

VAILA

M.P. Shiel

Gothic Digital Series @ UFSC



FREE FOR EDUCATION

VAILA

M.P. Shiel
(1896, *Shapes in the Fire*)

E caddi come l'uomo cui sonno piglia. – Dante.

A good many years ago, a young man, student in Paris, I was informally associated with the great Corot, and eye-witnessed by his side several of those cases of mind-malady, in the analysis of which he was a past master. I remember one little girl of the Marais, who, till the age of nine, in no way seemed to differ from her playmates. But one night, lying a-bed, she whispered into her mother's ear: "Maman, can you not hear the sound of the world?" It appears that her recently-begun study of geography had taught her that the earth flies, with an enormous velocity, on an orbit about the sun; and that sound of the world to which she referred was a faint (quite subjective) musical humming, like a shell-murmur, heard in the silence of night, and attributed by her fancy to the song of this high motion. Within six months the excess of lunacy possessed her.

I mentioned the incident to my friend, Haco Harfager, then occupying with me the solitude of an old place in S. Germain, shut in by a shrubbery and high wall from the street. He listened with singular interest, and for a day seemed wrapped in gloom.

Another case which I detailed produced a profound impression upon my friend. A young man, a toy-maker of S. Antoine, suffering from chronic congenital phthisis, attained in the ordinary way his twenty-fifth year. He was frugal, industrious, self-involved. On a winter's evening, returning to his lonely garret, he happened to purchase one of those vehemently factious sheets which circulate by night, like things of darkness, over the Boulevards. This simple act was the herald of his doom. He lay a-bed, and perused the feuille. He had never been a reader; knew little of the greater world, and the deep hum of its travail. But the next night he bought another leaf.

Gradually he acquired interest in politics, the large movements, the roar of life. And this interest grew absorbing. Till late into the night, and every night, he lay poring over the furious mendacity, the turbulent wind, the printed passion. He would awake tired, spitting blood, but intense in spirit – and straightway purchased a morning leaf. His being lent itself to a retrograde evolution. The more his teeth gnashed, the less they ate. He became sloven, irregular at work, turning on his bed through the day. Rags overtook him. As the greater interest, and the vaster tumult, possessed his frail soul, so every lesser interest, tumult, died to him. There came an early day when he no longer cared for his own life; and another day, when his maniac fingers rent the hairs from his head.

As to this man, the great Corot said to me:

"Really, one does not know whether to laugh or weep over such a business. Observe, for one thing, how diversely men are made! Their are minds precisely so

sensitive as a cupful of melted silver; every breath will roughen and darken them: and what of the simoon, tornado? And that is not a metaphor hut a simile. For such, this earth – I had almost said this universe – is clearly no fit habitation, but a Machine of Death, a baleful Vast. Too horrible to many is the running shriek of Being – they cannot bear the world. Let each look well to his own little whisk of life, say I, and leave the big fiery Automaton alone. Here in this poor toy-maker you have a case of the ear: it is only the neurosis, Oxyecoa. Splendid was that Greek myth of the Harpies: by them was this man snatched – or, say, caught by a limb in the wheels of the universe, and so perished. It is quite a grand exit, you know – translation in a chariot of flame. Only remember that the member first involved was the pinna: he bent ear to the howl of Europe, and ended by himself howling.

Can a straw ride composedly on the primeval whirlwinds? Between chaos and our shoes wobbles, I tell you, the thinnest film! I knew a man who had this peculiarity of aural hyperaesthesia: that every sound brought him minute information of the matter causing the sound; that is to say, he had an ear bearing to the normal ear the relation which the spectroscope bears to the telescope. A rod, for instance, of mixed copper and iron impinging, in his hearing, upon a rod of mixed tin and lead, conveyed to him not merely the proportion of each metal in each rod, but some strange knowledge of the essential meaning and spirit, as it were, of copper, of iron, of tin, and of lead. Of course, he went mad; but, beforehand, told me this singular thing: that precisely such a sense as his was, according to his certain intuition, employed by the Supreme Being in his permeation of space to apprehend the nature and movements of mind and matter. And he went on to add that Sin – what we call sin – is only the movement of matter or mind into such places, or in such a way, as to give offence or pain to this delicate diaplacis (so I must call it) of the Creator; so that the ‘Law’ of Revelation became, in his eyes, edicts promulgated by their Maker merely in self-protection from aural pain; and divine punishment for, say murder, nothing more than retaliation for unease caused to the divine aural consciousness by the matter in a particular dirk or bullet lodged, at a particular moment, in a non-intended place! Him, too, I say, did the Harpies whisk aloft.”

My recital of these cases to my friend, Harfager, I have mentioned. I was surprised, not so much at his acute interest – for he was interested in all knowledge – as at the obvious pains which he took to conceal that interest. He hurriedly turned the leaves of a volume, but could not hide his panting nostrils.

From first days when we happened to attend the same seminary in Stockholm, a tacit intimacy had sprung between us. I loved him greatly; that he so loved me I knew. But it was an intimacy not accompanied by many of the usual interchanges of close friendships. Harfager was the shyest, most isolated, insulated, of beings. Though our joint ménage (brought about by a chance meeting at a midnight séance in Paris) had now lasted some months, I knew nothing of his plans, motives. Through the day we pursued our intense readings together, he rapt quite back into the past, I equally engrossed upon the present; late at night we reclined on couches within the vast cave

of an old fireplace Louis Onze, and smoked to the dying flame in a silence of wormwood and terebinth. Occasionally a soirée or lecture might draw me from the house; except once, I never understood that Harfager left it. I was, on that occasion, returning home at a point of the Rue St. Honoré where a rush of continuous traffic rattled over the old coarse pavements retained there, when I came suddenly upon him. In this tumult he stood abstracted on the trottoir in a listening attitude, and for a moment seemed not to recognise me when I touched him.

Even as a boy I had discerned in my friend the genuine Noble, the inveterate patrician. One saw that in him. Not at all that his personality gave an impression of any species of loftiness, opulence; on the contrary. He did, however, give an impression of incalculable ancientness. He suggested the last moment of an aeon. No nobleman have I seen who so bore in his wan aspect the assurance of the inevitable aristocrat, the essential prince, whose pale blossom is of yesterday, and will perish tomorrow, but whose root fills the ages. This much I knew of Harfager; also that on one or other of the bleak islands of his patrimony north of Zetland lived his mother and a paternal aunt; that he was somewhat deaf; but liable to transports of pain or delight at variously-combined musical sounds, the creak of a door, the note of a bird. More I cannot say that I then knew.

He was rather below the middle height, and gave some promise of stoutness. His nose rose highly aquiline from that species of forehead called by phrenologists "the musical," that is to say, flanked by temples which incline outward to the cheek-bones, making breadth for the base of the brain; while the direction of the heavy-lidded, faded-blue eyes, and of the eyebrows, was a downward droop from the nose of their outer extremities. He wore a thin chin-beard. But the astonishing feature of his face were the ears: they were nearly circular, very small, and flat, being devoid of that outer volution known as the helix. The two tiny discs of cartilage had always the effect of making me think of the little ancient round shields, without rims, called clipeus and peltè. I came to understand that this was a peculiarity which had subsisted among the members of his race for some centuries. Over the whole white face of my friend was stamped a look of woeful inability, utter gravity of sorrow. One said "Sardanapalus," frail last of the great line of Nimrod.

After a year I found it necessary to mention to Harfager my intention of leaving Paris. We reclined by night in our accustomed nooks within the fireplace. To my announcement he answered with a merely polite "Indeed!" and continued to gloat upon the flame; but after an hour turned upon me, and said:

"Well, it seems to be a hard and selfish world."

Truisms uttered with just such an air of new discovery I had occasionally heard from him; but the earnest gaze of eyes, and plaint of voice, and despondency of shaken head, with which he now spoke shocked me to surprise.

"À propos of what?" I asked.

"My friend, do not leave me!"

He spread his arms. His utterance choked.

I learned that he was the object of a devilish malice; that he was the prey of a hellish temptation. That a lure, a becking hand, a lurking lust, which it was the effort of his life to eschew (and to which he was especially liable in solitude), continually enticed him; and that thus it had been almost from the day when, at time age of five, he had been sent by his father from his desolate home in time sea.

