The Phial of Dread

THE PHIAL OF DREAD.

By An Analytic Chemist

[Fitz Hugh Ludlow]

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I believe that I am now safe. This part of Columbia Street is not much visited by any people who ever knew me. The other end is in Grand Street. I doubt whether any of my acquaintance have vivid recollection of that end either.

As for myself, I was aware of neither end nor middle till three days ago. Being in Broadway, with an infinite terror hanging on my shoulders like a cloak—starting at every louder voice of man, woman, or child—recoiling from every rapidly approaching stranger who looked me in the face—I naturally enough wished to get away—any where out of the bustle. On my left hand was Grand Street; to turn into it was the most obvious method of escaping from Broadway. So I *did* turn. For a block beyond Brooks's great limbo of possible but undeveloped pantaloons Grand Street keeps a fashionable air. Thus far are whiffs of Broadway sucked into its draft; thus far you meet Broadway faces; thus far you are reminded of Broadway—are not quite at ease with the idea of being out of it—may at any moment be accosted by somebody you have met before on the great pave. I walked faster, therefore. Broadway began to fade out; the Bowery character become slowly dominant. I reached—I crossed the Bowery. Now I began to breathe freer. I was pretty sure—growing surer—that I should not be recognized; and the cloak lifted from my shoulders. The terror did not leave me, but it followed quietly afar off.

A strange place is the part of Grand Street I was going through now, to be sure! Quite a Broadway by itself, though not *the* Broadway, thank Heaven! but a sort of shabby Broadway come to New York to visit its merchant prince-cousin; and not being recognized as a connection, going off in a huff and setting up for itself—the Broadway of the east to west, entirely independent of the north to south aristocrat. Or to the speculative mind it might seem an old shell shed by Broadway the Magnificent thirty years ago, while marble and Albert granite were unconceived—a shell captured by the hermit crab called Grand Street, and peacefully lived in ever since; the ghost of old Broadway, as known to our fathers, reappearing across the track of young Broadway, yet a ghost, sociable, responsive, fearless

of daylight, not to be laid. All such thoughts as these whirled through my brain as I strode along with nervous, devious feet, and they seemed to fight back for a short farther distance *the terror*. I hailed them gladly, therefore, and indulged them.

Here were tailors, from the plethora of their shops evidently rejoicing in abundant custom, famous, blessed, well-to-do; and all this within the world of Grand Street—elsewhere unknown. So many green-grocers, with fresh Bermuda potatoes and cucumbers piled up in front of them, supplying a class of citizens who never gave one thought to Washington Market. So many celebrated doctors, all in black and gilt on the dull sides of the two-story brick houses. Dentists, on great door-plates of tarnished mock silver — and I had never heard of them before. Mouths filled, teeth pulled, backs clothed, children educated — all trades and professions going on — even a wholesale dry-goods store taking up two numbers, like a Murray Street or Liberty Street firm, and selling dollars' worths to its small neighbors who did the pennyworth business; and evidently none of all these depended in the least on any other part of New York for a living. I breathed free in Grand Street, more and more.

All the baggage that it was at present convenient for my to carry was a carpet-bag, not over heavy. I had that in my hand. What, then, was to prevent my taking lodgings in Grand Street? I should not be traced here; the chances were a thousand to one against my ever seeing a known face; and these were the qualifications which just now would make the most miserable tenement worth double the most sumptuous parlor of the St. Nicholas. Why not take lodgings here? —yes, why not?

As I asked myself this question I stood, with the carpet-bag in my hand, vacillating from one foot to the other, and once or twice turning completely around. Take lodgings? Yes, to be sure. Why not?

But my eye struck a building somewhat taller than the rest, on the opposite side of the street. In its door stood a bent man, with the general air about him of being up all night, drinking beer and eating Limburger cheese. His poll

was bald; in his hand was a dispensatory, and he peered down over it through some very round spectacles, as if he were suspecting arsenic in the bricks and meant to sublimate it by a look; on his right was a great green bottle; over his head, a blue; on his left, a red one; and far up, under the third-story windows, in very black letters, was printed all across the house-front, *Deutsche Apotheke*.

The cold sweat came out in large drops upon my forehead. The German on the opposite side lifted his eyes from the arsenical bricks and fixed them upon me! Was I— ? No! He quietly put up his dispensary, and drawing a meerschaum from the depths of his loose greasy coat, filled it, lighted it, and began to smoke. But he had given me a start —such a start! I would not have lived in that vicinity for untold gold. All trembling, I pushed on.

Supposing they had come in search of me even into Grand Street? Who? Why, any body—any body that I had ever known. Supposing they should track me even into that improbable locality, how would they seek me? By my affinities, no doubt. I was a chemist; among chemists they would seek me; and to be near that man of drugs there beyond were—well, to speak plainly, death! I hoped Heaven he had not seen me clearly with those horrible round goggles of his!

