Thrilling Tales: “The Adventure of the German Student” by Washington Irving and “The Room Above” by M.L. Humphreys

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Good afternoon everybody and welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library’s Story Time for Grownups. Ordinarily Thrilling Tales happens the first and third Monday of every month. This October, however, we have a Thrilling Tale every Monday, in honor of the season and all the great scary stories that I would be sad about not getting the chance to tell you if I only got to do this twice, so. Come join us, and please do share, spread the word. Today’s stories will also be podcasts – so if you know somebody who can’t make it or you like to listen to them on a dark night at home, these should appear in a week or two on the Library’s website.

My name is David and I am a librarian here, I work on the third floor in the Reader’s Services Department. We've got lots of good books up there, and we would love to see you. And, without any further ado, let’s get started. Today we have two stories, one from the 1920s and one from the 1820s. In fact, I think it is the oldest story ever shared here, so it does have some fancy old-timey language, and that is the one we’ll start with. And it’s story you may be familiar with even if you’ve never heard it in this form. Let’s see, it’s called “The Adventure of the German Student” by Washington Iriving.

In a stormy night, in the tempestuous times of the French Revolution, a young German was returning to his lodgings, at a late hour, across the old parts of Paris. The lightning gleamed, and the loud claps of thunder rattled through the lofty narrow streets--but I should first tell you something about this young German.

Gottfried Wolfgang was a young man of good family. He had studied for some time at Göttingen, but being of a visionary and enthusiastic character, he had wandered into those wild and speculative doctrines which have so often bewildered German students. His secluded life, his intense application, and the singular nature of his studies, had an effect on both mind and body. His health was impaired; his imagination diseased. He had been indulging in fanciful speculations on spiritual essences, until, like Swedenborg, he had an ideal world of his own around him. He took up a notion, I do not know

from what cause, that there was an evil influence hanging over him; an evil genius or spirit seeking to ensnare him and ensure his perdition. Such an idea working on his melancholy temperament produced the most gloomy effects. He became haggard and desponding. His friends discovered the mental malady preying upon him, and determined that the best cure was a change of scene; he was sent, therefore, to finish his studies amidst the splendors and gayeties of Paris.

Wolfgang arrived at Paris at the breaking out of the revolution. The popular delirium at first caught his enthusiastic mind, and he was captivated by the political and philosophical theories of the day: but the scenes of blood which followed shocked his sensitive nature, disgusted him with society and the world, and made him more than ever a recluse. He shut himself up in a solitary apartment in the Pays Latin, the quarter of students. There, in a gloomy street not far from the monastic walls of the Sorbonne, he spent hours all together in the great libraries of Paris, those catacombs of departed authors, rummaging among their hoards of dusty and obsolete works in quest of food for his unhealthy appetite. He was, in a manner, a literary ghoul, feeding in the charnel-house of decayed literature.

Wolfgang, though solitary and recluse, was of an ardent temperament, but for a time it operated merely upon his imagination. He was too shy and ignorant of the world to make any advances to the fair, but he was a passionate admirer of female beauty, and in his lonely chamber would often lose himself in reveries on forms and faces which he had seen, and his fancy would deck out images of loveliness far surpassing the reality.

While his mind was in this excited and sublimated state, a dream produced an extraordinary effect upon him. It was of a female face of transcendent beauty. So strong was the impression made, that he dreamt of it again and again. It haunted his thoughts by day, his slumbers by night; in fine, he became passionately enamored of this shadow of a dream. This lasted so long that it became one of those fixed ideas which haunt the minds of melancholy men, and are at times mistaken for madness.

Such was Gottfried Wolfgang, and such his situation at the time I mentioned. He was returning home late one stormy night, through some of the old and gloomy streets of the Marais, the ancient part of Paris. The loud claps of thunder rattled among the high houses of the narrow streets. He came to the Place de Grève, the square, where public executions are performed. The lightning quivered about the pinnacles of the ancient Hôtel de Ville, and shed flickering gleams over the open space in front. As Wolfgang was crossing the square, he shrank back in horror at finding himself close by the guillotine. It was the height of the reign of terror, when this dreadful instrument of death stood ever ready, and its scaffold was continually running with the blood of the virtuous and the brave. It had that very day been actively employed in the work of carnage, and there it stood in grim array, amidst a silent and sleeping city, waiting for fresh victims.

