

Like a Shadow, Like a Dream  
by  
Scott Mackay

I led the doctor upstairs and we entered the sick-room.

Euphemia Beech lay in her bed, wasted and thin, her once full lips stretched into a tense line by chronic pain.

Dr. Addison studied the patient for a few minutes, then looked around the room, nodding to himself, as if he understood the exact nature of her illness. He walked over to her wardrobe, pulled open the door, and fingered one of her whale-bone corsets.

"Her corsets are too tight," he said. He walked over to the lamp on her bedside table. "And she has the wick on this lamp turned too low." He leaned over Euphemia and gave her a small slap, trying to rouse her, but she remained semi-conscious. "Tell me," he said, "is she fond of wild dancing?"

"She's much too busy to indulge in wild dancing," I said.

"I see," he said. But it was clear he didn't believe me. "Perhaps she hasn't been getting enough outdoor exercise, then.

And her chest is rather small. And I see all those books over there. Has she been reading too much? What does a woman of her station want with all those books?" He walked over to her shelf and perused the volumes. "Euripides? Come, Mr. Cragg." He pulled out *The Odyssey*. "And Homer? She should know better."

"What's wrong with Homer?" I asked "She loves Homer."

He stared at me, like I must be daft, then lifted his black bag, put it on the chair, and pulled out a half-pint tin of sulfur. I stood at the end of Euphemia's bed, prudently keeping my mouth shut. Dr. Addison walked to the fire-place with the gravity of a priest about to perform a holy ritual, shut the flue, dumped a sizable amount of sulfur in the hearth, and lit it with a wooden match. The pile of yellow powder hissed, sparked, then ignited, and choking sulfur fumes filled the room. Dr. Addison took a handkerchief from his pocket and put it over his mouth.

"This will help kill the disease," he explained. "I want her chest rubbed with coal-oil and lard, then covered with a piece of old flannel. Her throat should be treated with camphorated oil. I want a moth ball placed at each nostril."

"Yes, doctor."

"And if the fever doesn't break in three days, send for me again."

When Dr. Addison was safely out of the house, I hurried back to Euphemia's room, threw open the sash, quenched the sulfur with water, and fanned as much of the smoke out the window as I could. Euphemia lay on her bed, now conscious, her eyes wide with fear. I rushed to her side and held a glass of water to her lips. She clutched my hand as if for dear life.

"How did I ever end up like this?" she asked, her voice barely audible. "What on earth am I going to do?"

I stroked her forehead and kissed her hand. "You're going to rest, Euphemia," I said, my voice thick with worry. I stroked her head again. "Everything's going to be all right. You rest. You get a good night's sleep."

I leaned over and kissed her pallid cheek.

I walked down the hall and went into my own room, the largest of the servants' rooms, with its own private water closet. I kept the water closet under lock and key now. I took out the key, opened the door, and went inside.

Sterilized with carbolic, the small room resembled nothing so much as my old castle laboratory in Cracow, when I'd been alchemist to Casimir II of Poland. No more parlor tricks. The old ways weren't going to work any more. I couldn't bring to bear any of my regular skills, not when I was here by a fragile web of time.

I looked through the glass of my culture flask, where blue foam floated on a gallon of corn steep liquor; not the work of a diabolist or theurgist or necromancer, but the work of a true scientist, using materials that were in no way tainted by my voyage across the years.

#

But let me go back.

It was February 25th, 1875. I climbed the steps of Huntington Oaks, a sanatorium of questionable caliber. Euphemia Beech clutched my arm. Percy Collyer, the man she loved, lay dying of consumption inside. I pulled the iron door open.

A nurse directed us to the paupers' ward. Mr. Vander Plaats had been kind enough to give us this evening free so we could visit Miss Beech's dying friend.

I won't say that her love for Percy Collyer showed weakness of character. Rather, her naivete and innocence made a perfect target for a man like Percy Collyer, who played on her trusting nature to satisfy his own selfish needs.

In the paupers' ward, we found Percy Collyer. The nurse left us with a kerosene lamp; the dim light flickered on Collyer's wasted face, casting shadows in the hollows of his cheeks and eyes.