Fleeing from him, I passed street after street, still keeping in Grand, when of a sudden, at one corner, my eye was arrested by the faded word "Columbia" in dead old paint, on a dead old billet, on a dead old brick wall. The rains had plowed its impress for how many years only the Heaven from which they came could tell, scrubbing at it assiduously, but as yet not quite able, with all their housemaid energy, to obliterate the stain. "Columbia" —I paused and looked north. The street descends a little, as if it were going to lead down into pleasant valleys, then remembers itself, recalls the fact that it is a city street, and mounts to go staidly on again. But afar I could perceive signs of almost country quiet. There were some green trees — green still, while all the urban parks were taking their dust- baptism, and the lilac leaves, mad for thirst, in St. John's church-yard, might be written on with the finger and keep

their record a week. There was one lazy omnibus utterly empty hurrying through it, far, far up, as if astray there by mistake, and running what seemed homeward with much bewilderment and sense of not having any business there. I saw no one on the east sidewalk as far as the eye reached. On the west a workman sat about midway between me and the farthest visible point, on the grass which sprung up along the curb, his feet in the dry gutter, eating his dinner out of a tin pail quite pastorally. He had not been building any thing. He had only been taking down a row of decayed tree-boxes; they lay in a neat pile near him, waiting for some unlikely cart. When he went away business there would be none in that street.

My mind was made up. I would get lodgings in Columbia Street. If possible, just a little northward of the middle.

If I were a bank-defaulter—a traitor to government—a fallen clergyman—a gallant who had brought gall into the heart—oblivion upon the head of a once pure wife, and were flying the mad, tireless husband—if I were any thing disgraced—in danger—I would make this same point my aim—I would run hither to hide me. If I were a murderer—But oh, hush! that word is too awful!

For when people came to hunt me, the first supposition would be that I was escaping to foreign parts. That idea would draw off a large part of my pursuers in the direction of the steamers, the foreign police journals, efforts for extradition. There would be other who would say, "He is in the States—he is too cunning to try such a common, such a well-watched mode of escape as the steamers"; but being of a somewhat timid mind themselves, they would be little likely to conceive of a man in peril staying in the great, public city. These the suburbs and the country would draw off. A few astute, alert, resolute, fearless persons, clinging to the theory that I had never left New York, would stay here to unearth me. And by them I should be looked for through all the kennels of the lower wards—Leonard, Worth, Thomas streets, and such like, and the upper tenement houses, as in further West Thirty-first Street, for instance, and the ungraded streets still higher. I do not suppose that of those pursuers who remained in New York to

look for me *three* would consider for a moment the likelihood of my being in the mid-heart of New York at the spot I mentioned. Grant even that these three together came on my trail through Grand Street. At the Bowery such an entirely different life and population from that of Broadway begins to appear—the side-streets lose so entirely all reference to the direction of that main artery, that two of the three would be drawn up or down the Bowery in pursuit of me through these branching ways, and to all of them it would appear most likely that I had involved myself in this new current, this turbulent swirl, obeying no Broadway laws, to escape discovery. One, perhaps, perplexed with misgivings, would go on his lonely track, from mere perversity, through Grand Street. There is no transverse way into which I fancy he would be less likely to turn than this one. For, in the first place, the air of respectability and quietude about it would turn him away, on the ground that a man in peril of discovery might as sensibly put himself within range of the lynx-eyes and gossiping tongues of a country town as to come here—there would seem no hurly-burly to merge one's criminal identity in. In the second place, he *would* have his attention attracted to the mysterious look of that billet on the corner wall, bearing the name—its blank, faded, sympathetic-ink appearance would certainly seem ominous to him—it has a theatrical likeness, seems full of secret meaning, and strongly attracts the man on a murder scent—on a defaulter's or a traitor's scent, I mean. But as he drew closer and read the name—read it and found it, after all its bad looks, to be something as patriotic, as frank, as world-wide as "Columbia," he would say to himself, "Pish! I'm a fool! One would have expected such a piratical-looking signal to spell out Brinvilliere Street, Tofana, Borgia, Burke, or Daval Street! Columbia! as soon expect to find a villain on the steps of the Merchants' Exchange!" And so, led by the force of his own false reasoning, made false at first by the disappointment of his sentiment of mystery, he would pass on and seek me in some of the streets parallel but nearer the river.

I am not a defaulter. I am not a seducer. I am not—

well, there are a great many things which I am not. But I am in Columbia Street. On the day when this clinging terror I have told of chased me from Broadway, I stole into Columbia Street as into a shadow—rather as a moose with the dog hanging to his flank will take to the water, deeper and still deeper, so that if he can not drown off his persecutor he can at least bear him easier in that denser fluid.

I could not content myself with any of the houses for a considerable distance from Grand Street. This one was too full of windows—this one had children playing in its front court—this had too much air of ostentatious mystery in its closed blinds, its dull-papered side-lights at the listed front door—and tying up the overgrown shoot of a strangling Madeira vine, a young girl, eager-eyed, bare-shouldered, flushed, and with lips half-parted, stood by a trellis just before this one. Oh! ugh! the terror-cloud wrapped me like a cloak of nightmare. I could not walk freely, but merely shuddered along. I moved away by palpitating like a sea-jelly rather than with feet like a man. It was a long way before I could recover myself at all. The terror would not endure the sight of a young girl. She was water to its hydrophobia!