Wolfgang's heart sickened within him, and he was turning shuddering from the horrible engine, when he beheld a shadowy form, cowering as it were at the foot of the steps which led up to the scaffold. A succession of vivid flashes of lightning revealed it more distinctly. It was a female figure, dressed in black. She was seated on one of the lower steps of the scaffold, leaning forward, her face hid in her

lap; and her long dishevelled tresses hanging to the ground, streaming with the rain which fell in torrents. Wolfgang paused. There was something awful in this solitary monument of woe. The female had the appearance of being above the common order. He knew the times to be full of vicissitude, and that many a fair head, which had once been pillowed on down, now wandered houseless. Perhaps this was some poor mourner whom the dreadful axe had rendered desolate, and who sat here heart-broken on the strand of existence, from which all that was dear to her had been launched into eternity.

He approached, and addressed her in the accents of sympathy. She raised her head and gazed wildly at him. What was his astonishment at beholding, by the bright glare of the lighting, the very face which had haunted him in his dreams. It was pale and disconsolate, but ravishingly beautiful.

Trembling with violent and conflicting emotions, Wolfgang again accosted her. He spoke something of her being exposed at such an hour of the night, and to the fury of such a storm, and offered to conduct her to her friends. She pointed to the guillotine with a gesture of dreadful signification.

"I have no friend on earth!" said she.

"But you have a home," said Wolfgang.

"Yes--in the grave!"

The heart of the student melted at the words.

"If a stranger dare make offer," said he, "without danger of being misunderstood, I would offer my humble dwelling as a shelter; myself as a devoted friend. I am friendless myself in Paris, and a stranger in the land; but if my life could be of service, it is at your disposal, and should be sacrificed before harm or indignity should come to you."

There was an honest earnestness in the young man's manner that had its effect. His foreign accent, too, was in his favor; it showed him not to be a hackneyed inhabitant of Paris. Indeed, there is an eloquence in true enthusiasm that is not to be doubted. The homeless stranger confided herself implicitly to the protection of the student.

He supported her faltering steps across the Pont Neuf, and by the place where the statue of Henry the Fourth had been overthrown by the populace. The storm had abated, and the thunder rumbled at a distance. All Paris was quiet; that great volcano of human passion slumbered for a while, to gather fresh strength for the next day's eruption. The student conducted his charge through the ancient streets of the Pays Latin, and by the dusky walls of the Sorbonne, to the great dingy hotel which he inhabited. The old portress who admitted them stared with surprise at the unusual sight of the melancholy Wolfgang, with a female companion.

On entering his apartment, the student, for the first time, blushed at the scantiness and indifference of his dwelling. He had but one chamber--an old-fashioned saloon--heavily carved, and fantastically furnished with the remains of former magnificence, for it was one of those hotels in the quarter of the Luxenburg Palace which had once belonged to nobility. It was lumbered with books and papers, and all the usual apparatus of a student, and his bed stood in a recess at one end.

When lights were brought, and Wolfgang had a better opportunity of contemplating the stranger, he was more than ever intoxicated by her beauty. Her face was pale, but of a dazzling fairness, set off by a profusion of raven hair that hung clustering about it. Her eyes were large and brilliant, with a singular expression approaching almost to wildness. As far as her black dress permitted her shape to be seen, it was of perfect symmetry. Her whole appearance was highly striking, though she was dressed in the simplest style. The only thing approaching to an ornament which she wore, was a broad black band round her neck, clasped by diamonds.

The perplexity now commenced with the student how to dispose of the helpless being thus thrown upon his protection. He thought of abandoning his chamber to her, and seeking shelter for himself elsewhere. Still he was so fascinated by her charms, there seemed to be such a spell upon his thoughts and senses, that he could not tear himself from her presence. Her manner, too, was singular and unaccountable. She spoke no more of the guillotine. Her grief had abated. The attentions of the student had first won her confidence, and then, apparently, her heart. She was evidently an enthusiast like himself, and enthusiasts soon understand each other.