And whose was this malice?

He told me his mother's and aunt's.

And what was this temptation?

He said it was the temptation to return – to fly with the very frenzy of longing – back to that dim home.

I asked with what motives, and in what particulars, the malice of his mother and aunt manifested itself. He replied that there was, he believed, no specific motive, but only a determined malevolence, involuntary and fated; and that the respect in which it manifested itself was to be found in the multiplied prayers and commands with which, for years, they had importuned him to seek again the far hold of his ancestors.

All this I could in no way comprehend, and plainly said as much. In what consisted this horrible magnetism, and equally horrible peril, of his home? To this question Harfager did not reply, but rose from his seat, disappeared behind the drawn curtains of the hearth, and left the room. He presently returned with a quarto tome bound in hide. It proved to be Hugh Gascoigne's Chronicle of Norse Families, executed in English black-letter. The passage to which he pointed I read as follows:

“Nowe, of thise two brethrene, tholder (the elder), Harold, beying of seemely personage and prowesse, did goe pilgrimage into Danemarke, wher from he repayred againward boom to Hjaltlande (Zetland), and wyth hym fette (fetched) the amiabil Thronda for hyss wyf, which was a doughter of the sank (blood) royall of danemark. And his yonger brothir, Sweyne, that was sad amid debonayre, but far surmounted the other in cunningyng, receyued him with all good chere. Butte eftsones (soon after) fel sweyne sick for alle his lust that he hadde of Thronda his brothir's wyfe. And whiles the worthy Harold, with the grenehede (greenness) and foyle of yowthe, ministred a bisy cure aboute the bedde wher Sweyne lay sick, lo, sweyne fastened on him a violent stroke with swerde, and with no lenger tarynge enclosed his hands in bondes, and cast him in the botme of a depe holde. And by cause harold wold not benumb (deprive) hymself of the gouernance of Thronda his wif, Sweyne cutte off boeth his ere[s], and putte out one of his iyes, and after diverse sike tormentes was preste (ready) to slee (slay) hym. But on a daye, the valiant Harold, breking hys bondcs, and embracinge his aduersary, did by the sleight of wrastlyng ouerthrowe him, and escaped. Nat-with-standyng, he foltred whan he came to the Somburgh Hed not ferre (far) fro the Castell, and al-be-it that he was swifte-foote, couth ne farder renne (run) by reson that he was faynte with the longe plag[u]es of hyss brothir. And whiles he ther lay in a sound (swoon) did Sweyne come sle (sly) and softe up on hym, and whan he had striken him with a darte, caste him fro Samburgh Hede in to the See.

Nat longe hereafterward did the lady Thronda (tho she knew nat the manere of her lordes deth, ne, veryly, yf he was dead or on live) receyve Sweyne in to gree (favour), and with grete gaudying and blowinge of beamous (trumpets) did gon to his bed. And right soo they two wente thennes (thence) to soiourn in ferre partes.

Now, it befel that sweyne was mynded by a dreme to let bild him a grete maunson in Hialtland for the hoom-cominge of the ladye Thronda; where for he called to hym a cunningge Maistre-worckman, and sente him hye (in haste) to englund to gather thrals for the bilding of this lusty Houss, but hym-self soiourned wyth his ladye at Rome. Thenne came his worckman to london, but passinge thennes to Hialtland, was drent (drowned) he, and his feers (mates), and his shippe, alle and some. And after two yeres, which was the tyme assygned, Sweyne harfager sente lettres to Hialtlande to vnderstonde how his grete Houss did, for he knew not the drenchyng of the Architecte; and eftsones he receiued answer that the Houss did wel, and was bildinge on the Ile of Vaila; but that ne was the Ile wher-on Sweyne had appoynted the bilding to be; and he was aferd, and nere fel down ded for drede, by cause that, in the lettres, he saw before him the mannere of wrytyng of his brothir Harold. And he sayed in this fourme: 'Surely Harolde is on lyue (alive), elles (else) ben thise a lettres writ with gostlye hande.' And he was wo many dayes, seeing that this was a dedely stroke. Ther-after, he took him-selfe back to Hjal-land to know how the matere was, and ther the old Castell on Somburgh Hede was brek down to the erthe. Thenn Sweyne was wode-worthe, and cryed, 'Jhesu mercy, where is al the grete Hous of my faders becomen? allas! thys wycked day of desteynye.' And one of the peple tolde him that a hoost of worckmen fro fer partes hadde brek it down. And he sayd:

'Who hath bidde them?' but that couth none answer. Thenne he sayd agayn; 'nis (is not) my brothir harold on-lyne? for I haue biholde his writinge'; and that, to, colde none answer. Soo he wente to Vaila, and saw there a grete Houss stonde, and wharm he looked on hyt, he saye[d]: 'this, sooth, was y-bild by my brothir Harolde, be he ded, or bee he on-lyue.' And ther he dwelte, and his ladye, and his sones and hys sones sones vntyl now. For that the Houss is rewthelesse (ruthless) and withoute pite; where-for tis seyed that up on al who dwel thre faleth a wycked madncss and a lecherous agonie; and that by waye of the eres doe they drinck the cuppe of the furie of the erelesse Harolde, til the tyme of the Houss bee ended."

I read the narrative half-aloud, and smiled.

"This, Harfager," I said, "is very tolerable romance on the part of the good Gascoigne; but has the look of indifferent history."

"It is, nevertheless, genuine history," he replied. "You believe that?"

"The house still stands solidly on Vaila."

"The brothers Sweyn and Harold were literary for their age, I think?"

"No member of my race," he replied, with, a suspicion of hauteur, "has been illiterate."

“But, at least, you do not believe that mediaeval ghosts superintend the building of their family mansions?”

“Gascoigne nowhere says that; for to be stabbed is not necessarily to die; nor, if he did say it, would it be true to assert that I have any knowledge on the subject.”

“And what, Harfager, is the nature of that ‘wicked madness,’ that ‘lecherous agonie,’ of which Gascoigne speaks?”

“Do you ask me?” He spread his arms. “What do I know? I know nothing! I was banished from the place at the age of five. Yet the cry of it still reverberates in my soul. And have I not told you of agonies – even within myself – of inherited longing and loathing . . . ”

But, at any rate, I answered, my journey to Heidelberg was just then indispensable. I would compromise by making absence short, and rejoin him quickly, if he would wait a few weeks for me. His moody silence I took to mean consent, and soon afterward left him.

But I was unavoidably detained; and when I returned to our old quarters, found them empty.

Harfager had vanished.

It was only after twelve years that a letter was forwarded me – a rather wild letter, an excessively long one – in the well-remembered hand of my friend. It was dated at Vaila. From the character of the writing I conjectured that it had been penned with furious haste, so that I was all the more astonished at the very trivial nature of the voluminous contents. On the first half page he spoke of our old friendship, and asked if, in memory of that, I would see his mother who was dying; the rest of the epistle, sheet upon sheet, consisted of a tedious analysis of his mother’s genealogical tree, the apparent aim being to prove that she was a genuine Harfager, and a cousin of his father. He then went on to comment on the extreme prolificness of his race, asserting that since the fourteenth century, over four millions of its members had lived and died in various parts of the world; three only of them, he believed, being now left. That determined, the letter ended.

Influenced by this communication, I travelled northward; reached Caithness; passed the stormy Orkneys; reached Lerwick; and from Unst, the most bleak and northerly of the Zetlands, contrived, by dint of bribes to pit the weather-worthiness of a lug-sailed ‘sixern’ (said to be identical with the ‘langschips’ of the Vikings) against a flowing sea and a darkly-brooding heaven. The voyage, I was warned, was, at such a time, of some risk. It was the Cimmerian December of those interboreal latitudes. The weather here, they said, though never cold, is hardly ever other than tempestuous. A dense and dank sea-born haze now lay, in spite of vapid breezes, high along the waters enclosing the boat in a vague domed cavern of doleful twilight and sullen swell. The region of the considerable islands was past, and there was a spectral something in the unreal aspect of silent sea and sunless dismalness of sky which produced upon my nerves the impression of a voyage out of nature, a cruise beyond the world. Occasionally, however, we careered past one of those solitary ‘skerries,’ or

sea-stacks, whose craggy sea-walls, cannonaded and disintegrated by the inter-shock of the tidal wave and the torrent currents of the German Ocean, wore, even at some distance, an appearance of frightful ruin and havoc. Three only of these I saw, for before the dim day had well run half its course, sudden blackness of night was upon us, and with it one of those tempests, of which the winter of this semi-polar sea is, throughout, an ever-varying succession. During the haggard and dolorous crepuscule of the next brief day, the rain did not cease; but before darkness had quite supervened, my helmsman, who talked continuously to a mate of seal-maidens, and waterhorses, and grülies, paused to point to a mound of gloomier grey in the weather-bow, which was, he assured me, Vaila.