By-and-by I came to a house two stories high—brick, and left unpainted, so that time had made its original scarlet a grave and staid dark red—shaded by two paper mulberries at the lower windows, and above catching shadow from the lime-tree on the street. The front fence was a picket—dark brown and rather higher than ordinary. I touched the gate, and it did not creak. On a dark door-plate, of old, silvery metal, with mourning lines about its rim, was the name John L. Jones. The door was grained in imitation of mahogany, and its *tout ensemble* was coffiny. You might almost expect, if you opened that door, to see John L. Jones lying pale and still in cerements behind it — a most respectable man with no nonsense about him—and dead. I was drawn to this house. Who would ever come to look for me in the house of a man named John L. Jones! Who would seek for me, the living, among the dead—or those who looked so dead as the inhabitants of this house must? Had there been a *morgue* in

New York, among *its* dead they might have sought me, but not here—not here!

It suited me. I swung the noiseless gate and passed into the silent yard—over the sweating, mould-chinked flagstones of the shady approach, that echoed not to the foot—up the damp, green, bordered steps of cracked freestone. Ah! there is a bell—a brass handle, very small, and lurking in a deep little recess by the architrave, as if it would not break the deadness by being pulled—hiding from the sound of its own tongue. And this alone took away from the coffiny look of the entrance. But when my shaky, undecided hand pulled it I found it not so incongruous with the general keeping—a slow, long-measured succession of muffled tinkles followed the pull—a trickling of mournful drops of sound far down through some dank, cellary air—not a ringing, but a tolling, as if the ghost of some long-dead man had died a second time to become a still fainter ghost—a ghost of a ghost—and the spirits in the first stage—the undiluted survivors—were tolling their chapel chime at his funeral. Link—link—link—link—link.

It suited me better. Presently I heard the steady, unimpassioned tread of middle-aged footsteps—the skeleton of a sexton walking in slippers of cemetery-moss, it might have been, coming to let me in to the burial-yard. The door opened like the gate, equally without creaking, and I saw a quiet, pale face looking languidly into my own — listlessly, not forcefully, inquiring — the face of a woman weary with long griefs which had worn out her resistance to them—a face forty in years, a thousand in cares.

"Mrs Jones—Mrs. John L. Jones?" said I.

The woman nodded feebly without change of expression.

"I have come," I continued, "to ask if I can have a room in your house—a back one if possible—in which I may sleep and have my meals quietly by myself. I am willing to pay liberally. All I need is *quiet*, and you seem to have that here."

"Myfi Cymraes—Shawad Sais Dembid."

This, as nearly as I can spell it, was the sound that came from those wan, changeless lips in reply. I under-

stood it to mean—" I am a Welsh woman, and speak no English" —for I had been with the Welse, at their settlemnet in Remson, in Middle New York, for a month of one summer, and caught just a smattering of their strange tongue. I brought all my vocabulary to the occasion, and rejoined,

"Bawarch—Odur—Gwelly—Tan," which is, being interpreted, "bread, water, a bed, and a fire." This I intended as a concise symbol for my whole want of food and lodging, at the same time pulling a handful of silver and a roll of bills from my wallet to aid the intelligence of the remark.

The woman motioned me in. I was left standing in the entry while she retreated to the basement; and then, from below, I heard her voice mix with a gruffer one, which seemed to indicate that John L. Jones, contrary to all appearances, was *not* in his coffin, but at his dinner. After which she returned, and led the way up a narrow and greasy-carpeted flight of stairs. At the top of it she turned a knob, and disclosed to me a vacant room. No, not vacant in the sense of being unfurnished; but there was a dead smell in it, and nobody sat there; and the only fly on the window-panes was dead, and stuck steadily there, held by stiffened gluey moisture. There were clothes hanging on the walls on rusty iron books—coats, vests, pantaloons. And over the mantle-piece was a dim, bleared daguerrotype. It was a man's—a man who looked as Mrs. John L. Jones might have done when she was, a long time ago, young and handsome. On the frame was pasted a scrap out of some fine-print paper like the *Herald*. I drew close to it and read:

"John L. Jones, Jun., in the 25th year of his age, being the last of twelve children born to his afflicted parents, John J. and Bendigedig Winifred Jones, died of heart complaint, at the residence of his father in this city, June the 12th.

This was June the 19th, one week exactly.

As the woman saw me looking at it, she pointed to it, then to the bed. It was the bed where her last son died! And our interview ended in my taking the room, at eight dollars a week, my food to be sent up to me, and my soli-

tude never to be invaded by the sweeper, the bedmaker, or any living being.

I was suited. The position, as I said when I began this day's journal, strikes me, just as it struck me then, favorably in respect to safety. The hunters who chance to come after me, and in all this vast chaos of houses, this hive of involved yet separate and distinct cities, New York, track me out to No.__ Columbia Street, must be omniscient! This number of all—this street of all.

I keep this journal, because if I hold my secret I shall go mad. I keep this journal, because to tell it but on paper were ruin—death. And I think in this way I shall be safe from pursuit—safe also from going crazy.

