

H. P. Lovecraft

Medusa's Coil



Howard Phillips Lovecraft

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Some of H. P. Lovecraft's most fascinating work came from a time in his life that he was forced, by economic survival, to ghostwrite, collaborate and revise the work of others in the field.

Содержание

Medusa's Coil	5
I	5
II	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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by H. P. Lovecraft

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I

It was a lonely and deserted country, but at last I spied a roof among a clump of trees near the small river on my right; perhaps a full half-mile from the road, and probably reachable by some path or drive which I would presently come upon. In the absence of any nearer dwelling, I resolved to try my luck there; and was glad when the bushes by the roadside revealed the ruin of a carved stone gateway, covered with dry, dead vines and choked with undergrowth which explained why I had not been able to trace the path across the fields in my first distant view. I saw that I could not drive the car in, so I parked it very carefully near the gate – where a thick evergreen would shield it in case of rain – and got out for the long walk to the house.

Traversing that brush-grown path in the gathering twilight I was conscious of a distinct sense of foreboding, probably induced by the air of sinister decay hovering about the gate and the former driveway. From the carvings on the old stone pillars I inferred that this place was once an estate of manorial dignity; and I could clearly see that the driveway had originally boasted guardian lines of linden trees, some of which had died, while others had lost their special identity among the wild scrub growths of the region.

As I ploughed onward, cockleburrs and stickers clung to my clothes, and I began to wonder whether the place could be inhabited after all. Was I tramping on a vain errand? For a moment I was tempted to go back and try some farm farther along the road, when a view of the house ahead aroused my curiosity and stimulated my venturesome spirit.

There was something provocatively fascinating in the tree-girt, decrepit pile before me, for it spoke of the graces and spaciousness of a bygone era and a far more southerly environment. It was a typical wooden plantation house of the classic, early nineteenth-century pattern, with two and a half stories and a great Ionic portico whose pillars reached up as far as the attic and supported a triangular pediment. Its state of decay was extreme and obvious; one of the vast columns having rotted and fallen to the ground, while the upper piazza or balcony had sagged dangerously low. Other buildings, I judged, had formerly stood near it.

As I mounted the broad stone steps to the low porch and the carved and fanlighted doorway I felt distinctly nervous, and started to light a cigarette – desisting when I saw how dry and inflammable everything about me was. Though now convinced that the house was deserted, I nevertheless hesitated to violate its dignity without knocking; so tugged at the rusty iron knocker until I could get it to move, and finally set up a cautious rapping which seemed to make the whole place shake and rattle. There was no response, yet once more I plied the cumbrous, creaking device – as much to dispel the sense of unholy silence and solitude as to arouse any possible occupant of the ruin.

Somewhere near the river I heard the mournful note of a dove, and it seemed as if the coursing water itself were faintly audible. Half in a dream, I seized and rattled the ancient latch, and finally gave the great six-panelled door a frank trying. It was unlocked, as I could see in a moment; and though it stuck and grated on its hinges I began to push it open, stepping through it into a vast shadowy hall as I did so.

But the moment I took this step I regretted it. It was not that a legion of specters confronted me in that dim and dusty hall with the ghostly Empire furniture; but that I knew all at once that the

place was not deserted at all. There was a creaking on the great curved staircase, and the sound of faltering footsteps slowly descending. Then I saw a tall, bent figure silhouetted for an instant against the great Palladian window on the landing.

My first start of terror was soon over, and as the figure descended the final flight I was ready to greet the householder whose privacy I had invaded. In the semi-darkness I could see him reach in his pocket for a match. There came a flare as he lighted a small kerosene lamp which stood on a rickety console table near the foot of the stairs. In the feeble glow was revealed the stooping figure of a very tall, emaciated old man; disordered as to dress and unshaved as to face, yet for all that with the bearing and expression of a gentleman.

I did not wait for him to speak, but at once began to explain my presence.

“You’ll pardon my coming in like this, but when my knocking didn’t raise anybody I concluded that no one lived here. What I wanted originally was to know the right road to Cape Girardeau – the shortest road, that is. I wanted to get there before dark, but now, of course—“

As I paused, the man spoke; in exactly the cultivated tone I had expected, and with a mellow accent as unmistakably Southern as the house he inhabited.

“Rather, you must pardon me for not answering your knock more promptly. I live in a very retired way, and am not usually expecting visitors. At first I thought you were a mere curiosity-seeker. Then when you knocked again I started to answer, but I am not well and have to move very slowly. Spinal neuritis – very troublesome case.