"Euphemia," I said, "do you really wish to see him like this?"

She didn't answer; rather, she stared at Percy Collyer, and a look of longing passed over her face. She reached out, touched Collyer's wrist, and shook him.

"Percy?" she said. She stroked his forehead. "Percy, can you hear me?"

Collyer opened his eyes and, when he saw Euphemia, he brought his hand out from underneath the sheets and rested it on top of hers. I didn't like this. I felt my lips stiffen. I shifted from one foot to the other, unable to conceal my displeasure.

"I'll wait in the carriage," I said.

She looked up at me, and even then I saw the beginnings of the love that would soon blossom, a dependence in her eyes, a trust and need meant for no one but myself. Finally, she gave me a nod. I tried to give her some sign of reassurance -- I knew how difficult this was -- but I turned, too abruptly, and left the ward without so much as a nod to Collyer. Collyer was my nemesis. He was also my last chance. Yet I couldn't bring myself to save him. At least not yet. Not until I had tried one more time to save Euphemia without him. For in saving Collyer, I would sacrifice all.

When Euphemia joined me in the carriage two hours later, she was pale, shaken.

"He's dead," she said.

I put my arm around her in a fatherly fashion. She pressed her face against my chest and clutched my coat as if it were a life-line; I don't recall, in all my long life, ever feeling more needed or wanted. I had never felt anything so strongly. And as we rattled through the dark lonely streets of Albany, with the snowflakes drifting down in ones and twos, I knew, at long last, I had found her, an unassuming, unremarkable

housekeeper, 31 years of age, who, miraculously, was the yardstick by which all human love could be measured.

#

Without even thinking, as in a scene from a play rehearsed a hundred times, I undid my bow-tie, lay down on the chaise lounge, and became desperately ill. I glanced out the window where Bob the coachman brought the brougham-and-four around. A mother mallard and her ducklings swam across the duck pond. I lay down on the chaise lounge and grew desperately ill because it's what I would have done, what I should have done my first time through, as easily as a parlor trick, the colour now draining from my face, sweat coming to my brow, and the delirium of fever creeping into my eyes.

A knock came at my door; it was my employer, Mr. Arthur Vander Plaats.

"Come in," I called.

He opened the door, a big man, well into middle age, a monocle in his right eye, his top hat under his arm, and gazed at me in alarm.

"Mr. Cragg?" he said. "Mr. Cragg, whatever is the matter?"

As easy as a parlor trick, a flush came to my face.

"I don't quite...I was feeling fine only a moment ago, sir. I don't know what's..." I struggled to my feet and cleared my throat. "I've noticed Bob's brought the coach around. Will you be needing me, sir?"

He took a few steps into the room and glanced around, preoccupied, then put his hands behind his back.

"I've been called back to Albany, Cragg," he said, displaying more than his usual vexation. "It's this damnable railway business. When is it ever going to leave me alone? I'm to entertain a few of our most influential and respected..." He trailed off, taking a closer look at me. "Are you sure you're all right, Cragg?"

"Just a little tired, sir. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Indeed," he said. "Well, then, perhaps you can rest in the carriage. I'm to host a rather grand affair for twenty-two back in the state capital, Cragg." He took out his monocle, his habitual gruffness replacing his vexation, and squared his shoulders. "You're to accompany me. I couldn't ask any of my other house-staff to organize and manage such an auspicious banquet."

"Very well, sir," I said, though I had no intention of accompanying Mr. Vander Plaats to Albany, not this time.

I took a few steps and fell like a stone, exhibiting all the signs and symptoms of apoplexy. Mr. Vander Plaats hurried forward and knelt by my side.

"Cragg?" he said. I moaned a little, just as I had done on this same day, in this same room, on a dozen-and-a-half other occasions. "Cragg, are you all right?"

A big bump formed on my head. Mr. Vander Plaats gave my cheek a few light slaps.

"Come, Cragg, old sport, please try to rouse yourself," he said. "Lily?" he called. He got up and went to the door. "Lily?" he called again.