I have gone out of the house into the street but once since I came here. I crept forth this evening at dusk, and found, as far off from my lodgings as possible, a hardware store. I bought a saw, a screw-driver, some screws, a couple of gimlets, and a chisel. The saw is thin and fine, of that description known as a compass-saw. I then went to a grocer's and purchased a bottle of sweet-oil. Saws go quite silently well oiled, unless you strike knots. Lastly, I found a carpenter's shop, still open. There were journeymen doing jobs for themselves after hours, inside, and I easily got some nice pine boards of them, fair and smooth planed. I shall go to work tomorrow.

Second Day's Journal

I have done good work today. I have put the memorial of my terror out of sight. It is safe; no one can know where it is but I.

Quietly, at dawn, I began operations. I am sure none of the family were awake. I listened at the key-hole of John L. Jones; he and his wife were in heavy slumber. And the one maid-servant they did keep did not come down from her garret for three hours after.

There is a closet which opens out of my room, just large enough to turn around in, and used as a clothes-press. A row of nails runs around its plaster wall. There are a couple of large drawers close to the floor. From all these conveniences every trace of John L. Jones, Jun., has

been removed, and I am installed therein. The contents of my carpet-bag are spread about the closet as widely as possible, to make a show of occupying it. A poor show it is, however. When the terror first seized me I had only time to snatch this bag and be off. I would not go back for the rest of my baggage for the world.

But what is the terror? Yes, I must tell it. I must faithfully disclose every thing, or this journal will have been merely a fruitless trouble, and I *shall* go mad after all. I am coming to the revelation.

I said I began operations at dawn. This was the fashion of it. I drew one of the drawers in the closet completely out of its case, so gradually that it made no rumbling, no creaking. This left the floor beneath it bare. I brushed away the dust that had been accumulating ever since the drawer was first slid in. I measured out upon the floor an area just six inches square. At each of the four corners of it I bored a hole with my gimlet. And then, after thoroughly oiling my compass-saw, I inserted it, and speedily had a square hole, of the dimensions I have told, through the plank, and all without noise. The square piece that came out I put carefully by, that it might not be abraded on the edges and lose its accuracy for the purpose of a cover.

With the pieces of thin and smooth pine board I had procured of the carpenters I framed a square box, exactly fitting within the hole, and just deep enough not to strike the lath of the ceiling below when I sunk its upper edges half the thickness of the floor-plank. This box I fastened in its piece by noiseless screws. I then plowed the edge of the cover which I had sawed out in making the hole, so that it fitted in its place perfectly over the top of the box. I had thus a little pit in the floor, with a lid admirably adjustable, and in a place quite unimaginable to anybody but myself.

And now, what was all this for? Ugh! It freezes me to tell, but I must—I will!

I go very quietly to my carpet-bag. It lies in an unusual place for baggage—between the tick and the mattress of my bed. I have slept on it thus ever since I came to the house of John L. Jones. I put my hand in to draw it out—

Hark! I withdraw my hand quickly! There is a footstep outside; is any body looking in at the key-hole? No! the foot goes up the garret stairs—it is the servant's—but I hang a coat over the lock to make sure. I draw out the carpet-bag. I said I had arranged its contents in the closet. Yes; but not all. In the very bottom of the bag is a very carefully tied and sealed bundle; cylindrical, and wrapped in strong papers. I take it out; I tremble from head to foot while I am doing so; and even in the blurred, cheap looking-glass which hangs on the pier I can see that my face is as white as his who last lay on the bed before me. Both dim and pale, not so much as if it were I as the only son of John L. Jones coming back to haunt me out of the damp wall. But I break the seals with a twitching hand, laying the fragments of wax carefully in one place, where I may gather and destroy them; I unfold one by one the many layers of paper, and place them also by themselves. And with the cold beads standing on my brow and cheeks, as on a flask in an ice-house, I come to the core of the bundle. I hold it in my hand.

A bloody dagger? No. A roll of bank-notes? No. A coining die? Not at all. A harmless-looking, ordinary, stout glass phial, with a ground glass stopper, cemented hermetically in the neck. A phial whose capacity is about four fluid ounces. It is full almost to the top of a transparent greenish liquid, and as I tip it the small bubble of air which lies above it floats slowly up and down with a gradual sliding motion and shows the liquid to be of a somewhat oily consistency, like the stronger acids. I lift it to my nostrils, forced to do so by an irresistible fascination; and even through that hermetical sealing it seems to me as if I perceived a whiff of death—a charnel odor that is horrible. It may be, nevertheless, only fancy working on me with the heavy air of this recent corpse-chamber in which I live. But at any rate I sicken, I faint, so that the phial nearly falls from my hands. It is not poison—perhaps any one but I might drink it all and be unharmed; but that fluid, even through its stout glass walls, *murders me like a slow lightning!* O my God! would that I could bury it, burn it, dash it from me where it would never return! But it is an

indestructible phial of vengeance—a fluid doom of hell—never, never, never to be exiled from me any more!

It is this for which I have made the hiding-place in the closet. I summon all my strength and will—I carry it, hardly opening my eyes to look where I go, to that little pit which I have made—I lay it therein—I cram down the layers of wrapping paper over it—I replace the tight-fitting wood cover, and, finally, I slide the drawer back over all to its former place. Then the horror lifts again from my shoulders a little space, and I lie down on my bed, convulsed in every nerve of my whole body.