Vaila, he added, was the centre of quite a system of those rösts (dangerous eddies) and cross-currents, which the action of the tidal wave hurls hurrying with complicated and corroding swirl among the islands; in the neighbourhood of Vaila, said the mariner, they hurtled with more than usual precipitancy, owing to the palisade of lofty sea-craggs which barbicaned the place about; approach was, therefore, at all times difficult, and by night fool-hardy. With a running sea, however, we came sufficiently near to discern the mane of surf which bristled high along the beetling coast-wall. Its shock, according to the man's account, had oft-times more than all the efficiency of a bombing of real artillery, slinging tons of rock to heights of several hundred feet upon the main island.

When the sun next feebly climbed above the horizon to totter with marred visage through a wan low segment of funereal murk, we had closely approached the coast; and it was then for the first time that the impression of some spinning motion in the island (born no doubt of the circular movement of the water) was produced upon me. We effected a landing at a small voe, or sea-arm, on the western side; the eastern, though the point of my aim, being, on account of the swell, out of the question for that purpose. Here I found in two feal-thatched skeoes (or sheds), which crouched beneath the shelter of a far over-hanging hill, five or six poor peasant-seamen, whose livelihood no doubt consisted in periodically trading for the necessaries of the great house on the east. Beside these there were no dwellers on Vaila; but with one of them for guide, I soon began the ascent and transit of the island. Through the night in the boat I had been strangely aware of an oppressive booming in the ears, for which even the roar of the sea round all the coast seemed quite insufficient to account. This now, as we advanced, became fearfully intensified, and with it, once more, the unaccountable conviction within me of spinning motions to which I have referred. Vaila I discovered to be a land of hill and precipice, made of fine granite and flaggy gneiss; at about the centre, however, we came upon a high table-land sloping gradually from west to east, and covered by a series of lochs, which sullenly and continuously flowed one into the other. To this chain of sombre, black-gleaming water I could see no terminating shore, and by dint of shouting to my companion, and bending close ear to his answering shout, I came to know that there was no such shore: I say shout, for nothing less could have prevailed over the steady bellowing as

of ten thousand bisons, which now resounded on every hand. A certain tremblement, too, of the earth became distinct. In vain did the eye seek in its dreary purview a single trace of tree or shrub; for, as a matter of course, no kind of vegetation, save peat, could brave, even for a day, that perennial agony of the tempest which makes of this turbid and benighted zone its arena. Darkness, an hour after noon, commenced to overshadow us; and it was shortly afterward that my guide, pointing down a precipitous defile near the eastern coast, hurriedly set forth upon the way he had come. I frantically howled a question after him as he went; but at this point the human voice had ceased to be in the faintest degree audible.

Down this defile, with a sinking of the heart, and a most singular feeling of giddiness, I passed.

Having reached the end, I emerged upon a wide ledge which shuddered to the immediate onsets of the sea. But all this portion of the island was, in addition, subject to a sharp continuous ague evidently not due to the heavy ordnance of the ocean. Hugging a point of cliff for steadiness from the wind, I looked forth upon a spectacle of weirdly morne, of dismal wildness. The opening lines of Hecuba, or some drear district of the Inferno, seemed realized before me. Three black 'skerries,' encompassed by a fantastic series of stacks, crooked as a witch's fore-finger, and giving herbergage to shrill routs of osprey and scart, to seal and walrus, lay at some fathoms' distance; and from its race and rage among them, the sea, in arrogance of white, tumultuous, but inaudible wrath, ramped terrible as an army with banners toward the land. Leaving my place, I staggered some distance to the left: and now, all at once, a vast amphitheatre opened before me, and there burst upon my gaze a panorama of such heart-appalling sublimity, as imagination could never have conceived, nor can now utterly recall.

"A vast amphitheatre" I have said; yet it was rather the shape of a round-Gothic (or Norman) doorway which I beheld. Let the reader picture such a door-frame, nearly a mile in breadth, laid flat upon the ground, the curved portion farthest from the sea; and round it let a perfectly smooth and even wall of rock tower in perpendicular regularity to an altitude not unworthy the vulture's eyrie; and now, down the depth of this Gothic shape, and over all its extent, let bawling oceans dash themselves triumphing in spendthrift cataclysm of emerald and hoary fury, – and the stupor of awe with which I looked, and then the shrinking fear, and then the instinct of instant flight, will find easy comprehension.

This was the thrilling disemboisement of the lochs of Vaila.

And within the arch of this Gothic cataract, volumed in the world of its smoky torment and far-excursive spray, stood a palace of brass . . . circular in shape . . . huge in dimension.

The last gleam of the ineffectual day had now almost passed, but I could yet discern, in spite of the perpetual rain-fall which bleakly nimbused it as in a halo of tears, that the building was low in proportion to the vastness of its circumference; that it was roofed with a shallow dome; and that about it ran two serried rows of

shuttered Norman windows, the upper row being of smaller size than the lower. Certain indications led me to assume that the house had been built upon a vast natural bed of rock which lay, circular and detached, within the arch of the cataract; but this did not quite emerge above the flood, for the whole ground-area upon which I looked dashed a deep and incense-reeking river to the beachless sea; so that passage would have been impossible, were it not that, from a point near me, a massive bridge, thick with algae, rose above the tide, and led to the mansion. Descending from my ledge, I passed along it, now drenched in spray. As I came nearer, I could see that the house, too, was to half its height more thickly bearded than an old hull with barnacles and every variety of brilliant seaweed; and – what was very surprising that from many points near the top of the brazen wall huge iron chains, slimily barbarous with the trailing tresses of ages, reached out in symmetrical divergent rays to points on the ground hidden by the flood: the fabric had thus the look of a many-anchored ark; but without pausing for minute observation, I pushed forward, and dashing through the smooth circular waterfall which poured all round from the eaves, by one of its many small projecting porches, entered the dwelling.

Darkness now was around me – and sound. I seemed to stand in the very throat of some yelling planet. An infinite sadness descended upon me; I was near to the abandonment of tears. “Here,” I said, “is Kohreb, and the limits of weeping; not elsewhere is the valley of sighing.” The tumult resembled the continuous volleying of many thousands of cannon, mingled with strange crashing and bursting uproars. I passed forward through a succession of halls, and was wondering as to my further course, when a hideous figure, bearing a lamp, stalked rapidly towards me. I shrank aghast. It seemed the skeleton of a tall man, wrapped in a winding-sheet. The glitter of a tiny eye, however, and a sere film of skin over part of the face, quickly reassured me. Of ears, he showed no sign. He was, I afterwards learned, Aith; and the singularity of his appearance was partially explained by his pretence – whether true or false – that he had once suffered burning, almost to the cinder-stage, but had miraculously recovered. With an expression of malignity, and strange excited gestures, he led the way to a chamber on the upper stage, where having struck light to a vesta, he pointed to a spread table and left me.

For a long time I sat in solitude. The earthquake of the mansion was intense; but all sense seemed swallowed up and confounded in the one impression of sound. Water, water, was the world – nightmare on my chest, a horror in my ears, an intolerable tingling on my nerves. The feeling of being infinitely drowned and ruined in the all-obliterating deluge – the impulse to gasp for breath – overwhelmed me. I rose and paced; but suddenly stopped, angry, I scarce knew why, with myself. I had, in fact, found myself walking with a certain hurry, not usual with me, not natural to me. The feeling of giddiness, too, had abnormally increased. I forced myself to stand and take note of the hall. It was of great size, and damp with mists, so that the tattered, but rich, mediaeval furniture seemed lost in its extent: its center was occupied by a

broad low marble tomb bearing the name of a Harfager of the fifteenth century; its walls were old brown panels of oak.