In the infatuation of the moment, Wolfgang avowed his passion for her. He told her the story of his mysterious dream, and how she had possessed his heart before he had even seen her. She was strangely affected by his recital, and acknowledge to have felt an impulse towards him equally unaccountable. It was the time for wild theory and wild actions. Old prejudices and superstitions were done away; everything was under the sway of the "Goddess of Reason." Among the old rubbish of the old times, the forms and ceremonies of marriage began to be considered superfluous bonds for honorable minds. Social compact were the vogue. Wolfgang was too much of theorist not to be tainted by the liberal doctrines of the day.

"Why should we separate?" said he: "our hearts are united; in the eye of reason and honor we are as one. What need is there of sordid forms to bind high souls together?"

The stranger listened with emotion: she had evidently received illumination at the same school.

"You have no home nor family," continued he: "Let me be everything to you, and rather let us be everything to one another. if form is necessary, form shall be observed--there is my hand. I pledge myself to you forever."

"Forever?" said the stranger, solemnly.

"Forever!" repeated Wolfgang.

The stranger clasped the hand extended to her: "Then I am yours," murmured she, and sank upon his bosom.

The next morning the student left his bride sleeping, and sallied forth at an early hour to seek more spacious apartments suitable to the change in his situation. When he returned, he found the stranger lying with her head hanging over the bed, and one arm thrown over it. He spoke to her, but received no reply. He advanced to awaken her from her uneasy posture. On taking her hand, it was cold--there was no pulsation--her face was pallid and ghastly. In a word, she was a corpse.

Horrified and frantic, he alarmed the house. A scene of confusion ensued. The police were summoned. As the officer of police entered the room, he started back on beholding the corpse.

"Great heaven!" cried he, "how did this woman come here?"

"Do you know anything about her?" said Wolfgang eagerly.

"Do I?" exclaimed the officer: "she was guillotined yesterday."

He stepped forward; undid the black collar round the neck of the corpse, and the head rolled to the floor!

The student burst into a frenzy. "The fiend! the fiend has gained possession of me!" shrieked he; "I am lost forever."

They tried to soothe him, but in vain. He was possessed with the frightful belief that an evil spirit had reanimated the dead body to ensnare him. He went distracted, and died in a mad-house.

[Applause and laughter] So the version of that story I remember she, she, told around the camp fire, she warns him not to remove the thing from around her neck, right? And, then he is the one who removes it and as her head rolls to the floor, she says, “I told you you’d be sorry!” Do you remember that? [Laughter] Okay, it’s the same story. Okay, move forward one century for our main story today, a story by a completely unknown writer who wrote for the pulps by the name of M.L. Humphreys, and the name of the story is “The Floor Above.”

September 17, 1922.—I sat down to breakfast this morning with a good appetite. The heat seemed over, and a cool wind blew in from my garden, where chrysanthemums were already budding. The sunshine streamed into the room and fell pleasantly on Mrs. O’Brien’s broad face as she brought in the eggs and coffee. For a supposedly lonely old bachelor the world seemed to me a pretty good place. I was buttering my third set of waffles when the housekeeper again appeared, this time with the mail.

I glanced carelessly at the three or four letters beside my plate. One of them bore a strangely familiar handwriting. I gazed at it a minute, then seized it with a beating heart. Tears almost came into my eyes. There was no doubt about it - it was Arthur Barker's handwriting! Shaky and changed, to be sure, but ten years have passed since I have seen Arthur, or, rather, since his mysterious disappearance.

For ten years I have not had a word from him. His people know no more than I what has become of him, and long ago we gave him up for dead. He vanished without leaving a trace behind, him. It seemed to me, too, that with him vanished the last shreds of my youth. For Arthur was my dearest friend in that happy time. We were boon companions, and many a mad prank played together.

And now, after ten years silence, Arthur was writing to me!

The envelope was postmarked Baltimore. Almost reluctantly—for I feared what it might contain— I passed my finger under the flap and I opened it. It held a single sheet of paper tom from a pad. But it was Arthur's writing:

"Dear Tom: Old man, can you run down to see me for a few days I'm afraid I'm in a bad way. ARTHUR."