The work is done. Through a broken shutter of my closed window one clear, sharp pencil of sunlight, showing that the day is now high-mounted, streams in, flushing the moty space about me, and falls like an inescapable, omniscient finger right on the threshold of the closet-door!

O God! the very sun knows my secret and tells it!

But I will not put down my revelations today. No. I am too sick. I will stop till to-morrow.

Third Day's Journal

It is—as I see on looking at my last date—five days since I wrote in this record. I have been very ill; part of the time quite delirious, I think. How fortunate that I have been alone! Yes, even if I had died alone, how fortunate. The red-haired Denbighshire girl, who brings up my meals sometimes, I am quite sure, knocked in vain for entrance, so stertorous have been my slumbers; for although she has not a command of English sufficient to communicate that fact to me, I infer it from having found the salver, with my food all cold upon it, placed on the floor outside my room, long after meal-hours. And at the times when I have answered her knock, the pitying, half-fearful look she has cast upon me seemed to prove that, in her experience, no much more miserable man had manifested himself.

How fortunate that I am alone! For I have been doing, saying very strange things, and I am not aware whether all of them, as I know part to be, are dreams.

Take, for instance, the night after my last entry in my journal. I had hardly closed my eyes in sleep before this

vision came into my presence. A beautiful girl of twenty knelt before me, her black hair rushing down over her fair neck in great free waves, like a mid-forest waterfall looked at in the first darkness of a summer evening, when the white floor of pebbles below it could still be seen glimmering up here and there through the water. A passionate melancholy made her face shadowy, and at the same time glowed in it with unearthly light, making a strange Rembrandt *chiaroscuro* that pained me mystically. With her small white hands she beat her still whiter breast, and ever, as her left side was disclosed, a deadly fresh wound showed ghastly in the vague light of the dream—a wound to the very heart, and still slowly dropping, dropping blood, like life telling itself away on beads of coral. She spoke no word, but looked at me—looked me to stone. I could not cry out; I could not move; yet I heard many voices as of people coming behind me. I tried to flee, but I could not even wake up.

At this moment of intense pain the dream changed. A shining mosque of pure glass, with a single minaret, whose crystals blazed in the sun like solid fire, rose suddenly from the ground—up-builded in an instant by magic. Gravitation lost all power over me, and I flew to the very pinnacle of the minaret with the ease of a wind-wafted gossamer. Till I reached it I thought myself alone, but just as I alighted I discovered that I had a burden in my arms. In surprise, I scrutinized it—it was a woman. Oh horror! it was she of the raven hair—the bleeding heart! I sought to loose her grasp from me, but I could not; it was the death-clutch. At last, in my despair, seeing a trap-door open in the bulb of the minaret, I hurled the girl down through it, and saw her strike, fathoms below, on the crystal pavement. So released, I flow leagues away across the air. But still I was plagued. The mosque, also taking wings, pursued me. At last, in a desert place, I dropped down breathless, and in anguish of fear cowered shrinking into myself, for shelter there was none. A moment more, and the mosque of glass dropped beside me. But how changed! It had grown—it was still growing—smaller, and its rate of diminution increased constantly. At last, with one great

spiral whirl, it shrunk to a gigantic flask, and in it, beating her breast, showing her red heart's wound, knelt the girl! Another whirl, and it was the phial—*the phial of dread!* As small as the phial I thought I had buried out of sight; but in it knelt clear as before, and seen through a green fluid medium, though almost infinitesimally little and delicate, the girl of the pierced heart. And as the apothecary labels his phials, so this was labeled. In letters black as ink could be, yet burning into my eyes like a calcium light, was written on the label, "Charlotte Lynde, in the 21st year of her age."

Then I *did* wake! I leaped from my bed crying, "Who labeled the phial? My God! who labeled the phial? Who told you that I had put her in it? I am lost!"

As I woke more thoroughly I stilled myself; I think I was not heard; and then, to reassure myself, I went to the closet, laboriously got out the phial from its tomb, and, striking a light found it was *not* labeled. Then putting it back I slid the drawer home again, and sat on the closet-floor all night, keeping watch in the darkness with my hand on the drawer knob.

Fourth Day's Journal

Among the Post-office advertisements in the *Herald* of today (kindly sent upon the salver with my breakfast) I saw my name. It seemed to speak itself from the column—it gave me almost such a shock as hearing it called at my side by a familiar voice. Ah! these newspapers! that can shout their recognitions into your utmost dungeon privacies; how dreadful would they be had they power of return to their starting-place with answers! The reflection that they could not reassured me, and I read my name over again with calmness.

It may seem fool-hardy, but I resolved to go for that letter. It would be a relief to the intense silence and self-devourings of my own mind to see what somebody else had to say—somebody who could not see me. So I stole down by the extreme east edge of town. Along the piers, through South Street, then across to the Post-office.

It was agony to stand in that string of applicants who,

keeping painful lock-step, march to the prison-looking window where advertised letters are to be had! A slow ordeal of torture, truly, to a man who hardly dares to stand in one place for an instant, lest he should multiply the probability of recognition. The man in front of me, when, after ages, it came his turn, higgled with the feverish, question-sick clerk about the extra postal charge for advertising. I could have knocked him down in my terrible agony of haste to be away. But he paid his pennies and took himself off, and I stood at the grating.