Having drearily observed these things, I waited on with an intolerable consciousness of loneliness; but a little after midnight the tapestry parted, and Harfager with hurried stride, approached me.

In twelve years my friend had grown old. He showed, it is true, a tendency to corpulence; yet, to a knowing eye, he was, in reality, tabid, ill-nourished. And his neck protruded from his body; and his lower back had quite the forward curve of age; and his hair floated about his face and shoulders in a disarray of awful whiteness. A chin-beard hung grey to his chest. His attire was a simple robe of bauge, which, as he went, waved aflaut from his bare and hirsute shins, and he was shod in those soft slippers called rivlins.

Rude Impression of Harfager

To my surprise, he spoke. When I passionately shouted that I could gather no fragment of sound from his moving lips, he clapped both palms to his ears, and thereupon renewed a vehement siege to mine: but again without result. And now, with a seemingly angry fling of the hand, he caught up the taper, and swiftly strode from the chamber.

There was something singularly unnatural in his manner – something which irresistibly reminded me of the skeleton, Aith: an excess of zeal, a fever, a rage, a loudness, an eagerness of walk, a wild extravagance of gesture. His hand constantly dashed the hair-whiffs from his face.

Though his countenance was of the saffron of death, the eyes were turgid and red with blood – heavy-lidded eyes, fixed in a downward and sideward intentness of gaze. He presently returned with a folio of ivory and a stylus of graphite hanging from a cord about his garment.

He rapidly wrote a petition that I would, if not too tired, take part with him in the funeral obsequies of his mother. I shouted assent.

Once more he clapped palms to ears; then wrote: “Do not shout: no whisper in any part of the building is inaudible to me.”

I remembered that, in early life, he had seemed slightly deaf.

We passed together through many apartments, he shading the taper with his hand. This was necessary; for, as I quickly discovered, in no part of the shivering fabric was the air in a state of rest, but seemed for ever commoved by a curious agitation, a faint windiness, like the echo of a storm, which communicated a gentle universal trouble to the tapestries. Everywhere I was confronted with the same past richness, present raggedness of decay. In many of the chambers were old marble tombs; one was a museum piled with bronzes, urns; but broken, imbedded in fungoids, dripping wide with moisture. It was as if the mansion, in ardour of travail, sweated. An odour of decomposition was heavy on the swaying air. With difficulty I followed Harfager through the labyrinth of his headlong passage. Once only he stopped short, and with face madly wild above the glare of the light, heaved up his

hand, and uttered a single word. From the shaping of the lips, I conjectured the word, "Hark!"

Presently we entered a very long black hall wherein, on chairs beside a bed near the centre, rested a deep coffin, flanked by a row of tall candlesticks of ebony. It had, I noticed, this singularity, that the foot-piece was absent, so that the soles of the corpse were visible as we approached. I beheld, too, three upright rods secured to the coffin-side, each fitted at its summit with a small silver bell of the kind called morrice pendent from a flexible steel spring. At the head of the bed, Aith, with an appearance of irascibility, stamped to and fro within a small area.

Harfager, having rapidly traversed the apartment to the coffin, deposited the taper upon a stone table near, and stood poring with crazy intentness upon the body. I too, looking, stood. Death so rigorous, Gorgon, I had not seen. The coffin seemed full of tangled grey hair. The lady was, it was clear, of great age, osseous, scimitar-nosed. Her head shook with solemn continuity to the vibration of the house. From each ear trickled a black streamlet; the mouth was ridged with froth.

I observed that over the corpse had been set three thin laminae of polished wood, resembling in position, and shape, the bridge of a violin. Their sides fitted into groves in the coffin-sides, and their top was of a shape to exactly fit the inclination of the two coffin-lids when closed. One of these laminae passed over the knees of the dead lady; another bridged the abdomen; the third the region of the neck. In each of them was a small circular hole. Across each of the three holes passed vertically a tense cord from the morrice-bell nearest to it; the three holes being thus divided by the three cords into six vertical semicircles. Before I could conjecture the significance of this arrangement, Harfager closed the folding coffin-lid, which in the centre had tiny intervals for the passage of the cords. He then turned the key in the lock, and uttered a word, which I took to be, "Come."

At his summons, Aith, approaching, took hold of the handle at the head; and from the dark recesses of the hall a lady, in black, moved forward. She was very tall, pallid, and of noble aspect. From the curvature of the nose, and her circular ears, I conjectured the lady Swertha, aunt of Harfager. Her eyes were red, but if with weeping I could not determine.

Harfager and I, taking each a handle near the coffin-foot, and the lady bearing before us one of the candlesticks, the procession began. As we came to the doorway, I noticed standing in a corner yet two coffins, inscribed with the names of Harfager and his aunt. We passed at length down a wide-curving stairway to the lower stage; and descending thence still lower by narrow brazen steps, came to a portal of metal, at which the lady, depositing the candlestick, left us.

The chamber of death into which we now bore the coffin had for its outer wall the brazen outer wall of the whole house at a point where this approached nearest the cataract, and must have been deep washed by the infuriate caldron without. The earthquake here was, indeed, intense. On every side the vast extent of surface was piled with coffins, rotted or rotting, ranged upon tiers of wooden shelves. The floor, I

was surprised to see, was of brass. From the wide scampering that ensued on our entrance, the place was, it was clear, the abode of hordes of water-rats. As it was inconceivable that these could have corroded a way through sixteen brazen feet, I assumed that some fruitful pair must have found in the house, on its building, an ark from the waters; though even this hypothesis seemed wild. Harfager, however, afterwards confided to me his suspicion, that they had, for some purpose, been placed there by the original architect.

Upon a stone bench in the middle we deposited our burden, whereupon Aith made haste to depart. Harfager then rapidly and repeatedly walked from end to end of the long sepulchre, examining with many an eager stoop and peer, and upward strain, the shelves and their props.

Could he, I was led to wonder, have any doubts as to their security? Damp, indeed, and decay pervaded all. A piece of woodwork which I handled softened into powder between my fingers.

He presently beckoned to me, and with yet one halt and uttered "Hark!" from him, we traversed the house to my chamber. Here, left alone, I paced long about, fretted with a strange vagueness of anger; then, weary, tumbled to a horror of sleep.

In the far interior of the mansion even the bleared day of this land of heaviness never rose upon our settled gloom. I was able however, to regulate my levées by a clock which stood in my chamber. With Harfager, in a startlingly short time, I renewed more than all our former intimacy.

That I should say more, is itself startling, considering that an interval of twelve years stretched between us. But so, in fact, it was; and this was proved by the circumstances that we grew to take, and to pardon, freedoms of expression and manner which, as two persons of more than usual reserve, we had once never dreamed of permitting to ourselves in reference to each other.

Down corridors that vanished either way in darkness and length of perspective remoteness we linked ourselves in perambulations of purposeless urgency. Once he wrote that my step was excruciatingly deliberate. I replied that it was just such a step as fitted my then mood. He wrote:

"You have developed an aptitude to fret." I was profoundly offended, and replied: "There are at least more fingers than one in the universe which that ring will wed."

Something of the secret of the unhuman sensitiveness of his hearing I quickly surmised. I, too, to my dismay, began, as time passed, to catch hints of loudly-uttered words. The reason might he found, I suggested, in an increased excitability of the auditory nerve, which, if the cataract were absent, the roar of the ocean, and bombast of the incessant tempest about us, would by themselves be sufficient to cause; in which case, his own aural interior must, I said, be inflamed to an exquisite pitch of hyperpyrexial fever. The affection I named to him as the Paracusis Willisii. He frowned dissent, but I, undeterred, callously proceeded to recite the case, occurring within my own experience, of a very deaf lady who could hear the fall of a pin in a

rapidly-moving railway-train.* To this he only replied: "Of ignorant persons I am accustomed to consider the mere scientist as the most profoundly ignorant."