Scrawled across the bottom was the address, 536 N. Marathon Street.

I have often visited Baltimore, but I cannot recall a street of that name.

Of course I shall go. . . . But what a strange letter after ten years! There is something almost uncanny about it.

I shall go tomorrow evening. I cannot possibly get off before then.

September 18.—I am leaving tonight. Mrs. O'Brien has packed my two suitcases, and everything is in readiness for my departure. Ten minutes ago I handed her the keys and she went off tearfully. She has been sniffling all day and I have been perplexed, for a curious thing occurred this morning.

It was about Arthur's letter. Yesterday, when I had finished reading it, I took it to my desk and placed it in a small compartment together with other personal papers. I remember distinctly that it was on top, with a lavender card from my sister directly underneath. This morning I went to get it. It was gone.

There was the lavender card exactly where I had seen it, but Arthur's letter had completely disappeared. I turned everything upside down, then called Mrs. O'Brien and we both searched, but in vain. Mrs. O'Brien, in spite of all I could say, took it upon herself to feel that I suspected her.... But what could have become of it? Fortunately I remember the address.

September 19.—I have arrived.

I have seen Arthur. Even now he is in the next room and I am supposed to be preparing for bed. But something tells me I shall not sleep a wink this night. I am strangely wound up, though there is not the shadow of an excuse for my excitement. I should be rejoicing to have found my friend again. And yet…

I reached Baltimore this morning at eleven o'clock. The day was warm and beautiful, and I loitered outside the station a few minutes before calling a taxi. The driver seemed well acquainted with the street I gave him, and we rolled off across the bridge.

As I drew near my destination, I began to feel anxious and afraid. But the ride lasted longer than I expected—Marathon Street seemed to be located in the suburbs of the city. At last we turned into a dusty street, paved only in patches and lined with linden and aspen trees. The fallen leaves crunched beneath the tires. The September sun beat down with a white intensity. The taxi drew up before a house in the middle of a block that boasted not more than six dwellings. On each side of the house was a vacant lot, and it was set far back at the end of a long narrow yard crowded with trees.

I paid the driver, opened the gate and went in. The trees were so thick that not until I was half way up the path did I get a good view of the house. It was three stories high, built of brick, in fairly good repair, but lonely and deserted-looking. The blinds were closed in all of the windows with the exception of two, one on the first, one on the second floor. Not a sign of life anywhere, not a cat nor a milk bottle to break the monotony of the leaves that carpeted the porch.

But, overcoming my feeling of uneasiness, I resolutely set my suitcases on the porch, caught at the old-fashioned bell, and gave an energetic jerk. A startling peal jangled up through the silence. I waited and there was no answer.

After a minute I rang again and then, from the interior I heard a queer dragging sound as if someone were coming slowly down the hall. And the knob was turned and the door opened. And, I saw before me an old woman, wrinkled, withered and filmy-eyed, who leaned on crutch.

"Does Mr. Barker live here?" I asked. She nodded at me staring at me in the most curious way, but made no move to invite me in.

"Well, I've come to see him" I said. "I am a friend of his, and he has sent for me." At that she drew slightly aside.

"He's upstairs," said she in a cracked voice that was little more than a whisper. "I can't show you up. Haven't been upstairs in ten years."

"That's all right," I replied, and, seizing my suitcase as I strode down the long hall.

“At the head of the steps,” came the whispering voice behind me. “The door at the end of the hall,”

I climbed the cold dark stairway, passed along the short hall at the top, and stood before a closed door. I knocked.

“Come in.” It was Arthur’s voice and yet—not his.

I opened the door and saw Arthur sitting on a couch, his shoulders hunched over, his eyes raised to mine. After all ten years had not changed him so much. As I remembered him, he was of medium height, inclined to be stout, and ruddy-faced with keen gray eyes. He was still stout, but had lost his color, and his eyes had dulled.

“And where have you been all this time?” I demanded, after the first greetings were over.

“Here,” he answered.

“In this house?”

“Yes.”

“But why didn’t you let us hear from you?”

He seemed to be making an effort to speak.

“What did it matter? I didn’t suppose anyone cared.”