"What name?" said the clerk.

"Edgar Sands," I answered, feeling my voice twitch at the muscles of my throat like a horse at the rein. But I held it firm; it did not tremble. Just then a hand fell on my shoulder. I started as if the executioner grasped me, looked around, and found that it was only a drunken sailor, who begged my pardon when he saw my astonishment. But the shock he gave me I did not recover from for hours.

"Sands—Sands—what first name?" repeated the clerk, slowly.

"Edgar, I said," was my reply. I fancied he was longer in looking over the bundle in his hand than there was need, and made a gesture of impatience. His motions quickened perceptibly, but he seemed (though that may have been fancy) scrutinizing me in an underbrowed way as much as he did the letters. It was very disagreeable even to fancy it.

"Ah, here it is—Edgar Sands! By-the-way, Mr. Sands, could you give us your address, so that the postman may call on you on his rounds when you have any thing? We have so many Sandses come into the advertised department that they give us a great deal of trouble; in fact, my own sands nearly run out sorting them—ha, ha, ha! Heh?"

This sally of wit, coming as it did from a being whose particular routine is usually supposed to have withered all the faculties save those of quick reading and manipulation, so staggered me that I stood regarding him fixedly for a moment, half suspecting him, half overwhelmed by him, and then answered:

"I will come for my letters as I want them," and passed out the door.

The letter was in my pocket, and if possible, it brought me still nearer than I had been to the further verge of miserableness. I thought I knew the handwriting; I durst not open it to see. I durst not stop for an instant on any account. The whole trial at the Post-office had brought back the old dread in all its relentlessness of clinging, freezing weight. I feared myself watched. Who could tell but that unusual conversation of the delivery clerk had been meant to detain me till I could be marked? How did I know but at that very instant I was tracked by some lynx-eyed emissary? And what if, after all my careful calculation, I should be followed to my improbable concealment?

I knew the horror of Cain; I seemed moving before an omniscient persecutor! Yet I have not done his wrong. Nay —but my soul answers—nay, but thou hast done a dreadful thing!

One hope of escape from the Nemesis I could not see (but felt as if all my body were covered with eyes), one hope remained. I sauntered into the Hotel Jellalich, a foreign inn, full of lounging men whose beards were wet with beer, and cutting my way through the smoke of pipes as up to a battery, demanded a room of the barkeeper. I had been traveling—I was weary—I would sleep till the Cape May boat went out. Monsieur would be called? Yes, at a quarter to four precisely. Would it please Monsieur to take dinner? No dinner. The man handed me a key. On which floor was the room? The second, Monsieur. I prefer the first, the ground-floor. The man looked surprised, but changed my key. I laid down the price on the counter, and a boy went before me to show the way, carrying a whisk broom and slippers. I locked the door after me as soon as I had entered, and then looked out of the window. It opened on a court full of unsavory garlic steams, but just now entirely empty of aught but that. A sensitive nose would have thought it fully occupied.

But I had not time to think of such odors. I seemed to breathe in the charnel smell of the dreadful phial, and behind me I fancied footsteps, whispers, all sorts of sounds that tremble and cause to tremble. I placed a chair against the door, on the chair a pillow from the dingy bed to hide

the keyhole, and then I tried the sash. It was damp and swollen; it had lost one cord and weight, so that I made slow progress, and was in an agony of fear to hear it creak. But then ten minutes' patient, gradual pushing lifted it far enough to admit my head and shoulders, after which I fell rather than clambered out. Still there was no one in the court, and, thanking God, I slunk through it to the farther side, out of which a dark *porte-chochere* led into the street. I came into the open air; I was unperceived; I was safe! Ah! safe? As safe as *I* could be.

Thus I escaped, and by degrees got back to my room at John L. Jones's. Once there, I sank trembling into a chair and drew forth the letter. I tore open the envelope, and hungrily read these words:

> "Albany, June 3, 18—
>
> "Edgar Sands, Esq.
>
> "Very dear Sir, —It is now a week since my daughter Charlotte left home in your charge, to spend a couple of days in the city of New York. No one but a widowed father like myself, with this only child, can fancy the distress with which I tell you that, in all this time, I have not received a word of tidings from her. She was intending to stop with her mother's sister in East Eleventh Street; and when two days had elapsed beyond her furthest proposed stay, and I got no letter relieving my anxiety, my fears became so extreme that I telegraphed to that lady for some information relative to my poor girl. In three hours the answer came back that she had not been seen or heard from! I went immediately to New York by the earliest train and sought out your laboratory. You were not there, nor have I been able to find you. As a last resource, I take this means of reaching you. If it fails—and nothing more reveals itself—I go down to the grave in bitterness that has no name. For God's sake, dear Sir, let me hear from you immediately! Telegraph me fully as you would write on paper.

"I can form but one hypothesis to keep me from utter despair. Charlotte's mother and her family were all subject to fits of insanity—sometimes occurring most unexpectedly—once resulting fatally. And in my daughter's childhood I remember her having shown strange indications, which gave us much anxiety for the future. She may have reached New York with you, and then wandered away, under the influence of her first attack of this awful malady.