From somewhere off in the house I heard the sound of Mrs. Vander Plaats' footsteps coming this way. Mr. Vander Plaats came back and pulled open my eyelid. His own eyes widened. Lily Vander Plaats entered the room.

"Arthur?" she said. "Arthur, what's happened?"

Vander Plaats continued to gaze at me. "I don't know," he said. "I came up here to tell him I'd been called back to the capital, and I...he just collapsed. Please have Euphemia fetch the smelling salts. And send for Dr. Addison."

"Of course, darling."

"Ask Thaddeus to fetch the doctor and meet me in the front hall."

"Yes, darling."

Mr. Vander Plaats stared at me again. "My word, look at his eyes. Have you ever seen anything so fantastical? He looks positively demonic."

#

A few hours after I fell down ill on the chaise lounge at Kinderbrook, I stood in the deepest jungles of the Philippine Archipelago. I pushed the fronds of a palm bush aside and walked deep into the jungle. A monkey scampered from branch to branch and a species of blue-winged butterfly fluttered up from a vanilla plant and disappeared into the trees.

At a clearing near a brook I ripped some thick cords of creeper away and examined the soil underneath. I put my bucket down and sliced deeply into the earth with my spade. This soil was rich in nutrients, the exact kind of soil I needed. I began digging. I filled the bucket until it overflowed with moist jungle dirt.

#

Late May, 1875.

Mr. Vander Plaats was still in Albany negotiating the consolidation of three railway companies, and Lily Vander Plaats, along with a considerable number of the household staff, had gone there to join him. This gave Euphemia and I generous leeway to pursue our courtship.

I sat in the rowboat, gently dipping the oars into the water. Euphemia sat opposite me, the moonlight glistening in her hair. A chorus of crickets filled the night with music, and a trout splashed out of the duck pond. I played weatherman that night; within a five-mile radius of Kinderbrook the skies were perfectly clear -- elsewhere else in upstate New York the skies boiled with thunder and lightning, and poured rain.

When I reached the centre of the pond I let the oars dangle in their braces and looked closely at Euphemia Beech. She was pale now, exhausted, had contracted the consumptive bacterial infection from Collyer, and was already in the grip of her disease. But she did her best to hide the tuberculosis that now rampaged through her body. She was, at least to me, the most beautiful creature on earth. I leaned forward and took both her hands in mine.

"Euphemia, I'm glad we've had this opportunity...this time to spend alone together. Look at how the moonlight sparkles on the water. Isn't it lovely?"

As always, I felt awkward, nervous, and rather annoyed with myself; easy enough to make the skies around Kinderbrook clear, but when it came to love, I grew self-conscious and red in the ears.

"Euphemia, I...it's been...I've always thought that, I mean, ever since we..." I was a master of 246 dialects and languages, yet tonight simple English was beyond me. "What I mean to say is...this courtship of ours has been most agreeable and I...I recognize its importance...but...I think a more permanent arrangement might be beneficial to both of us, especially if we ever decide to -- "

"Alistair Cragg, are you asking me to marry you?"

She said this tenderly, softly, with the starlight gathered in her eyes; and her voice was like music, sweet, caressing, and it told me that my centuries-long search was over. She leaned forward and kissed me.

"I...I suppose I am."

"In that case," she said, an impish smile coming to her face, "the answer is yes."

#

The ride up Blackberry Hill was bumpy and steep, and Thaddeus the house-boy had to hold the empty rain barrel in place as best he could. The elms grew thick and lush on either side of the road. I saw perched among the trees and hummocks the cabin of Mr. O'Malley; Mr. O'Malley was one of several hill people who lived on these wooded slopes of the Adirondacks.

I brought the horse around into Mr. O'Malley's yard. Mr. O'Malley came out of his shack wearing suspenders and a pair of pants stained with tobacco juice. His derby sat askew on his head and his grey chest hairs were sticky with sweat. He looked at me suspiciously -- he had never had a butler visit his shack before.

"Have you made it?" I asked.

He fished a plug of tobacco out of his pocket, popped it into his mouth, and began to chew.

"I made it, all right," he said. "I don't know what you want it for. It ain't no good for drinking."