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could not get rid of the thought that Arthur’s pale eyes fixed tenaciously upon my face, were trying to tell me something, something quite different from what his lips said.

I felt chilled. Although the blinds were open, the room was almost darkened by the branches of the trees that pressed against the -window. Arthur had not given me his hand, he had I seemed troubled to know how to make me welcome. Yet of one thing I was certain: He needed me and he -wanted me to know he needed me.

As I took a chair I glanced about the room. It was a typical lodging-house room, medium sized, with flowered wall paper, worn matting, nondescript rugs a wash-stand in one corner, a chiffonier in another, a table in the center, two or three chairs, and the couch which evidently served Arthur as a bed. But it was cold, strangely cold for such a warm day.

Arthur’s eyes wandered uneasily to my suitcase. He made an effort to drag himself to his feet.

“Your room is back here,’’ he said, with a motion of his thumb.

“No, wait,’’ I protested. “Let’s talk about yourself first. What’s wrong?’’

“I’ve been sick.*’

“Haven’t you a doctor? If not. I’ll get one.”

At this he started up with the first sign of animation he had shown.

“No, Tom, don’t do it. Doctors can’t help me now. Besides, I hate them. I’m afraid of them.”

His voice trailed away, and I took pity on his agitation. I decided to let the question of doctors drop for the moment

“As you say,” I assented care-

Without more ado, I followed him into my room, which adjoined his and was furnished in much the same fashion. But there were two windows, one on each side, looking out on the vacant lots. Consequently, there was more light, for which I was thankful. In a far comer I noticed a door, heavily bolted.

“There’s one more room-,” said Arthur, as I deposited my belongings. “One that you’ll like. But we’ll have to go through the bathroom.”

Groping our way through the musty bathroom, in which a tiny jet of gas was flickering, we stepped into a large, almost luxurious chamber. It was a library, well-furnished, carpeted, and surrounded by shelves fairly bulging with books. But for the chilliness and bad light, it was perfect. As I moved about, Arthur followed me with his eyes.

“There are some rare works on botany—”

I had already discovered them, a set of books that I would have given muxh to own. I could not contain my joy.

“You won’t be so bored browsing around in here—”

In spite of my preoccupation, I pricked up my ears. In that monotonous voice there was no sympathy with my joy. It was cold and tired. When I had satisfied my curiosity we returned to the front room, and Arthur flung himself, or rather fell, on to the couch. It was nearly five o’clock and quite dark. As I lighted the gas, I heard a sound below as of somebody thumping on the wall.

“That’s the old woman,” Arthur explained. “She cooks my meals, but she’s too lame to bring them up.”

He made a feeble attempt at rising, but I saw he was worn out.

“Don’t stir,” I warned him. “I’ll bring up your food tonight.”

'To my surprise, I found the dinner appetizing and well-cooked, and, in spite of the fact that I did not like the looks of the old woman, I ate with relish. Arthur barely touched a few spoonfuls of soup to his lips and absently crumbled some bread -in his plate.

Directly I had carried off the dishes, he wrapped in a reddish-brown dressing-gown about him, stretched out at full length on the couch, and asked me to turn out the gas. When I had complied with his request, I again heard his weak voice asking if I had everything I needed.

“Everything,” I assured him, and then there was unbroken silence.

I went to my room, finally, closed the door, and here I am sitting restlessly between the two back windows that look out on the vacant lots!

I have unpacked my clothes and turned down the bed, but I cannot make up my mind to retire. If the truth be told, I hate to put out the light. . . . There is something disturbing in the way the dry leaves tap on the panes. And my heart is sad when I think of Arthur.

I found my old friend, but he is no longer my old friend, "Why does he fix his pale eyes so strangely on my face? What does he wish to tell me?

But these are morbid thoughts. I will put them out of my head. I will go to bed and get a good night’s rest. And tomorrow I will wake up finding everything as right and as it should be.

September 26.-Have been here a week today, and I have settled down to this queer existence as if I had never known another. The day after my arrival I discovered that the third volume of the botanical series was done in Latin, which I have set myself the task of translating. It is absorbing work, and when I have buried myself in one of the deep chairs by the library table, the hours fly fast.