“But as for your getting to town before dark – it’s plain you can’t do that. The road you are on – for I suppose you came from the gate – isn’t the best or shortest way. What you must do is to take your first left after you leave the gate – that is, the first real road to your left. There are three or four cart paths you can ignore, but you can’t mistake the real road because of the extra large willow tree on the right just opposite it. Then when you’ve turned, keep on past two roads and turn to the right along the third. After that—“

“Please wait a moment! How can I follow all these clues in pitch darkness, without ever having been near here before, and with only an indifferent pair of headlights to tell me what is and what isn’t a road? Besides, I think it’s going to storm pretty soon, and my car is an open one. It looks as if I were in a bad fix if I want to get to Cape Girardeau tonight. The fact is, I don’t think I’d better try to make it. I don’t like to impose burdens, or anything like that – but in view of the circumstances, do you suppose you could put me up for the night? I won’t be any trouble – no meals or anything. Just let me have a corner to sleep in till daylight, and I’m all right. I can leave the car in the road where it is – a bit of wet weather won’t hurt it if worst comes to worst.”

As I made my sudden request I could see the old man’s face lose its former expression of quiet resignation and take on an odd, surprised look.

“Sleep – here?”

He seemed so astonished at my request that I repeated it.

“Yes, why not? I assure you I won’t be any trouble. What else can I do? I’m a stranger hereabouts, these roads are a labyrinth in the dark, and I’ll wager it’ll be raining torrents outside of an hour—“

This time it my host’s turn to interrupt, and as he did so I could feel a peculiar quality in his deep, musical voice.

“A stranger – of course you must be, else you wouldn’t think of sleeping here, wouldn’t think of coming here at all. People don’t come here nowadays.”

He paused, and my desire to stay was increased a thousandfold by the sense of mystery his laconic words seemed to evoke. There was surely something alluringly queer about this place, and the pervasive musty smell seemed to cloak a thousand secrets. Again I noticed the extreme decrepitude of everything about me; manifest even in the feeble rays of the single small lamp. I felt woefully

chilly, and saw with regret that no heating was provided, and yet so great was my curiosity that I still wished most ardently to stay and learn something of the recluse and his dismal abode.

“Let that be as it may,” I replied. “I can’t help about other people. But I surely would like to have a spot to stop till daylight. Still – if people don’t relish this place, mayn’t it be because it’s getting so run-down? Of course I suppose it would a take a fortune to keep such an estate up, but if the burden’s too great why don’t you look for smaller quarters? Why try to stick it out here in this way – with all the hardships and discomforts?”

The man did not seem offended, but answered me very gravely.

“Surely you may stay if you really wish to – you can come to no harm that I know of. But others claim there are certain peculiarly undesirable influences here. As for me – I stay here because I have to. There is something I feel it a duty to guard – something that holds me. I wish I had the money and health and ambition to take decent care of the house and grounds.”

With my curiosity still more heightened, I prepared to take my host at his word; and followed him slowly upstairs when he motioned me to do so. It was very dark now, and a faint pattering outside told me that the threatened rain had come. I would have been glad of any shelter, but this was doubly welcome because of the hints of mystery about the place and its master. For an incurable lover of the grotesque, no more fitting haven could have been provided.

II

There was a second-floor corner room in less unkempt shape than the rest of the house, and into this my host led me, setting down his small lamp and lighting a somewhat larger one. From the cleanliness and contents of the room, and from the books ranged along the walls, I could see that I had not guessed amiss in thinking the man a gentleman of taste and of breeding. He was a hermit and eccentric, no doubt, but he still had standards and intellectual interests. As he waved me to a seat I began a conversation on general topics, and was pleased to find him not at all taciturn. If anything, he seemed glad of someone to talk to, and did not even attempt to swerve the discussion from personal topics.

He was, I learned, one Antoine de Russy, of an ancient, powerful, and cultivated line of Louisiana planters. More than a century ago his grandfather, a younger son, had migrated to southern Missouri and founded a new estate in the lavish ancestral manner; building this pillared mansion and surrounding it with all the accessories of a great plantation. There had been, at one time, as many as 200 negroes in the cabins which stood on the flat ground in the rear – ground that the river had now invaded – and to hear them singing and laughing and playing the banjo at night was to know the fullest charm of a civilization and social order now sadly extinct. In front of the house, where the great guardian oaks and willows stood, there had been a lawn like a broad green carpet, always watered and trimmed and with flagstoned, flower-bordered walks curving through it. “Riverside”—for such the place was called – had been a lovely and idyllic homestead in its day; and my host could recall it when many traces of its best period remained.