"You can rest assured, Mr. O'Malley, I have no intention of drinking it."

We stared at each other; perhaps he believed I was going to reveal my purpose. But I said nothing. Finally, he shrugged.

"Have the boy bring the barrel round back to the shed," he said.

I glanced at Thaddeus. Thaddeus muscled the barrel off the back of the wagon.

In the shed we found an elaborate distilling apparatus, with copper tubing and big brass urns poised above kerosene burners.

"That urn over there," said O'Malley. "You know, corn liquor's not even good for cooking."

Thaddeus moved our barrel over to the urn. Though I considered O'Malley a worthy craftsman when it came to the distilling of homemade spirits, his curiosity now annoyed me. I gave him my coldest butlerly look.

"I don't intend to cook with it either, Mr. O'Malley."

He looked at me, suspicious again. "Well, that'll be five dollars just the same, Mr. Cragg. No special price."

I gave him the money and helped Thaddeus steady the barrel under the spigot. O'Malley turned the handle, and a sweet-smelling yellow liquid poured out of the urn, looking more like syrup than liquor, foaming in the bottom of the barrel. O'Malley shook his head as he watched the corn liquor pour into the barrel.

"If you ain't going to drink it," he said, "and you ain't going to cook with it, what are you going to use it for?"

I rose to my full height. "That, Mr. O'Malley," I said, "is my business."

#

This is what really happened one-hundred-and-twenty-one years ago.

I glanced out the window where Bob the coachman brought the brougham-and-four around. A mother mallard and her ducklings swam across the duck pond. I sat down at my roll-top writing table and continued with my staff plan. A knock came at my door, the knock of my employer, Mr. Arthur Vander Plaats.

"Come in," I called.

He opened the door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Cragg," he said. "But I'm afraid I'll be needing you."

"Yes, I saw Bob bring the coach around."

"I've been called back to Albany, Cragg," he said, displaying more than his usual vexation. "It's this damnable railway business. When is it ever going to leave me alone? I've been asked to entertain a few of our most influential and respected investors. In fact, I'm to host a rather grand affair for twenty-two." He took out his monocle, his habitual gruffness replacing his vexation, and squared his shoulders. "You shall accompany me to Albany, Cragg. I couldn't ask any of my other house-staff to organize and manage such an auspicious banquet."

"Of course, sir," I said. "I'll pack my portmanteau at once."

So I went to the state capital. That first time through, when I'd actually been part of the things around me, I had no idea how desperately ill Euphemia had become. She hid it so well. I went to Albany, and I learned that Mr. Vander Plaats would not only host a rather grand affair for twenty-two but also chair a four-week conference regarding the consolidation of certain railway concerns in the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Had I stayed in Kinderbrook that first time through, when I, too, had been part of that quiet uneventful year, when I hadn't been at temporal odds with my surroundings, the simplest of wizardly stratagems would have cured her. But I went to Albany. I stayed there for five weeks. And she died.

And now my wizardly stratagems stand against the flux of time.

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A week later I took the runabout into town. By now, Euphemia Beech lay bedridden at Kinderbrook with a high fever. She insisted all she needed were a few days bed rest, but I knew otherwise.

I steered my mare down Main Street and turned left on Sycamore Lane. I pulled on the reins and brought the runabout to a stop in front of the town's only photography shop. In the window, Mr. Fleming displayed several samples of his handiwork, sepia-toned tin-types of local families in stiff poses.

I got down from my runabout, tied the mare to the hitching post, and entered the shop.

Aloysius Fleming, Mr. Fleming's son, sat behind the counter polishing a camera lens. When he saw me, he put the lens down and came to the front of the shop to help me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cragg," he said.

"Good afternoon," I replied. "Is your father not here?"

"I'm afraid he's been called to Saratoga Springs, sir," he said. "The thoroughbred races have begun."

Mr. Fleming was always hired to photograph the equine champions and their jockeys in the winner's circle.

"Of course," I said. "Then perhaps you can help me. I wish to purchase two pints of silver iodide."