"Pity me! pity me! for God's sake. All you know, let me have; and if she is dead, I shall be better satisfied than if she, the beautiful, the lovely, is lost, without any guiding soul, in that dark, dangerous city. Telegraph instantly! And God deal with you as you deal with her heart-broken father, your father's friend and yours,

"Russell Lynde.

"Edgar Sands, Esq, New York."

You might tell me till my dying day that it was rats beneath the floor; but it was not. With my last breath I would swear not. I heard distinctly, as I read aloud the last words of this letter, a rattling in the closet—a dull, heavy clink, as of that phial with its contents shaken up and down, trying to escape from the pit in the floor! And then there came up through the planks, and out of the crevices of the door, a low, prolonged, bitter wail, as of a woman in soul-pain. Rats! Do rats cry like dying women?

I ran to the closet, feeling my head full of molten lead, which was about to pour out through my eyes. I tore out the drawer without much regard to noise—I pried up the cover of my pit and looked down. The phial *had* moved; from the center where I had placed it it had shrunk into one corner. I had left it upright; it was lying flat! I took it into my hand; it seemed blistered all over with icy drops of sweat!

I brought it out into the light of the room—a muffled light, but brighter than the closet's. Did I dream again? I chafed my forehead to wake me up, if all this was but an-

other freak of sleep. I looked once more:

Charlotte Lynde was kneeling in that phial—the blood-red spot showing between the fingers that she pressed upon her heart!

I shook the phial—I whispered madly, "If thou be now a fiend in the life which thou livest, in God's name, *depart*! If thou be gathered among the angels, pity me for Christ's mercy and *depart!*"

She never moved at atom's breadth. I set the phial down upon the table, and felt a devil-calmness take possession of me. I looked the dread full in the face, and sat down to write a *lie* to the girl's father:

> "Russell Lynde, Esq.
>
> "Respected Sir, —On the day that I left Albany in company with your daugher, I fully expected to take charge of her as far as New York. We reached Poughkeepsie, where the train stopped ten minutes, and Miss Lynde, who had seemed dejected during the whole three hours of our journey, complained of feeling ill and desired me to bring her a glass of water. I left our seat to comply with the request and returned as soon as possible, but found her gone. Supposing her absence temporary, I made no search for her until just before the train was to start, and then, feeling somewhat anxious, rose and passed through to ascertain whether she might not by mistake have got into the wrong car on her return. She was nowhere to be seen. I then got off and looked for her through the rooms of the station—alas! with the same result. My fears became extreme, and I abandoned my project of taking that train to New York, left it, and spent the remainder of the afternoon in looking for her through the hotels of Poughkeepsie. My search was equally fruitless there. At length I remembered her speaking of relatives in the place, whom she very much wished to see, and came to the conclusion that she had determined to change her plan and visit them. But as their name was

unknown to me, I could pursue my quest no farther. I therefore returned to the station and took a late train to the city. I have been out of town ever since, or would have received your letter long ago and answered it immediately.

"I can understand your agony. I agree with your hypothesis of derangement, but further information I am unable to give.

"May God pity and help you!

"Your humble servant—"

Thus far had I come in the written lie and was about to sign my name to it, when I heard the very same dull ringing of the phial that had driven me mad before. It was moving toward me on the table, and in it I clearly beheld the figure shake its finger at me — once — twice — thrice — and the pen fell from my hand.

I was *compelled* to resume it. Within that horrible glass prison I saw a gesture *commanding* me to. I could have sooner disobeyed the pitiless sweep of an engire crank to which I was lashed by cords! Then, not audibly to the external sense, but ringing like a bell to the inner ear, I heard a low voice dictating, and seizing another sheet of paper I wrote:

"Thrice miserable Father, —I have no longer any hand which can hold human pen, but I use Edgar Sands to write for me.

I was going mad slowly for days. Days and days, nights and nights, when no soul but I knew it. When I left Albany, I was sure I should never see you again. Death went riding at my side between me and my useless protector all the way to New York. Protector! Who *could* protect me from the slayer that he could not see, feel or hear? Though on the seat by my side, by Edgar's, he sat to my eyes plainly visible, muttering, 'It comes! It comes!' and when we were half-way down the road, 'It hastens! It hastens!'

"Reaching New York, I asked Edgar Sands to

show me his laboratory. *It* made me ask him. That was the place for the end of all things, *it* said.

He took me there as I desired, immediately. We were alone together among the strange poisons, each one of whom, with a quicker or a slower death-devil in his eye, sat in his glass or porcelain sentry-box, a living force of bale. Should it be Hemp? No, that was too slow, uncertain, painful. Morphine? Too many antidotes—too much commonness, ostentation in *that*. Daturin? I did not like to ask how much of that was certain.

I saw a small glass bottle full of crystals, labeled 'Anhydrous Cyanic Acid.' I knew that was sure, quick as thought. I slyly took down the bottle, opened it, withdraw a slender diamond spear, and was just putting it to my tongue, when Edgar turned around, saw me, caught my hand soon enough, and I was cheated of that conclusion. He eyed me in surprise, cried, 'Are you crazy?' and I answered, looking innocent, that I thought the thing was harmless. 'It would have killed you like a thunderbolt!' he replied, pale as death and trembling. 'Ah, indeed! how terrible!' I answered, and turned away. There was a long, thin knife lying by the charcoal pan of a blowpipe, used, I saw, to chip off small fragments of minerals to be tested. That was bitter, but quick, and before Edgar had recovered from his first alarm it was in my heart to the hilt.