It was raining hard now, with dense sheets of water beating against the insecure roof, walls, and windows, and sending in drops through a thousand chinks and crevices. Moisture trickled down to the floor from unsuspected places, and the mounting wind rattled the rotting, loose-hinged shutters outside. But I minded none of this, for I saw that a story was coming. Incited to reminiscence, my host made a move to shew me to sleeping-quarters; but kept on recalling the older, better days. Soon, I saw, I would receive an inkling of why he lived alone in that ancient place, and why his neighbours thought it full of undesirable influences. His voice was very musical as he spoke on, and his tale soon took a turn which left me no chance to grow drowsy.

“Yes – Riverside was built in 1816, and my father was born in 1828. He’d be over a century old now if he were alive, but he died young – so young I can just barely remember him. In ‘64 that was – he was killed in the war, Seventh Louisiana Infantry C.S.A., for he went back to the old home to enlist. My grandfather was too old to fight, yet he lived on to be ninety-five, and helped my mother bring me up. A good bringing-up, too – I’ll give them credit. We always had strong traditions – high notions of honor – and my grandfather saw to it that I grew up the way de Russys have grown up, generation after generation, ever since the Crusades. We weren’t quite wiped out financially, but managed to get on very comfortable after the war. I went to a good school in Louisiana, and later to Princeton. Later on I was able to get the plantation on a fairly profitable basis – though you see what it’s come to now.

“My mother died when I was twenty, and my grandfather two years later. It was rather lonely after that; and in ‘85 I married a distant cousin in New Orleans. Things might have been different if she’d lived, but she died when my son Denis was born. Then I had only Denis. I didn’t try marriage again, but gave all my time to the boy. He was like me – like all the de Russys – darkish and tall and thin, and with the devil of a temper. I gave him the same training my grandfather had give me, but he didn’t need much training when it came to points of honor. It was in him, I reckon. Never saw such high spirit – all I could do to keep him from running away to the Spanish War when he was eleven! Romantic young devil, too – full of high notions – you’d call ‘em Victorian, now – no trouble at all to make him let the nigger wenches alone. I sent him to the same school I’d gone to, and to Princeton, too. He was Class of 1909.

“In the end he decided to be a doctor, and went a year to the Harvard Medical School. Then he hit on the idea of keeping to the old French tradition of the family, and argued me into sending him across to the Sorbonne. I did – and proudly enough, though I knew how lonely I’d be with him so far off. Would to God I hadn’t! I thought he was the safest kind of boy to be in Paris. He had a room in the Rue St. Jacques – that’s near the University in the ‘Latin Quarter’—but according to his letters and his friends he didn’t cut up with the gayer dogs at all. The people he knew were mostly young fellows from home – serious students and artists who thought more of their work than of striking attitudes and painting the town red.

“But of course there were lots of fellows who were on a sort of dividing line between serious studies and the devil. The aesthetes – the decadents, you know. Experiments in life and sensation – the Baudelaire kind of a chap. Naturally Denis ran up against a good many of these, and saw a good deal of their life. They had all sorts of crazy circles and cults – imitation devil-worship, fake Black Masses, and the like. Doubt if it did them much harm on the whole – probably most of ‘em forgot all about it in a year or two. One of the deepest in this queer stuff was a fellow Denis had known at school – for that matter, whose father I’d known myself. Frank Marsh, of New Orleans. Disciple of Lafcadio Hearn and Gauguin and Van Gogh – regular epitome of the yellow ‘nineties. Poor devil – he had the makings of a great artist, at that.

“Marsh was the oldest friend Denis had in Paris, so as a matter of course they saw a good deal of each other – to talk over old times at St. Clair academy, and all that. The boy wrote me a good deal about him, and I didn’t see any especial harm when he spoke of the group of mystics Marsh ran with. It seems there was some cult of prehistoric Egyptian and Carthaginian magic having a rage among the Bohemian element on the left bank – some nonsensical thing that pretended to reach back to forgotten sources of hidden truth in lost African civilisations – the great Zimbabwe, the dead Atlantean cities in the Haggar region of the Sahara – and they had a lot of gibberish concerned with snakes and human hair. At least, I called it gibberish, then. Denis used to quote Marsh as saying odd things about the veiled facts behind the legend of Medusa’s snaky locks – and behind the later Ptolemaic myth of Berenice, who offered up her hair to save her husband-brother, and had it set in the sky as the constellation Coma Berenices.