For health’s sake I force myself to walk a few miles every day. I have tried to prevail on Arthur to do likewise, but he, who used to be so active, now refuses to budge from the house. No wonder he is literally blue! For it is a fact that his complexion and the shadows about his eyes and temples, are decidedly blue.

"What does he do with himself all day? Whenever I enter his room, he is lying on the couch, a book beside him, which he never reads. He does not seem to suffer pain, for he never complains. After several ineffectual attempts to get medical aid for him, I have given up mentioning the subject of a doctor. I feel that his trouble is more mental than physical.

September 28.—A rainy day. It has been coming down in a flood since dawn. And I got a queer turn this afternoon. As I could not get out for my walk, I spent the morning staging a general house-cleaning. It was time! Dust and dirt everywhere. The bathroom, which has no window and is lighted by gas, was fairly overrun with water-bugs and roaches. Of course I did not penetrate to Arthur's room, but I heard no sound from him as I swept and dusted.

I made a good dinner and settled down in the library, feeling quite cozy. The rain came down steadily and it had grown so cold that I decided to make a fire later on. But once I had gathered my tablets my notebooks about me I forgot the cold.

I remember I was on the subject of the Aster Tripolium, a rare variety seldom found in this country. Turning a page, I came upon a specimen of this very variety, dried, pressed flat, and pasted to the margin. And, above it, in Arthur's handwriting, I read:

September 27, 1912.

I was bending close to examine it, when I felt a vague fear. It seemed to me that someone was in the room and was watching me. Yet I had not heard the door open, nor seen anyone enter. I turned sharply and saw Arthur, wrapped in his reddish- brown dressing-gown, standing at my very elbow.

He was smiling—smiling for the first time since my arrival, and his dull eyes were bright. But I did not like that smile. In spite of myself I jerked away from it. He pointed at the aster.

"It grew in the front yard under a linden tree. I found it yesterday."

"Yesterday!" I shouted, my nerves on edge. "Good Lord man! Look! It was ten years ago!"

The smile faded from his face.

"Ten years ago," he repeated thickly. "Ten years ago?"

And with his hand pressed against his forehead, he went out of the room still muttering, "Ten years ago!''

Five o'clock. Dusk is falling. O God! What has come over me? Am I the same man that went out of this house three hours ago? And what has happened.

I had a splendid walk, I was striding homeward in a fine glow. But as I turned the comer and came in sight of the house, it was as if I looked on death itself. I could hardly drag myself up the stairs, and when I peered into the shadowy chamber, and saw the man hunched up on the couch, with his eyes fixed intently on my face, I could have screamed like a woman. I wanted to fly, to rush out into the clear cold air and run - to run and never come back! But I controlled myself, forced my feet to carry me to my room.

There is a weight of hopelessness at my heart. The darkness is advancing, swallowing up everything, but I have not the will to light the gas. . . .

Now there is a flicker in the front room. I am a fool; I must pull myself together. Arthur is lighting up, and downstairs I can hear the thumping that announces dinner…

It is a queer thought that comes to me now, but it is odd I have not noticed it before. We are about to sit down to our evening meal. Arthur will eat practically nothing for he has no appetite. Yet he remains stout. It cannot be healthy fat, but even at that it seems to me for a man who eats as little as he does would become a living skeleton.

October 5.—Positively, I must see a doctor about myself, or soon I shall be a nervous wreck. I am acting like a child. Last night I lost all control and played the coward.

I had gone to bed early, tired out with a hard day's work. It was raining again, and as I lay in bed I watched the little rivulets trickling down the panes. Lulled by the sighing of the wind among the leaves, I fell asleep.

I awoke (how long afterward I cannot say) to feel a cold hand upon my arm. For a moment I lay paralyzed with terror. I would have cried aloud, but I had no voice. At last I managed to sit up, to take the hand off. I reached for the matches and lighted the gas.

It was Arthur who stood by my bed—Arthur wrapped in his eternal reddish-brown dressing-gown. He was excited. His blue face had a yellow tinge, and his eyes gleamed in the light.

"Listen!" he whispered.

I listened but I heard nothing.

"Don't you hear it?" he gasped, as he pointed upward.

"Upstairs?" I stammered. "Is there somebody upstairs?"