"We were all alone, locked into the laboratory. I made only one faint moan, and fell on my knees at his feet, the blood darting out between the fingers, which I pressed against the faint, fierce pain. And he only cried, `My God! My God! We are lost, both lost!' He ran for help, for a witness at the least, but before he could open the door I had fallen upon the marble floor—*dead*!

"In the air, hovering among strange voices and shapes, I still saw him. There must have been madness in my cold face, lying below there, which

he caught; for, instead of leaving the place, he went calmly to work, with an awful despair in his eyes, and cut the shell of me—the husk I had left —to pieces; as a surgeon would, on a table in a laboratory. These fragments he screwed down into a large retort, and placed in the fiercest of flames, fed with pure oxygen. Though still above, apart from them and him, and in the spirit, I knew that all of me that had been seen on earth was reducing there to the ultimates—I was distilled there by degrees. Through the worm of the still my physical life came over in a fluid; and, drop by drop, he saw it fall into the receiver, watching through the whole night, with lips blue as corruption in the flame which he moved only to feed. That motionless, bloodless face of his, by its terrible attraction, called back my soul into the fluid, though from the solid body my life had parted long hours before. I was becoming enthralled—dungeon-covered in a pit of glass. At four in the morning he had done the heaviest part of his work. He let the fire go down; the ashy residuum in the bottom of the retort he treated with acid; it cleared; and he poured the fluid result into the receiver, which held my distilled being.

"Then it was that my soul came wholly back into the liquid body thus prepared for it—I was one with a strange, greenish, phosphorescent oil. Ah! that was agony which, in the life of the frame of bone, nerve, muscle, had no parallel! Agony—hellish agony—with no prospect of an end! For he knew not what he was subjecting me to; the fiend used him for my misery, while he only thought of obliterating all traces of the damning crime humanity would lay at his door, finding me stabbed to the heart.

"He poured all my life from the receiver into a phial. He sealed the phial hermetically—yes, hermetically, for my shrieks within, which cracked my own ears, were utterly inaudible to him. Then he

deluged with strong acids all the blood-spots on the floor, the table, and fled the laboratory in the first gray light of morning, taking me with him in his satchel.

"I am with him now—shut up to this liquid life of hell—a hell that will never cease till the phial be broken, the liquid outpoured, and I set free to fly to Heaven's court of pardon for forgiveness. I am worthy of pardon: I was mad when I did the crime.

"God pity thee, poor, poor Father, and thy daughter,

"Charlotte Lynde."

I had finished this letter mechanically, not meaning aught else in my pen but scrawls, never knowing what word was coming next, and wholly forced along, by an outer will. I had signed the name; and then, for the first time, I saw that the hand in which I had traced every letter of the whole—was *Charlotte Lynde's*!

Heavy feet came up the front steps. They sounded like the feet visiting a vault, on the damp stones in front of John L. Jones's.

The ghostly bell said *link, link, link, link, link,* as when I had pulled it; it was answered by the same grim warder; and then I heard eager voices in conversation. O God! I heard my own name mentioned distinctly in the dark, wet entry below!

Then the heavy footsteps came up the stairs, trampling each step behind angrily, each step in front, hungrily—all doomfully! They reached the landing, stopped at my door, and my name was uttered again.

There was a large tub of water standing by the side of my washstand. I ran to it, snatching the phial form the table as I went.

With one blow against the edge of the tub I broke off the neck of the phial, and let the dreadful fluid run out. A violent vapor, variegated with amber and leek-green, filled the room; a strangling grave odor pervaded my very brain—my eyes were nigh burned out by the pungency of it—and still the fluid trickled slowly down into the water.

No, not *into* it, for it floated upon the water, utterly refusing to mingle. At first it lay in a broad, shallow, iridescent pellicle over the whole surface. My name was spoken louder at the door, and hard, eager hands shook the lock. Then that concentrated essence of a mad life gathered itself, by the same law of grouping which had given its original members birth as one body, and turning an agonized face up into my own — (a strong man's shoulder forges against the door!) —trying to hide a red, pierced heart, there lay on the top of the water, clear as in clearest life, Charlotte Lynde!

The door gave way. Three men came into the room. One was John L. Jones, one was the delivery clerk, and one—the father of the dead girl!

"Fiend!" he cried, making at me, while the two others scarcely held his struggling arms, "what have you done with my child?"

I said not a word, but pointed first at the last letter I had written, lying on the table; then at the surface of the water. The three men bent over and gazed—two of them with looks of blank amazement, but one with an agony that paralyzed every muscle of his face.

And just then the shape smiled full into the father's face, looked and pointed toward heaven, then gathered itself above the water, and flew up between us; for an instant lingering caressingly upon the old man's white head —then disappeared forever. I fell to the floor—not from dread, but because peace at last came too suddenly. And this last day of my journal is written at the first lodging I moved to after I was discharged from Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. ☠