“I don’t think this business made much impression on Denis until the night of the queer ritual at Marsh’s rooms when he met the priestess. Most of the devotees of the cult were young fellows, but the head of it was a young woman who called herself ‘Tanit-Isis’—letting it be known that her real name – her name in this latest incarnation, as she put it – was Marceline Bedard. She claimed to be the left-handed daughter of Marquis de Chameaux, and seemed to have been both a petty artist and an artist’s model before adopting this more lucrative magical game. Someone said she had lived for a time in the West Indies – Martinique, I think – but she was very reticent about herself. Part of her pose was a great show of austerity and holiness, but I don’t think the more experienced students took that very seriously.

“Denis, though, was far from experienced, and wrote me fully ten pages of slush about the goddess he had discovered. If I’d only realised his simplicity I might have done something, but I never thought a puppy infatuation like could mean much. I felt absurdly sure that Denis’ touchy personal honour and family pride would always keep him out of the most serious complications.

“As time went, though, his letters began to make me nervous. He mentioned this Marceline more and more, and his friends less and less, and began talking about the ‘cruel and silly way’ they declined to introduce her to their mothers and sisters. He seems to have asked her no questions about herself, and I don’t doubt but that she filled him full of romantic legendry concerning her origin and divine revelations and the way people slighted her. At length I could see that Denis was altogether cutting his own crowd and spending the bulk of his time with his alluring priestess. At her especial request he never told the old crowd of their continual meetings; so nobody over there tried to break the affair up.

“I suppose she thought he was fabulously rich; for he had the air of a patrician, and people of a certain class think all aristocratic Americans are wealthy. In any case, she probably thought this a rare chance to contract a genuine right-handed alliance with a really eligible young man. By the time my nervousness burst into open advice, it was too late. The boy had lawfully married her, and wrote that he was dropping his studies and bringing the woman home to Riverside. He said she had made a great sacrifice and resigned her leadership of the magical cult, and that henceforward she would be merely a private gentlewoman – the future mistress of Riverside, and mother of de Russys to come.

“Well, sir, I took it the best way I could. I knew that sophisticated Continentals have different standards from our old American ones – and anyway, I really knew nothing against the woman. A charlatan, perhaps, but why necessarily any worse? I suppose I tried to keep as naïve as possible about such things in those days, for the boy’s sake. Clearly, there was nothing for a man of sense to do but let Denis alone so long as his new wife conformed to de Russey ways. Let her have a chance to prove herself – perhaps she wouldn’t hurt the family as much as some might fear. So I didn’t raise any objections or ask any penitence. The thing was done, and I stood ready to welcome the boy back, whatever he brought with him.

“They got here three weeks after the telegram telling of marriage. Marceline was beautiful – there was no denying that – and I could see how the boy might very well get foolish about her. She did have an air of breeding, and I think to this day she must have had some strains of good blood in her. She was apparently not much over twenty; of medium size, fairly slim, and as graceful as a tigress in posture and motion. Her complexion was a deep olive – like old ivory – and her eyes were large and very dark. She had small, classically regular features – though not quite clean-cut enough to suit my taste – and the most singular braid of jet black hair that I ever saw.

“I didn’t wonder that she had dragged the subject of hair into her magical cult, for with that heavy profusion of it the idea must have occurred to her naturally. Coiled up, it made her look like some Oriental princess in a drawing of Aubrey Beardsley’s. Hanging down her back, it came well below her knees and shone in the light as if it had possessed some separate, unholy vitality of its own. I would almost have thought of Medusa or Berenice myself – without having such things suggested to me – upon seeing and studying that hair.

“Sometimes I thought it moved slightly of itself, and tended to arrange itself in distinct ropes or strands, but this may have been sheer illusion. She braided it incessantly, and seemed to use some sort of preparation on it. I got the notion once – a curious, whimsical notion – that it was a living being which she had to feed in some strange way. All nonsense – but it added to my feeling of constraint about her and her hair.

“For I can’t deny that I failed to like her wholly, no matter how hard I tried. I couldn’t tell what the trouble was, but it was there. Something about her repelled me very subtly, and I could not help weaving morbid and macabre associations about everything connected with her. Her complexion called up thoughts of Babylon, Atlantis, Lemuria, and the terrible forgotten dominations of an elder world; her eyes struck me sometimes as the eyes of some unholy forest creature or animal goddess too immeasurably ancient to be fully human; and her hair – that dense, exotic, overnourished growth of oily inkiness – made one shiver as a great black python might have done. There was no doubt but that she realised my involuntary attitude – though I tried to hide it, and she tried to hide the fact that she noticed it.

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