His eyes widened and he was no doubt puzzled by my request; I needed the silver iodide as a crude precipitating agent. "It's a very particular solution, Mr. Cragg," he said, "used only by photographers and --"

"If you would be so kind as to go to the back room and check," I said. "Mr. Vander Plaats would be much obliged."

At the mention of Mr. Vander Plaats, his face reddened; he understood. Mr. Vander Plaats was a well-known industrialist. No doubt he believed Mr. Vander Plaats needed the silver iodide for some invention he was working on at home.

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At the edge of town, there stood a large canvas tent, an army surplus depot. I hitched my horse to a nearby tree next to a rack of old saddles, pulled the tent flap open, and went inside.

The air smelled heavy, cloying with the fumes of the three kerosene lamps that hung on the central pole. Old stretchers set on ammunition crates, some stacked as many as five high, were crammed with every kind of military junk imaginable. A negro gentleman, in his late fifties, dressed in the blue uniform of the Union Army, approached me and doffed his hat.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked.

"Good day," I said. "Would you be so kind as to direct me to your medical inventory?"

"Of course, sir," he said. "Right this way."

He led me to a small table at the back. I was certain I would find what I was looking for, an invention of recent design, brought into prevalent use during the Civil War. I foraged through piles of old cotton gauze, pushed aside a pile of rubber tourniquets, even looked under a pathologist's saw, and finally found what I was looking for -- a wooden box containing six hypodermic needles.

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Dr Addison came again later that week. He arrived late in the day, with the sun just down, and blood-red clouds mottling the sky. He pulled his buggy into the yard, then just sat there, looking at the house; and it became apparent to me, as I stood at the window, that he was staring at something in particular up on the roof. I walked out onto the porch and joined the doctor in the yard.

"Good evening, Dr. Addison," I said. "I'm so glad you could come at such short notice."

He continued to stare at the roof. I followed his gaze and saw, growing up among the lead guttering, a huge houseleek, its leaves thick, its pink blossoms open and full.

Dr. Addison shook his head. "It's a houseleek," he said. "A sure sign of death, Mr. Cragg."

I stared at him; I was quietly astonished by his medical hokum.

"But Dr. Addison, it's only a plant."

"You should have the hired man remove it immediately," he said. "And make sure he's careful not to drop the least bit on the roof; it could take root and grow again. Once he's got it down, it should be destroyed, burned in an outdoor fire. Though frankly, Mr. Cragg, I don't think it will do much good. Once the houseleek blooms, death is all but inevitable."

We went upstairs.

Euphemia Beech was unconscious now, looking as wasted and thin as Percy Collyer had the night we visited Huntington Oaks. If wizardly stratagems wouldn't work outside the proper time-line, there was no reason I couldn't invent penicillin sixty-five years before its time. Though she had received seven injections of streptomycin sulfate so far, I hadn't seen any improvement. Dr. Addison drew back the bed sheets and looked closely at my fiancée, then shook his head.

"Her condition is extremely grave, Mr. Cragg," he said. "What are those markings on her arm?"

He pointed to the hypodermic needle puncture wounds.

"I think they might be spider bites," I said.

"Of course," he said, as if he'd known all along. He undid the top three buttons of her chemise and pulled it away from her shoulders. "She's got bad blood, Mr. Cragg. We'll have to get rid of it. I'm afraid it's our only alternative."

He opened his bag, pulled out a jar of leeches, and, using a pair of tweezers, applied them to points on Euphemia's arms, abdomen, and legs. The theory was simple: ridding the body of bad blood would make way for good blood.

"Leave my little friends on all night," said Dr. Addison. "You can kill them in the morning with a solution of salt and water." He wiped the tweezers and put them back in his bag. "But if you want my honest opinion, Mr. Cragg," he said, "I don't think she'll last till dawn."

When the doctor had gone, I frantically prepared a solution of salt water and removed the leeches from poor Euphemia's skin. She moaned a few times but otherwise didn't stir. I rubbed her arm with cleansing alcohol, and, taking a fully prepared syringe, gave her the eighth injection. I laid a damp cloth over her head then sat down in the rocking chair for my nightly vigil.