I strained my ears, and at last I fancied I could hear a furtive sound like the light tapping of footsteps.

"It must be somebody walking around up there," I suggested.

"No!" he cried in a sharp rasping voice. "No! It is nobody walking about up there!"

And he fled to his room.

For a long time I lay trembling, afraid to move. But at last, fearing for Arthur, I got up and crept to his door. He was lying on the couch, and his face in the moonlight, apparently asleep.

October 6.—I had a talk with Arthur today. Yesterday I could not bring myself to speak of the previous night's happening, but all of this nonsense must be cleared away.

We were in the library. A fire was burning in the grate, and Arthur had his feet on the fender. The slippers he wears, by the way, are as objectionable to me as his dressing-gown. They are felt slippers, old and worn and frayed around the edges as if they had been gnawed by rats. I cannot imagine why he does not get a new pair.

"Say, old man," I began abruptly, "do you own this house?"

He nodded.

"Do you rent any of it?"

"Downstairs—to Mrs. Harlan."

"But upstairs?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, it's inconvenient. There's only a peculiar way upstairs."

I was struck by this;

"By jove! You're right. Where is the staircase?"

He looked me full in the eyes.

"Don't you remember seeing a bolted door in a corner of your room? The staircase runs from that door."

I did remember it, and somehow the memory made me uncomfortable.

I said no more and decided not to refer to what had happened that night. It occurred to me that Arthur might have been walking in his sleep.

October 8.— When I went for my walk on Tuesday. I dropped by and saw Dr. Lorraine, who is an old friend. He expressed some surprise at my rundown condition and wrote me a prescription.

I am planning to go home next week. How pleasant it will be to walk in my garden and listen to Mrs.

O’Brien singing in the kitchen!

October 9.—Perhaps I had better postpone my trip. I casually mentioned it to Arthur this morning.

He was lying relaxed on the sofa, but when I spoke of leaving he sat up as straight as a bolt. His eyes fairly blazed.

“No, Tom, don’t go!” There was terror in his voice, and such pleading that it wrung my heart. “You’ve stood it alone here ten years,” I protested. “And now—”

“It’s not that,” he said. “But if you go, you will never come back.” “Is that all the faith you have in me?

“I’ve got faith, 'Tom. But if you go, you’ll never come back.”

I decided that I must humor the vagaries of a sick man.

“All right,” I agreed. “I’ll not go. Anyway, not for some time.”

October 12. — What is it that hangs over this house like a cloud? For I can no longer deny that there is something—something indescribably oppressive. It seems to pervade the whole neighborhood.

Are all the houses on this block vacant? If not, why do I never see children playing in the street? Why are passersby so rare? And why, when from the front window I do catch a glimpse of one, is he hastening away as fast as possible?

I am feeling blue again. I know that I need a change, and this morning I told Arthur definitely that I was going.

To my surprise he made no objection. In fact, he murmured a word of assent and smiled. He smiled as he smiled in the library that morning when he pointed at the Aster Tripolium. And I don’t like that smile. Anyway, it is settled. I shall go next week, Thursday, the 19th.

October 13.—I had a strange dream last night. Or was it a dream? It was so vivid all day long I have been seeing it over and over again.

In my dream I thought that I was lying there in my bed. The moon was shining brightly into the room, so that each piece of furniture stood out distinctly. The bureau is so placed that when I am lying on my back, with my head high on the pillow, I can see full into the mirror.

I thought I was lying in this manner and staring in the mirror. In this way I saw the bolted door in the far corner of the room. I tried to keep my mind off it, to think of something else, but it drew my eyes like a magnet.

It seemed to me that someone was in the room, a vague figure that I could not recognize. It approached the door and caught at the bolts. It dragged at them and struggled, but in vain—they would not give way, then it turned and showed me its agonized face. It was Arthur I recognized his reddish-brown dressing-gown.

I sat up in bed and I cried to him, but he was gone. I ran to his room, and there he was, stretched out in the moonlight asleep. It must have been a dream.

October 16.—We are having Indian Summer weather now-- almost oppressively warm. I have been wandering about all day, unable to settle down to anything. This morning I felt so lonesome that when I took the breakfast dishes down, I tried to strike up a conversation with Mrs. Harlan.