[* Such cases are known, or at least easily comprehensible, to every medical man. The concussion on the deaf nerves is said to be the cause of the acquired sensitiveness. Nor is there any limit to such sensitiveness when the concussion is abnormally increased.]

Yet that he should affect darkness as to the highly morbid condition of his hearing I regarded as simply far-fetched. Himself, indeed, confided to me his own, Aith's, and his aunt's proneness to violent paroxysms of vertigo. I was startled; for I had myself shortly before been twice roused from sleep by sensations of reeling and nausea, and a conviction that the chamber furiously spun with me in a direction from right to left. The impression passed away, and I attributed it, perhaps hastily (though on well-known pathological grounds), to some disturbance in the nerve-endings of the "labyrinth," or inner ear. In Harfager, however, the conviction of wheeling motions in the house, in the world, attained so horrible a degree of certainty, that its effects sometimes resembled those of lunacy or energuminal possession. Never, he said, was the sensation of giddiness wholly absent; seldom the feeling that he stared with stretched-out arms over the verge of abysmal voids which wildly wooed his half-consenting foot. Once, as we went, he was hurled, as by unseen powers, to the ground; and there for an hour sprawled, cold in a flow of sweat, with distraught bedazzlement and amaze in eyes that watched the racing house. He was constantly racked, moreover, with the consciousness of sounds so very peculiar in their nature, that I could account for them upon no other hypothesis than that of tinnitus highly exaggerated. Through the heaped-up roar, there sometimes visited him, he said, the high lucid warbling of some Orphic bird, from the pitch of whose impassioned madrigals he had the inner consciousness that it came from a far country, was of the whiteness of snow, and crested with a comb of mauve. Else he was aware of accumulated human voices, remotely articulate, contending in volubility, and finally melting into chaotic musical tones. Or, anon, he was stunned by an infinite and imminent crashing, like the huge crackling of a universe of glass about his ears. He said, too, that he could often see, rather than hear, the parti-coloured whorls of a mazy sphere-music deep, deep, within the black dark of the cataract's roar. These impressions, which I ardently protested must be purely entotic, had sometimes upon him a pleasing effect, and long would he stand and listen with raised hand to their seduction; others again inflamed him to the verge of angry madness. I guessed that they were the origin of those irascibly uttered "Harks!" which at intervals of about an hour did not fail to break from him. In this I was wrong: and it was with a thrill of dismay that I shortly came to know the truth.

For, as once we passed together by an iron door on the lower stage, he stopped, and for several minutes stood, listening with an expression most keen and cunning.

Presently the cry "Hark!" escaped him; and he then turned to me, and wrote upon the tablet: "You did not hear?" I had heard nothing but the monotonous roar. He shouted into my ear in accents now audible to me as an echo heard far off in dreams: "You shall see."

He lifted the candlestick; produced from the pocket of his garment a key; unlocked the door.

We entered a chamber, circular, very loftily domed in proportion to its extent, and apparently empty, save that a pair of ladder-steps leaned against its wall. Its flooring was of marble, and in its centre gloomed a pool, resembling the impluvium of Roman atriums, but round in shape; a pool evidently deep, full of an unctuous miasmal water. I was greatly startled by its present aspect; for as the light burned upon its jet-black surface, I could see that this had been quite recently disturbed, in a manner for which the shivering of the house could not account, inasmuch as ripples of slimy ink sullenly rounded from the centre toward its marble brink. I glanced at Harfager for explanation. He signed to me to wait, and for about an hour, with arms in their accustomed fold behind his back, perambulated. At the end of that time he stopped, and standing together by the margin, we gazed into the water. Suddenly his clutch tightened upon my arm, and I saw, not without a thrill of honor, a tiny ball, doubtless of lead, but smeared blood-red by some chymical pigment, fall from the direction of the roof and disappear into the centre of the black depths. It hissed, on contact with the water, a thin puff of vapour.

"In the name of all that is sinister!" I cried, "what thing is this you show me?"

Again he made me a busy and confident sign to wait; snatched then the ladder-steps toward the pool; handed me the taper. I, mounting, held high the flame, and saw hanging from the misty centre of the dome a form – a sphere of tarnished old copper, lengthened out into balloon-shape by a down-looking neck, at the end of which I thought I could discern a tiny orifice. Painted across the bulge was barely visible in faded red characters the hieroglyph:

"harfager-hous: 1389 – 188"

Something – I know not what – of eldritch in the combined aspect of spotted globe, and gloomy pool, and contrivance of hourly hissing ball, gave expedition to my feet as I slipped down the ladder.

"But the meaning?"

"Did you see the writing?"

"Yes. The meaning?"

He wrote: "By comparing Gascoigne with Thrunster, I find that the mansion was built about 1389."

"But the final figures?"

"After the last 8," he replied, "there is another figure, nearly, but not quite, obliterated by a tarnish-spot."

"What figure?"

“It cannot be read, but may be surmised. The year 1888 is now all but passed. It can only be the figure 9.”

“You are horribly depraved in mind!” I cried, flaring into anger. “You assume – you dare to state – in a manner which no mind trained to base its conclusions upon fact could hear with patience.”

“And you, on the other hand, are simply absurd,” he wrote.

“You are not, I presume, ignorant of the common formula of Archimedes by which, the diameter of a sphere being known, its volume may be determined. Now, the diameter of the sphere in the dome there I have ascertained to be four and a half feet; and the diameter of the leaden balls about the third of an inch. Supposing then that 1389 was the year in which the sphere was full of balls, you may readily calculate that not many fellows of the four million and odd which have since dropped at the rate of one an hour are now left within it. It could not, in fact, have contained many more. The fall of balls cannot persist another year. The figure 9 is therefore forced upon us.”

“But you assume, Harfager,” I cried, “most wildly you assume! Believe me, my friend, this is the very wantonness of wickedness! By what algebra of despair do you know that the last date must be such, was intended to be such, as to correspond with the stoppage of the horologe? And, even if so, what is the significance of the whole. It has – it can have – no significance! Was the contriver of this dwelling, of all the gnomes, think you, a being pulsing with omniscience?”

“Do you seek to madden me?” he shouted. Then furiously writing: “I know – I swear that I know – nothing of its significance! But is it not evident to you that the work is a stupendous hour-glass, intended to record the hours not of a day, but of a cycle? and of a cycle of five hundred years?”

“But the whole thing,” I passionately cried, “is a baleful phantasm of our brains! an evil impossibility! How is the fall of the balls regulated? Ah, my friend, you wander – your mind is debauched in this bacchanal of tumult.”

“I have not ascertained,” he replied, “by what internal mechanism, or viscous medium, or spiral coil, dependent no doubt for its action upon the vibration of the house, the balls are retarded in their fall; that is a matter well within the cunning of the mediaeval artisan, the inventor of the watch; but this at least is clear, that one element of their retardation is the minuteness of the aperture through which they have to pass; that this element, by known, though recondite, statical laws, will cease to operate when no more than three balls remain; and that, consequently, the last three will fall at nearly the same moment.”

“In God’s name!” I exclaimed, careless what folly I poured out, “but your mother is dead, Harfager! You dare not deny that there remain but you and the lady Swertha!”

A contemptuous glance was all the reply he then vouchsafed me.

