terror and wonder combined, began to rise.”

Once again Henry stopped. He sat quietly in his chair, as if he had relayed nothing more than a somewhat interesting anecdote from class.

“And?” I finally asked. Henry raised an open palm as if in apology.

“And, that is all,” he said. “Ashcroft remembers nothing from that moment until his arrival in Arkham. Whatever followed was too horrible, too monstrous for the mind, even one as strong as his. What he saw there . . . well, I pray to God we never know.”

I looked around at my compatriots, and I saw true fear in their ashen faces. I smiled and said, “Bravo, Henry, you have truly outdone yourself this time.”

“I'm not surprised, Carter, that you would disbelieve Ashcroft's report. Disappointed perhaps, but not surprised.”

“Henry, please. It makes for a fantastic story and, from the looks on our friends’ faces here, one that no doubt has a great power to instill fear.” I saw the other men look down and blush. Fear was not an emotion to be lightly shown. “But what is more likely? That Dr. Ashcroft stumbled upon some Atlantis of antiquity only to witness a scene that drove him mad? Or that the expedition ran into great difficulty and when he was found, Ashcroft, half-starved and probably fully frozen, imagined a vast host of impossible visions?”

“Ah, but if that were true,” Henry said, gesturing to me with his pipe, “wouldn’t we expect that some of his men would have survived, as well? His dogs? His supplies? But it was only him. A man of some, though not exceeding, age, who managed to survive while all else perished?”

“Well, if you expect to bring logic into the discussion, how would that same man have made the trek from southern Antarctica to its western shore and survived? Surely such a thing is impossible.”

“And thus you have hit upon the most compelling evidence for Ashcroft's story. It is impossible, whether his men fell by natural causes or were hunted down by some fell beast. Ashcroft should be dead. Yet, he is not. Something must have saved him.”

“So, the very force you believe killed Ashcroft's men and stole his sanity delivered him safe and sound to be rescued? Why? For what purpose?”

“No purpose but its own, I assure you. Why did it bring him to that dead city? Why did it lead him to the steps of an ancient necropolis, only to deliver him from its clutches? I cannot say. All I know is that it did, and that is enough for me.”

At that point I simply sat back in my chair. There was nothing more to be said. Soon our friends had departed, and I was left alone with Henry.

“That was quite a story you told tonight,” I said. “Do you believe a word of it?”

Henry laughed as he poured two glasses of brandy.

“Some of it. Do I believe that Ashcroft saw something fantastic? Certainly. Is every word he spoke the truth? Unlikely. That is where we differ, Carter.”

“Where? That I do not give credence to insanity?”

“No,” he said, “that you do not recognize that in all things there is at least a grain of truth. And that makes Ashcroft's story truly remarkable.”

“You are from another age, Henry. Another age altogether.”

“Yes, that may be true,” he said, handing me my glass. “But the ancients knew certain things, Carter. Yes, I see what you are thinking. They were superstitious. Fearful. Hateful and destructive at times. But they knew man is not meant to understand all things. They knew man is not capable of understanding all things. And there is wisdom there, wisdom that we would do well to heed.”

In truth, I did see much wisdom in his words. But I simply could not believe. I was, and remain, a man of faith. But that faith was the limit of my belief in the supernatural. I was, as Thomas of old, condemned not to believe, lest I see. Alas, a time would come when mine eyes would see and mourn because of it.

Why did that story come to mind in those lonely moments on the north bound train from Arkham? Why did it leap to my mind, unbidden and uncalled? Fate's foreshadowing perhaps, as fate's hand was constantly upon me that night. Fate, or perhaps the power of the Book.

The train chugged north, through the darkened countryside, over the Miskatonic River and into the river valley itself. It passed sturdy rock walls and ancient gabled barns; thick, untouched forests and domed hills. Then the dark, churning wilderness gave way to what looked in the shadow to be an endless flat plane — we had reached the sea. The combination of the black night and thick snow made it impossible to see the tempest no doubt rocking its surface. I saw the lighthouse of Anchorhead before the dimly lit houses came in view. Its powerful beam swept across land and sea like a single, great eye casting its gaze upon all within its sight.