I was afraid she would lie there like a dead weight, as she had on the past several evenings; but she tossed and turned, and on one or two occasions regained consciousness. I was much encouraged. My streptomycin sulfate, so painstakingly derived from my Filipino soil, Mr. O'Malley's corn steep liquor, and Mr. Fleming's silver iodide, at last seemed to be working.

I sat there in my chair watching Euphemia, tired beyond endurance, my hope as fragile as the breath of a new-born child, and I couldn't help thinking how useless my wizardly skills had become, and how crippled they were by temporal constraints. I was of an old breed, a mage, a relic from a time when mages were still common on this earth; from a time when we still lived in castles, fought with broadswords, and played our music on the lute. But now there weren't many of us left. I wasn't so much a mage. I was really just a shy man, a bashful one, grateful to at last find a woman like Euphemia Beech, a woman who made me feel as if I was no longer a thing apart, a woman who saw past the fantastical light in my eyes.

Her breathing grew easier, and her face was no longer creased by so much pain, was now restful. She had a magic, a greater magic than I, the power to bring light into my otherwise dark life, to make me feel as if I belonged, to reach out and bring into the fold of her gentle caring arms an aging necromancer who had for so long lived at the edge of the world. I got up, walked to the window, and looked up at the sky, where the moon played hide and seek with the clouds, that same moon from that same window I had seen on this same night so many times before, then returned to my rocker. No more parlor tricks. She made me feel human. Parlor tricks did nothing against death. Only years of careful study. Sixty-two years from now I would receive my doctoral degree in chemistry. I wasn't a diabolist, theurgist, or necromancer. No! I was a scientist. I would participate in the first clinical trials of penicillin, then join Bas Pharmaceutical and help develop streptomycin sulfate. All because Euphemia Beech had finally opened the door and asked me to come in.

Then, around two o'clock in the morning, her fever broke, and she was drenched in a cooling sweat. I was so relieved, so certain I had finally done it, that my exhaustion, kept in check by immense will, swept over me like a tidal wave; I tried to keep my eyes open but they eventually fell shut, and I slipped into a dark, dreamless sleep.

When I woke several hours later, the first grey light of dawn coloured the sky and the cock was crowing on Orville Dingwall's farm down the road. Euphemia lay motionless on her bed, and I knew despite all my years of scientific study and all my anguished hours of effort that she was dead, and that the bluish colour in her face could mean only one thing: Pleural effusions had gathered and concentrated in her lungs while I had been asleep. She had died, as Percy Collyer had, of a slow and horrible suffocation.

#

I return to the present. I need time to think, time to rest, time to remember. My love for Euphemia Beech is as deep as ever.

In my black Dodge Neon, I follow the Taconic State Parkway north to East Chatham, then take the turn-off to Malden Bridge, and eventually Kinderbrook.

On the site of Mr. Vander Plaats rambling three-story mansion there now stands an aquatic amusement park, Wild Water Kingdom. Most of Orville Dingwall's farm has been paved over, turned into parking lot. From out on the road I see the seven-story Speed Slide and the half-acre Wave Pool. Travelling further along, I observe several amphibiously inclined individuals negotiating the white water rapids of Canyon Way. As I round the corner, on my way to the Kinderbrook Methodist Church, I come upon several youngsters frolicking in Dolphin Bay.

Corn fields grow on either side of me now, and in the distance I see the blue-green peaks of the Adirondacks. Soon, a wood-frame church rises out of the ripening corn, the Kinderbrook Methodist Church, and beside this church there stands a small cemetery. I pull my car into the church-yard, get out, and enter the cemetery, clutching a bouquet of white lilies. This time I will succeed. My story isn't one of futility. It's one of hope. My quest makes me that which I am not and that which I can never be; it makes me human.

Sunlight butters the tombstones, small cottony clouds sail across the sky, and the grass is speckled with white clover. I walk right to the back of the church yard, where tall maples stand, and climb over a small weed-choked wall to the old part of the cemetery where most of the tombstones are made of limestone. Nobody cares about these tombstones any more. The grass has been allowed to grow waist-high in some places. No one knows who these people are anymore. These people died over a hundred years ago.