But he confided to me a day or two later that the leaden balls were a constant bane to his ears; that from hour to hour his life was a keen waiting for their fall; that even from his brief slumbers he infallibly startled into wakefulness at each descent;

that, in whatever part of the mansion he happened to be, they failed not to find him out with a clamorous and insistent loudness; and that every drop wrung him with a twinge of physical anguish in the inner ear. I was therefore appalled at his declaration that these droppings had now become to him as the life of life; had acquired an intimacy so close with the hue of his mind, that their cessation might even mean for him the shattering of reason. Convulsed, he stood then, face wrapped in arms, leaning against a pillar. The paroxysm past, I asked him if it was out of the question that he should once and for all cast off the fascination of the horologe, and fly with me from the place. He wrote in mysterious reply: "A threefold cord is not easily broken" I started. How threefold? He wrote with bitterest smile: "To be enamoured of pain – to pine after aching – to dote upon Marah – is not that a wicked madness?" I was overwhelmed. Unconsciously he had quoted Gascoigne: a wicked madness! a lecherous agonie! "You have seen the face of my aunt," he proceeded; "your eyes were dim if you did not there behold an impious calm, the glee of a blasphemous patience, a grin behind her daring smile." He then spoke of a prospect, at the infinite terror of which his whole nature trembled, yet which sometimes laughed in his heart in the aspect of a maniac hope. It was the prospect of any considerable increase in the volume of sound about him. At that, he said, the brain must totter. On the night of my arrival the noise of my booted tread, and, since then, my occasionally raised voice, had caused him acute unease. To a sensibility such as this, I understood him further to say, the luxury of torture involved in a large sound-increase in his environment was an allurement from which no human strength could turn; and when I expressed my powerlessness even to conceive such an increase, much less the means by which it could be effected, he produced from the archives of the house some annals, kept by the successive heads of his race. From these it appeared that the tempests which continually harried the lonely latitude of Vaila did not fail to give place, at periodic intervals of some years, to one sovereign ouragan – one Sirius among the suns – one ultimate lyssa of elemental atrocity. At such periods the rains descended – and the floods came – even as in the first world-deluge; those rösts, or eddies, which at all times encompassed Vaila, spurning then the bands of lateral space, shrieked themselves aloft into a multitudinous death-dance of water-spouts, and like snaky Deinotheria, or say towering monolithic in a stonehenge of columned and cyclopean awe, thronged about the little land, upon which, with converging débâcle, they discharged their momentous waters; and the loebs to which the cataract was due thus redoubled their volume, and fell with redoubled tumult. It was, said Harfager, like a miracle that for twenty years no such great event had transacted itself at Vaila.

And what, I asked, was the third strand of that threefold cord of which he had spoken? He took me to a circular hall, which, he told me, he had ascertained to be the geometrical centre of the circular mansion. It was a very great hall – so great as I think I never saw – so great that the amount of segment illumined at any one time by the taper seemed nearly flat. And nearly the whole of its space from floor to roof was

occupied by a pillar of brass, the space between wall and cylinder being only such as to admit of a stretched-out arm.

“This cylinder, which seems to be solid,” wrote Harfager, “ascends to the dome and passes beyond it; it descends hence to the floor of the lower stage, and passes through that; it descends thence to the brazen flooring of the vaults, and passes through that into the rock of the ground.

Under each floor it spreads out laterally into a vast capital, helping to support the floor. What is the precise quality of the impression which I have made upon your mind by this description?”

“I do not know!” I answered, turning from him; “propound me none of your questions, Harfager. I feel a giddiness . . .”

“Nevertheless you shall answer me,” he proceeded; “consider the strangeness of that brazen lowest floor, which I have discovered to be some ten feet thick, and whose under-surface, I have reason to believe, is somewhat above the level of the ground; remember that the fabric is at no point fastened to the cylinder; think of the chains that ray out from the outer walls, seeming to anchor the house to the ground. Tell me, what impression have I now made?”

“And is it for this you wait?” I cried – “for this? Yet there may have been no malevolent intention! You jump at conclusions! Any human dwelling, if solidly based upon earth, would be at all times liable to overthrow on such a land, in such a situation, as this, by some superlative tempest! What if it were the intention of the architect that in such eventuality the chains should break, and the house, by yielding, be saved?”

“You have no lack of charity at least,” he replied; and we returned to the book we then read together.

He had not wholly lost the old habit of study, but could no longer constrain himself to sit to read. With a volume, often tossed down and resumed, he walked to and fro within the radius of the lamp-light; or I, unconscious of my voice, read to him. By a strange whim of his mood, the few books which now lay within the limits of his patience had all for their motive something of the picaresque, or the foppishly speculative: Quevedo’s *Taca – o*; or the mundane system of Tycho Brahe; above all, George Hakewill’s *Power and Providence of God*. One day, however, as I read, he interrupted me with the sentence, seemingly à propos of nothing: “What I cannot understand is that you, a scientist, should believe that the physical life ceases with the cessation of the breath” – and from that moment the tone of our reading changed. He led me to the crypts of the library in the lowest part of the building, and hour after hour, with a certain furore of triumph, overwhelmed me with volumes evidencing the longevity of man after “death.” A sentence of Haller had rooted itself in his mind; he repeated, insisted upon it: “*sapientia denique consilia dat quibus longaevitas obtineri queat, nitro, opio, purgationibus subinde repetitis . . .*”; and as opium was the elixir of long-drawn life, so death itself, he said, was that opium, whose more potent nepenthe lulled the body to a peace not all-insentient, far within the gates of the gardens of

dream. From the Dhammapada of the Bhuddist canon, to Zwinger's *Theatrum*, to Bacomi's *Historia Vitae et Mortis*, he ranged to find me heaped-up certainty of his faith. What, he asked, was my opinion of Baron Verulam's account of the dead man who was heard to utter words of prayer; or of the leaping bowels o' the dead *condamné*? On my expressing incredulity, he seemed surprised, and reminded me of the writhings of dead serpents, of the visible beating of a frog's heart many hours after "death." "She is not dead," he quoted, "but sleepeth." The whim of Bacon and Paracelsus that the principle of life resides in a subtle spirit or fluid which pervades the organism he coerced into elaborate proof that such a spirit must, from its very nature, be incapable of any sudden annihilation, so long as the organs which it permeates remain connected and integral. I asked what limit he then set to the persistence of sensibility in the physical organism. He replied that when slow decay had so far advanced that the nerves could no longer be called nerves, or their cell-origins cell-origins, or the brain a brain – or when by artificial means the brain had for any length of time been disconnected at the cervical region from the body – then was the king of terrors king indeed, and the body was as though it had not been.

With an indiscretion strange to me before my residence at Vailla, I blurted the question whether all this *Aberglaube* could have any reference, in his mind, to the body of his mother. For a while he stood thoughtful, then wrote: "Had I not reason to believe that my own and my aunt's life in some way hinged upon the final cessation of hers, I should still have taken precautions to ascertain the progress of the destroyer upon her mortal frame; as it is, I shall not lack even the minutest information." He then explained that the rodents which swarmed in the sepulchre would, in the course of time, do their full work upon her; but would be unable to penetrate to the region of the throat without first gnawing their way through the three cords stretched across the holes of the laminae within the coffin, and thus, one by one, liberating the three *morrisco* bells to a tinkling agitation.

The winter solstice had passed; another year opened. I slept a deep sleep by night when Harfager entered my chamber, and shook me. His face was ghastly in the taper-light. A transformation within a few hours had occurred upon him. He was not the same. He resembled some poor wight into whose unexpecting eyes – at midnight – have glared the sudden eye-balls of Terror.

He informed me that he was aware of singular intermittent straining and creaking sounds, which gave him the sensation of hanging in aerial spaces by a thread which must shortly snap to his weight. He asked if, for God's sake, I would accompany him to the sepulchre. We passed together through the house, he craven, shivering, his step for the first time laggard. In the chamber of the dead he stole to and fro examining the shelves, furtively intent. His eyes were sunken, his face drawn like death. From the footless coffin of the dowager trembling on its bench of stone, I saw an old water-rat creep. As Harfager passed beneath one of the shortest of the shelves which bore a single coffin, it suddenly fell from a height with its burthen into

fragments at his feet. He screamed the cry of a frightened creature, and tottered to my support. I bore him back to the upper house.

He sat with hidden face in the corner of a small room doddering, overcome, as it were, with the extremity of age. He no longer marked with his usual "Hark!" the fall of the leaden drops. To my remonstrances he answered only with the words, So soon! so soon! Whenever I sought I found him there. His manhood had collapsed in an age of trepidancy. I do not think that during this time he slept.

On the second night, as I approached him, he sprang suddenly straight with the furious outcry:

"The first bell tinkles!"