The train jerked and spasmed as it pulled slowly into Anchorhead station, a desolate edifice consisting of no more than a platform and a darkened shack. I was the only person to alight from the train, and there was, to my eye, no living soul in the vicinity. This might have bothered me at another time, but the north winds were now roaring fiercely from the sea with such violence that none with a sound mind would have ventured into their midst. There were, of course, no stagecoaches to be had either, and so I began what I hoped was a short walk to the nearest inn.

I found it not fifty feet from the station. I entered quickly, pressing the door forcefully closed against the now raging wind outside. I turned to see an elderly woman glaring at me from behind a solid oak desk.

"Good evening," I lied.

"You need a room, I suspect?" she snarled.

I told her that I did, and she begrudgingly obliged me. I paid her for two nights with the promise I would likely stay for more. She spoke little, using the minimum amount of words necessary to show me the location of my room and its arrangements. I realized as I placed my bag upon a bedside table that I was quite famished. I hesitated to venture back into the howling maelstrom rocking the panes of my windows, but it was evident that either I must or go to bed hungry. The innkeeper brusquely indicated there was a tavern only a short walk away, a quaint place located on the shores of the sea. I took her up on this suggestion and stepped out once again into the swirling darkness.

I was immediately buffeted by the wind. I would call it a gale, but it was too constant in its fierceness for that appellation. As I turned down the road, it seemed as though the direction of the storm shifted. It was now blowing in my face, every fleck of snow stinging like the sharp prick of so many needles. The road curved sharply right and after passing between two rows of wooden and brick houses, the pungent aroma of the ocean surrounded me. Even with the blinding snow and darkened skies, some unknown glow illuminated the oily sea as it roiled and undulated under the ever gathering barrage.

The tavern sat on a ledge at the ocean's edge. The sign hung lower on one corner than the other, and its violent swinging on the metal chain holding it indicated it was not long for this world. I could barely make out the name etched into the ancient wood: The Kracken. I took a moment, despite the howling gale buffeting me, to smile.

I pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside, letting it slam behind me. The room was lit by oil lamps hung haphazardly from the ceiling. The gust of wind pursuing me had rocked them to and fro, and now their pale light cast grotesque shadows that seemed to gibber and dance on the tavern walls.

I looked around the room. It was built like the bow of a ship, the center portion lower than its sides. There were several denizens, regulars of this establishment I would have wagered, spread here and there about the place. But it was a particular table, the only one in the center depression that was occupied, that stood out to me the most.

At it sat four men, incongruous for their diversity of dress and the mien with which they held themselves. They sat quietly, each man seemingly more interested in his ale than those around him. One was an ancient man, dressed in a thick, but grizzled, fur coat and an unkempt beard obscuring his face. His warm dress was the most appropriate for the evening. Next to him was a man who had the look of a scholar or professional, as if perhaps he were the town magistrate. There was yet another man, who while attired in a similar manner to the previous fellow, I took immediately for a doctor of some sort. And finally, another bearded gentleman, though he was more thoughtfully trimmed and kept. He wore a dark blue coat and pants with black boots. And he was the only one staring directly at me. There was a light in his eye, not of welcome, but of knowledge and recognition.

I walked down the three steps into the central depression and past the table. The three men never looked up; the fourth never looked away. I stepped up three more steps and found myself at the bar. The man behind it, a heavysset older gentlemen who, in his day, would probably have been considered a ruffian, stared at me without word or welcome, and so I felt compelled to lead the conversation.

“Excuse me, good man. I wondered if you might have some food available.”

“Fish stew’s all we got,” he said with a deep New England accent. “But I reckon a fella’ from Boston-way would frown on that.”

“Why, certainly not,” I said, trying to save a first impression. “A bowl of soup and some bread, please. And a pint to wash it down.”

For a moment he only glared. But then eventually he turned and walked to a large pot sitting over a fire, raging hot and wild, in the hearth. As I waited uncomfortably for him to return, I felt a hand on my shoulder.