I walk to the second tombstone from the end and read the lichen-encrusted inscription.

Euphemia Beech  
1844 - 1875

"Thrice I tried to clasp her image,  
And thrice it slipped through my hands,  
Like a shadow,  
Like a dream."

The quote is from Homer's The Odyssey. I know how much she loved Homer.

I toss the lilies on her grave, then, taking a deep breath, brace myself. This time I know it will work. I am ready to go back. This time I will bury my selfishness. This time I will reckon with Percy Collyer.

#

It's Christmas Eve, 1874. I'm back in Albany and I'm strolling along the New London Road toward Dudley Park with the first of a series of injections wrapped in a piece of cotton snug in my pocket. I am just passing the Auburn Eatery and Steak Emporium when Percy Collyer staggers from the doorstep, so drunk he can hardly stand. He slips on the snowy pavement and falls into the gutter. I wonder how such a man could have ensnared her; I wonder how she can love such an unreformed rogue. He tries to get up but he blacks out. I look up and down the street, making sure no one sees, and approach Percy Collier. I raise his sleeve, rub his arm with alcohol, and give him the injection.

#

It's January 31st, 1875. Percy Collier has been admitted to Huntington Oaks, and the doctors have great hope for him. It's well past midnight. I steal down the gloomy corridor to the pauper's ward. I was worried about Percy Collyer; I was afraid he might be as refractive to streptomycin sulfate as Euphemia. But the penicillin works like a...well, like a charm.

I push the door open and I see the beds all lined up in the murky glow of the kerosene lamps, a grey and depressing scene.

I hurry to Collyer's bed. He's sleeping. I take a bottle of ether and wave it under his nose, making sure he stays asleep. He's no longer wasted and thin. His flesh has a rosy tint. He's safely beyond the infectious stage. Euphemia will not contract his disease. I pull up his sleeve and give him the final injection. I have finally learned the true meaning of love. In saving Collyer I have at last saved Euphemia. Yet in saving Collyer I have also lost Euphemia. I take a reluctant glance into the future. Euphemia works her magic on Collyer. He reforms. They marry. They have children. Her tombstone is one of the newer ones. She dies in 1939, not in 1875. And the butler Cragg is no more than a forgotten face from the days when she worked as a housemaid at Kinderbrook.

#

February 25th, 1875

In the paupers' ward, Euphemia and I find Percy Collyer sitting on the edge of his bed, fully dressed, his portmanteau on the floor beside him, ready to go. The nurse gives us a prim nod.

"Mr. Collyer's had a remarkable recovery," she says. "Haven't you, sir?"

He pats his chest with both hands. "I feel like my old self again." He gets up, puts his arm around Euphemia, and gives her a kiss. "Euphie, darlin'.

She stares at Percy Collyer, and a look of longing passes over her face. I don't think I've ever seen her so happy. She reaches out and touches Collyer's face.

"You've really come back," she says.

Percy Collyer seems to notice me for the first time. "Hallo, Cragg, old boy." He cuffs me on the shoulder. "Don't you ever smile?"

My lips stiffen. I shift from one foot to the other, unable to conceal my displeasure.

"I'll wait in the carriage," I say.

"No need, no need," says Collyer. "We're coming right away."

So they follow me out to the carriage. I sit across from them as the coachman shakes the reins, and the brougham moves slowly away from the sanitorium. Collyer is to spend a restorative month at Kinderbrook; he will then be hired there as a grounds-keeper. Collyer puts his arm around Euphemia in what I consider an all-too familiar manner. She presses her face against his shoulder and clutches his coat as if it were a life-line; I don't recall, in all my long life, ever seeing a happier woman.

As we rattle through the dark lonely streets of Albany, with the snowflakes drifting down in ones and twos, I know that I have finally succeeded, that my quest is over; I'm fantastical, yes, and my eyes glow in the night, I won't deny it; I'm a creature from the beginning of time, this is certainly true, a mage who can turn a bird into a cat into a dog and back again; and yet, at last, even as a grin slips unexpectedly onto to my face, and I give Collyer a conciliatory nod, I know I am finally that which Euphemia has made me; I know I am finally human.

END