And he had hardly larynxed the wild words when, from some great distance, a faint wail, which at its origin must have been a most piercing shriek, reached my now feverishly sensitive ears. Harfager at the sound clapped hands to ears, and dashed insensate from his place, I following in hot pursuit through the black breadth of the mansion. We ran until we reached a mound chamber, containing a candelabrum, and arrased in faded red. In an alcove at the furthest circumference was a bed. On the floor lay in swoon the lady Swertha. Her dark-grey hair in disarray wrapped her like an angry sea, and many tufts of it lay scattered wide, torn from the roots. About her throat were livid prints of strangling fingers. We bore her to the bed, and, having discovered some tincture in a cabinet, I administered it between her fixed teeth. In the rapt and dreaming face I saw that death was not, and, as I found something appalling in her aspect, shortly afterwards left her to Harfager.

When I next saw him his manner had assumed a species of change which I can only describe as hideous. It resembled the officious self-importance seen in a person of weak intellect, incapable of affairs, who goads himself with the exhortation, "to business! the time is short – I must even bestir myself!" His walk sickened me with a suggestion of ataxic locomotrice. I asked him as to the lady, as to the meaning of the marks of violence on her body. Bending ear to his deep and unctuous heard, "A stealthy attempt has been made upon her the skeleton, Aith."

My unfeigned astonishment at this announcement he seemed not to share. To my questions, repeatedly pressed upon him, as to the reason for retaining such a domestic in the house, as to the origin of his service, he could give no lucid answer. Aith, he informed me, had been admitted into the mansion during the period of his own long absence in youth. He knew little of the fact that he was of extraordinary physical strength. Whence he had come, or how, no living being except Swertha had knowledge; and she, it seems, feared, or at least persistently declined, to admit him into the mystery. He added that, as a matter of fact, the lady, from the day of his return to Vaila, had for some reason imposed upon herself a silence upon all subjects, which he had never once known her to break except by an occasional note.

With a curious, irrelevant impressment, with an intensely voluntary, ataxic strenuousness, always with the air of a drunken man constraining himself to ordered action, Harfager now set himself to the ostentatious adjustment of a host of

insignificant matters. He collected chronicles and arranged them in order of date. He tied and ticketed bundles of documents. He insisted upon my help in turning the faces of portraits to the wall. He was, however, now constantly interrupted by paroxysms of vertigo; six times in a single day he was hurled to the ground. Blood occasionally gushed from his ears. He complained to me in a voice of piteous wail of the clear luting of a silver piccolo, which did not cease to invite him. As he bent sweating upon his momentous futilities, his hands fluttered like shaken reeds. I noted the movements of his muttering and whimpering lips, the rheum of his far-sunken eyes. The decrepitude of dotage had overtaken his youth.

On a day he cast it utterly off, and was young again. He entered my chamber, roused me from sleep; I saw the mad gaudium in his eyes, heard the wild hiss of his cry in my ear:

“Up! It is sublime. The storm!”

Ah! I had known it – in the spinning nightmare of my sleep. I felt it in the tormented air of the chamber. It had come, then. I saw it lurid by the lamplight on the hell of Harfager’s distorted visage.

I glanced at the face of the clock. It was nine – in the morning. A sardonic glee burst at once into being within me. I sprang from the couch. Harfager, with the naked stalk of some maniac old prophet, had already rapt himself away. I set out in pursuit. A clear deepening was manifest in the quivering of the edifice; sometimes for a second it paused still, as if, breathlessly, to listen.

Occasionally there visited me, as it were, the faint dirge of some far-off lamentation and voice in Ramah; but if this was subjective, or the screaming of the storm, I could not say. Else I heard the distinct note of an organ’s peal. The air of the mansion was agitated by a vaguely puffy unease.

About noon I sighted Harfager, lamp in hand, running along a corridor. His feet were bare. As we met he looked at me, but hardly with recognition, and passed by; stopped, however, returned, and howled into my ear the question: “Would you see?” He beckoned before me. I followed to a very small window in the outer wall closed with a slab of iron. As he lifted a latch the metal flew inward with instant impetuosity and swung him far, while a blast of the storm, braying and booming through the aperture with buccal and reboant bravura, caught and pinned me against an angle of the wall. Down the corridor a long crashing bouleversement of pictures and furniture ensued. I nevertheless contrived to push my way, crawling on the belly, to the opening. Hence the sea should have been visible. My senses, however, were met by nothing but a reeling vision of tumbled blackness, and a general impression of the letter O. The sun of Vaila had gone out. In a moment of opportunity our united efforts prevailed to close the slab.

“Come” – he had obtained fresh light, and beckoned before me – “let us see how the dead fare in the midst of the great desolation and dies irae!” Running, we had hardly reached the middle of the stairway, when I was thrilled by the consciousness of a momentous shock, the bass of a dull and far-reverberating thud, which nothing

conceivable save the huge simultaneous thumping to the ground of the whole piled mass of the coffins of the sepulchre could have occasioned. I turned to Harfager, and for an instant beheld him, panic flying in his scuttling feet, headlong on the way he had come, with stopped ears and wide mouth. Then, indeed, fear overtook me – a tremor in the midst of the exultant daring of my heart – a thought that now at least I must desert him in his extremity, now work out my own salvation. Yet it was with a most strange hesitancy that I turned to seek him for the last time – a hesitancy which I fully felt to be selfish and diseased. I wandered through the midnight house in search of light, and having happened upon a lamp, proceeded to hunt for Harfager. Several hours passed in this way. It became clear from the state of the atmosphere that the violence about me was being abnormally intensified. Sounds as of distant screams – unreal, like the screamings of spirits – broke now upon my ear. As the time of evening drew on, I began to detect in the vastly augmented baritone of the cataract something new – a shrillness – the whistle of an ecstasy – a malice – the menace of a rabies blind and deaf.

It must have been at about the hour of six that I found Harfager. He sat in an obscure apartment with bowed head, hands on knees. His face was covered with hair, and blood from the ears. The right sleeve of his garment had been rent away in some renewed attempt, as I imagined, to manipulate a window; the slightly-bruised arm hung lank from the shoulder. For some time I stood and watched the mouthing of his mumblings. Now that I had found him I said nothing of departure. Presently he looked sharply up with the cry “Hark!” – then with imperious impatience, “Hark! Hark!” – then with rapturous shout, “The second bell!” And again, in instant sequence upon his cry, there sounded a wail, vague but unmistakably real, through the house. Harfager at the moment dropped reeling with vertigo; but I, snatching a lamp, hastened forth, trembling, but eager. For some time the high wailing continued, either actually, or by reflex action of my ear.

As I ran toward the lady’s apartment, I saw, separated from it by the breadth of a corridor, the open door of an armoury, into which I passed, and seized a battle-axe; and, thus armed, was about to enter to her aid, when Aith, with blazing eye, rushed from her chamber by a further door. I raised my weapon, and, shouting, flew forward to fell him; but by some chance the lamp dropped from me, and before I knew aught, the axe leapt from my grasp, myself hurled far backward. There was, however, sufficiency of light from the chamber to show that the skeleton had dashed into a door of the armoury: that near me, by which I had procured the axe, I instantly slammed and locked; and hastening to the other, similarly secured it. Aith was thus a prisoner. I then entered the lady’s room. She lay half-way across the bed in the alcove, and to my bent ear loudly croaked the râles of death. A glance at the mangled throat convinced me that her last hours were surely come. I placed her supine upon the bed; curtained her utterly from sight within the loosened festoons of the hangings of black, and inhumanly turned from the fearfulness of her sight. On an escritoire near I saw a note, intended apparently for Harfager: “I mean to defy, and fly. Think

not from fear – but for the glow of the Defiance itself. Can you come?” Taking a flame from the candelabrum, I hastily left her to solitude, and the ultimate throes of her agony.

I had passed some distance backward when I was startled by a singular sound – a clash – resembling in timbre the clash of a tambourine, I heard it rather loudly, and that I should now hear it at all, proceeding as it did from a distance, implied the employment of some prodigious energy. I waited, and in two minutes it again broke, and thenceforth at like regular intervals. It had somehow an effect of pain upon me. The conviction grew gradually that Aith had unhung two of the old brazen shields from their pegs; and that, holding them by their handles, and smiting them viciously together, he thus expressed the frenzy which had now overtaken him. I found my way back to Harfager, in whom the very nerve of anguish now seemed to stamp and stalk about the chamber. He bent his head; shook it like a hail-tormented horse; with his deprecating hand brushed and barred from his hearing each recurrent clash of the brazen shields.