Hitherto I have found her as solemn and uncommunicative as the Sphinx, but as she took the tray from my hands, her wrinkles broke into the semblance of a smile. Positively at that moment it seemed to me that she resembled Arthur. Has she, also, something to tell me?

“Don’t you get lonesome here?” I asked her sympathetically.

She shook her head.

“No, sir, I’m used to it now. I couldn’t stand it anywhere else.”

“And do you expect to go on living here the rest of your life?’’

“Well, that may not be very long, sir,” she said, and smiled again.

Her words were simple enough, but the way she looked at me when she uttered them seemed to give them a double meaning. She hobbled away, and I went upstairs and wrote Mrs. O’Brien to expect me early on the morning of the 19th.

OCTOBER 18 10 a. m.— Am catching the twelve o’clock train tonight. Thank God, I had the resolution to get away I believe another week of this life would drive me mad. And perhaps Arthur is right—perhaps I shall never come back.

I ask myself if I have become such a weakling as that, to desert him when he needs me most. I don’t know. I don’t even recognize myself any longer. . . .

But of course I will be back. There is the translation, for one tiring, which is coming along famously. I could never forgive myself for dropping it at the most vital point.

As for Arthur, when I return, I intend to give in to him no longer. I will make myself master here and cure him against his will. Fresh air, change of scene, a good doctor, these are the things he needs.

But what is his malady? Is it the influence of this house that has fallen on him like a blight? One might imagine so, since it is having the same effect on me.

Yes, I have reached the point where I no longer sleep. At night I lie awake and try to keep my eyes off the mirror across the room. But in the end I always find myself staring into it—watching the door with the heavy bolts. I long to rise from the bed and draw back the bolts, but I'm afraid.

How slowly the day goes by! The night will never come!

9 pm I packed my suitcases and put the room in order. Arthur must be asleep. ... I'm afraid the parting from him it will be painful. I shall leave here at eleven o'clock in order to give myself plenty of time. ... It is beginning to rain.

October 19. — At last! It has come! I am mad! I knew it! I felt it creeping on me all the time! Have I not lived in this house a month? Have I not seen—. To have seen what I have seen, to have lived for a month as I have lived, one must be mad…

It was ten o'clock. I was waiting impatiently for the last hour to pass. I'd seated myself in a rocking chair by the bed, my suitcase beside me my back to the mirror. The rain no longer fell. I must have dozed off.

But all at once I was wide awake, my heart beating furiously. Something had touched me. I leapt to my feet, and as I turned sharply, my eyes fell upon the mirror. In it I saw the door just as I had seen the other night, and the figure fumbling with the bolt I wheeled around, but there was nothing there.

I told myself that I was dreaming again, that Arthur was asleep in his bed. But I trembled as I opened the door of his room and peered in. The room was empty, the bed not even crumpled. Lighting a match, I groped my way through the bathroom into the library.

The moon had come from under a cloud and was pouring in a silvery flood through the windows, and Arthur was not there. I stumbled back into my room.

The moon was there, too. . . . And the door, the door in the corner was half open. The bolt had been drawn. In the darkness I could just make out a flight of steps that wound upward.

I could no longer hesitate. Striking another match, I climbed the back stairway.

When I reached the top I found myself in total darkness, for the blinds were tightly closed. Realizing that the room was probably a duplicate of the one below, I felt along the wall until I came to the gas jet. For a moment the flame flickered, then burned bright and clear.

Oh God! What was it I saw? A table, thick with dust, and something wrapped in a reddish-brown dressing-gown, that sat with its elbows propped upon it.

How long had if been sitting there that it had grown more dry than the dust upon the table! For how many thousands of days and nights had the flesh rotted from that grinning skull!

In its bony fingers it still clutched a pencil. In front of it lay a sheet of scratch paper, yellow with age. With trembling fingers I brushed away the dust, it was dated October 12, 1912.

It read:

“Dear Tom: Old man, can you run down to see me for a few days I’m afraid I’m in a bad way —”

[Applause] See you next week!

[Piano music plays] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening. [Piano music fades]