“Au, when – when – when –” he hoarsely groaned into my ear, “will that rattle of hell choke in her throat? I will myself, I tell you – with my own hand! – Oh God . . .” Since the morning his auditory inflammation (as, indeed, my own also) seemed to have heightened in steady proportion with the roaring and screaming chaos round; and the râles of the lady hideously filled for him the measured intervals of the grisly cymbaling of Aith. He presently hurled twinkling fingers into the air, and with wide arms rushed swiftly into the darkness.

And again I sought him, and long again in vain. As the hours passed, and the slow Tartarean day deepened toward its baleful midnight, the cry of the now redoubled cataract, mixed with the throng and majesty of the now climactic tempest, assumed too definite and intentional a shriek to be longer tolerable to any mortal reason. My own mind escaped my governance, and went its way. Here, in the hot-bed of fever, I was fevered; among the children of wrath, was strong with the strength, and weak with the feebleness of delirium. I wandered from chamber to chamber, precipitate, bemused, giddy on the up-buoyance of a joy. “As a man upon whom sleep seizes,” so had I fallen. Even yet, as I approached the region of the armoury, the noisy ecstasies of Aith did not fail to clash faintly upon my ear. Harfager I did not see, for he too, doubtless, roamed a headlong Ahasuerus in the round world of the house. At about midnight, however, observing light shine from a door on the lower stage, I entered and found him there. It was the chamber of the dropping horologe. He half-sat, swaying self-hugged, on the ladder-steps, and stared at the blackness of the pool. The last flicker of the riot of the day seemed dying in his eyes. He cast no glance as I approached. His hands, his bare right arm, were red with new-shed blood; but of this, too, he appeared unconscious. His mouth gaped wide to his pantings. As I looked, he leapt suddenly high, smiting hands, with the yell, “The last bell tinkles!” and galloped forth, a-rave.

He therefore did not see (though he may have understood by hearing) the spectacle which, with cowering awe, I immediately thereupon beheld: for from the horologe there slipped with hiss of vapour a ball into the torpid pool: and while the clock once ticked, another! and while the clock yet ticked, another! and the vapour of the first had not utterly passed, when the vapour of the third, intermingling, floated with it into grey tenuity aloft. Understanding that the sands of the house were run, I, too, flinging maniac arms, rushed from the spot. I was, however, suddenly stopped in my career by the instinct of some stupendous doom emptying its vials upon the mansion; and was quickly made aware, by the musketry of a shrill crackling from aloft, and the imminent downpour of a world of waters, that a water-spout had, wholly or partly, hurled the catastrophe of its broken floods upon us, and crashed ruining through the dome of the building.

At that moment I beheld Harfager running toward me, hands buried in hair. As he flew past, I seized him. "Harfager! save yourself!" I cried – "the very fountains, man, – by the living God, Harfager" – I hissed it into his inmost ear – "the very fountains of the Great Deep. . .!" Stupid, he glared at me, and passed on his way. I, whisking myself into a room, slammed the door. Here for some time, with smiting knees, I waited; but the impatience of my frenzy urged me, and I again stepped forth. The corridors were everywhere thigh-deep with water. Rags of the storm, irrageous by way of the orifice in the shattered dome, now blustered with hoiden wantonness through the house. My light was at once extinguished; and immediately I was startled by the presence of another light – most ghostly, gloomy, bluish – most soft, yet wild, phosphorescent – which now perfused the whole building. For this I could in no way account. But as I stood in wonder, a gust of greater vehemence romped through the house, and I was instantly conscious of the harsh snap of something near me. There was a minute's breathless pause – and then – quick, quick – ever quicker – came the throb, and the snap, and the pop, in vastly wide circular succession, of the anchoring chains of the mansion before the urgent shoulder of the hurricane.

And again a second of eternal calm – and then – deliberately – its hour came – the ponderous palace moved. My flesh writhed like the glutinous flesh of a serpent. Slowly moved, and stopped: – then was a sweep – and a swirl – and a pause! then a swirl – and a sweep – and a pause! – then steady industry of labour on the monstrous brazen axis, as the husbandman plods by the plough; then increase of zest, assuetude of a fledgeling to the wing – then intensity – then the last light ecstasy of flight. And now, once again, as staggering and plunging I spun, the thought of escape for a moment visited me: but this time I shook an impious fist. "No, but God, no, no," I cried, "I will no more wander hence, my God! I will even perish with Harfager! Here let me waltzing pass, in this Ball of the Vortices, Anarchie of the Thunders! Did not the great Corot call it translation in a chariot of flame? But this is gaudier than that! redder than that! This is jaunting on the scoriac tempests and reeling bullions of hell! It is baptism in a sun!"

Recollection gropes in a dimmer gloaming as to all that followed. I struggled up the stairway now flowing a steep river, and for a long time ran staggering and plunging, full of wild words, about, amid the downfall of ceilings and the wide ruin of tumbling walls. The air was thick with splashes, the whole roof now, save three rafters, snatched by the wind away. In that blue sepulchral moonlight, the tapestries flapped and trailed wildly out after the flying house like the streaming hair of some ranting fakeer stung gyratory by the gadflies and tarantulas of distraction.

The flooring gradually assumed a slant like the deck of a sailing ship, its covering waters flowing all to accumulation in one direction. At one point, where the largest of the porticoes projected, the mansion began at every revolution to bump with horrid shiverings against some obstruction.

It bumped, and while the lips said one-two-three, it three times bumped again. It was the levity of hugeness! it was the maenadism of mass! Swift – ever swifter, swifter – in ague of urgency, it reeled and raced, every portico a sail to the storm, vexing and wracking its tremendous frame to fragments. I, chancing by the door of a room littered with the débris of a fallen wall, saw through that wan and livid light Harfager sitting on a tomb. A large drum was beside him, upon which, club grasped in bloody hand, he feebly and persistently beat. The velocity of the leaning house had now attained the sleeping stage, that ultimate energy of the spinning-top. Harfager sat, head sunk to chest; suddenly he dashed the hairy wrappings from his face; sprang; stretched horizontal arms; and began to spin – dizzily! – in the same direction as the mansion! – nor less sleep-embathed! – with floating hair, and quivering cheeks, and the starting eye-balls of horror, and tongue that lolled like a panting wolf's from his bawling degenerate mouth. From such a sight I turned with the retching of loathing, and taking to my heels, staggering and plunging, presently found myself on the lower stage opposite a porch. An outer door crashed to my feet, and the breath of the storm smote freshly upon me. An élan, part of madness, more of heavenly sanity, spurred in my brain. I rushed through the doorway, and was tossed far into the limbo without.

The river at once swept me deep-drowned toward the sea. Even here, a momentary shrill din like the splitting asunder of a world reached my ears. It had hardly passed, when my body collided in its course upon one of the basalt piers, thick-cushioned by sea-weed, of the not all-demolished bridge. Nor had I utterly lost consciousness. A clutch freed my head from the surge, and I finally drew and heaved myself to the level of a timber. Hence to the ledge of rock by which I had come, the bridge was intact. I rowed myself feebly on the belly beneath the poundings of the wind. The rain was a steep rushing, like a shimmering of silk, through the air.

Observing the same wild glow about me which had blushed through the broken dome into the mansion, I glanced backward – and saw that the dwelling of the Harfagers was a memory of the past; then upward – and lo, the whole northern sky, to the zenith, burned one tumbled and fickle-undulating ocean of gaudy flames. It was the aurora borealis which, throeing at every aspen instant into rays and columns, cones and obelisks, of vivid vermil and violet and rose, was fairily whiffed and

flustered by the storm into a vast silken oriflamme of tresses and swathes and breezes of glamour; whilst, low-bridging the horizon, the flushed beams of 'the polar light assembled into a changeless boreal corona of bedazzling candor. At the augustness of this great phenomenon I was affected to blessed tears. And with them, the dream broke! – the infatuation passed! – a hand skimmed back from my brain the blind films and media of delusion; and sobbing on my knees, I jerked to heaven the arms of grateful oblation for my surpassing Rephidim, and marvel of deliverance from all the temptation – and the tribulation – and the tragedy – of Vaila.

