

Abomination at the Shilkie

by Andrew Edwards

The Hotel Shilkie stands adjacent to an ancient cemetery on Pygg Street not far north of Foley Square in the borough of Manhattan. Crowned by a dented copper diadem, it seems to beckon me in a cocked manner as I behold it from my rooftop garden.

I've got no love for the Shilkie. After a day on the set, I come here with a highland malt to relax-- not to ruminate on dark weedy thoughts sprouting from a common ancestry with lizards and perhaps even other coldblooded forms.

My name is Ian Yardley and I host "A World Beyond", in 1955 the sixth most popular show on television. Each week we offer a tale of mystery and the supernatural. I am often looking for tales to present, and sometimes, as in the deeply upsetting matter described hereunder, I do find one too awful and too strange for the show. Our goal is to entertain, but also to reassure that, alongside certain anomalies of time, space and the hereafter, life itself goes on--that is to say, as our sponsors would want it, the better to sell suds and blades and vacations.

That pair of twisted, entwined bodies in the air shaft, discovered during renovation at the Shilkie not long ago, could offer no such reassurance. Instead, they would cast into doubt nearly all I had thought reasonable about the primacy of our so-called "rational" plane of existence. Their presence made clear that foreign dimensions could intersect with ours in ways that might occasionally go well beyond the uncomfortable; that they might even insinuate certain cosmic threats to undermine that fragile wisp of gladness we often refer to as "the human spirit".

They also reminded one uncomfortably of a Miss Urquhart from Albany who came to New York a "flapper" according to the papers, and disappeared thirty years ago at the mansard-roofed Shilkie.

That I own one of the world's largest collections of occult references, including a clutch of rare and ancient grimoires, ought to suggest I'd have been prepared for the shock. But nothing in my

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studies left me meaningfully prepared to accept the malignity of what was discovered by three hapless day laborers as they broke down that wall a fortnight past. Two are hospitalized today with dementia, while the third ran and has not been seen.

It was at my insistent urging that the air shaft adjacent to room 805 be investigated. A timely renovation was already underway when I put forth my unbidden request, and this, I am guessing, was why it was not rejected out of hand. It is an educated guess that being famous would have in no way harmed one's ability to convince an understandably reticent hotelier to grant its execution.

I had become subject to a series of dreams that each night seemed more real and more unwavering in their suggestions.

The old Pygg Street Cemetery next to the Shilkie provided backdrop for these dreams. In each I saw a crypt built into a cemetery wall that adjoined the Shilkie. Into that dank portal I would go and turn down a hallway and follow it long and twisted. The fissure went far deep and would prove monstrous before each time I waked. This dream I had four nights running.

Waking the fourth night, I recalled one consistent certainty that would not let me rest: without question between the deep gate and the old tower there were congress. And if dreams might serve as guideposts to facts in the world, then uncouth actors from below might commune inside the Shilkie with the incautious and the unlucky and the sick-minded. A brief visit to the old Pygg boneyard showed that indeed there was such a crypt as in my dream, its doorway rotting on the hinge; and at back the sepulcher was, as in dreams, attached to a wall adjoining the old hotel.

Thus I became concerned with what had long been half-forgotten legend about the decrepit hostelry. The Shilkie, over long years, had been home to more than its share of misfortune. Fire had visited the premises rather often. Some wags were known to have joked that a hearse might as like have pulled up as a taxi. There were disappearances. Jumpers. Hanged women. Many may still recall "the awful noise" reported just before an Undersecretary in the State Department went out a high window just after the Armistice.

Sometime between the wars, the old Shilkie had been converted to a transient hotel where the indigent would while away their days in shabby, ill-lit quarters. At the deadest moment of the Depression a new strain of tenancy was established when at one point, arriving all within months of the first, a certain clannish rabble of snuffling, unsavory, lumpy-looking types took rooms of the cheapest sort. Few now recall, but not long after that immigration a room on the top floor had to be cleared of a thick coating of what was described in the papers as "semi-viscous sap". In the room and mired in crusted sap were the leathery remains of a creature referred to as a malformed alligator. Adjacent to this and coated also with sap was the fresh corpse of the bent-backed, unwholesome tenant, who wore the robe of a conjurer printed with "sigils reminiscent of an earth cult".

Brief investigation into my sources, matching evidence with obliquely recorded lore, revealed the lumpy, uncouth keepers to be, by every sign, part of a little-known coterie of idol-worshippers of a type completely unduplicated in the west. Though none amongst them ever gave willing sign of it, they were very close in description to certain minions of a buried, arthropod overlord that ruled in fissures and craters and was said to marshal terrible humanoid armies deep in a cavernous earth.

In dreams came an unbidden suggestion that a natural person could go far beyond mere communion with awful things from the deep--it seemed they could even *meld with* and become *part of* the darkling abominations. The dreams suggested as well that such union could be rooted deep through cellars and fissures to the network of the very deity long nesting below.

This outlandish certainty, couched in correspondences I had noted between the dreams, the cemetery evidence, and accounts recorded in folkloric volumes I possessed, proved so unsettling that I elected to approach Shilkie ownership. It turned out to be perhaps an odd, but, according to an established renovation schedule, not an ill-timed request. Boarders on all but the two lowest and best floors had been cleared out for the work. Therefore I did not need to

concern myself with the unblinking, protuberant eyes common to that unpleasant clan that had formerly tenanted many of the rooms directly of concern.

During the Twenties, the Shilkie had ridden a rather frothy crest of bohemianism and debauchery. Its reputation as a locus of queer doings only popularized its little speakeasy. The better rooms were taken by those who chose to spend their money on adventurous urban exploits that occasionally, according to police reports, resembled nothing so much as the trussed and studded comedies practiced at Weimar.

Among this number was one Sally Urquhart, a pretty, apparently free-thinking young woman from the state capital who had sought to dally amongst the gin-blasted swells that hung around the Shilkie back then.

It is not clear that Sally ever rented at the Shilkie but what is known is that in September of 'twenty-seven, she was seen to enter the Shilkie but never to depart--nor was she ever seen again by family or friend. Her disappearance was left unsolved. At the time of her disappearance she was known to have been wearing a necklace surmounted by a jeweled beetle.

The air shaft we broke into shared an inner wall with all the rooms in the "5" column; but the suggestions of the dream led me to direct the workers' pickaxes towards 805 in particular. For years the room apparently had been unused. The door was bolted shut from the outside, its knobs and locks painted over. Upon my generous persuasion the laborers broke in with bars and hammers.

With a crack of old wood the room was opened. Furniture that had been unlovely new, now covered with dust and grit, bespoke in its casual disarray a hasty abandonment. Of greatest concern to me was a certain unmistakable foetor--that same dusty, sepulchral stench from my dream! I pointed to a corner of the room where a ventilation duct had been boarded over with unpainted lumber.

The workers hardly wanted to continue their work and made wan excuses why they could not. It was only with the rapid unfurlment from my wallet of additional compensation they agreed to press on.

And so with crowbars they pried off the old grey lumber and began to have at the wall with picks and sledges. They worked in a cloud of white dust and I put a good thick handkerchief over my mouth so as not to choke. Soon the wall was broken from floor to ceiling, revealing a darkened shaft within.

A cry from one of the men gave first indication we had come upon something dreadful. Perhaps luckiest of the three, he ran and was heard stumbling down the flights shouting arcane-sounding imprecations I am almost certain he would not have known before entering that room.

The remaining two allowed me to lead with my flashlight. They seemed egged on to the challenge. My beam shone in. The shaft was only a few feet wide and from above, a dirty faint light filtered down from a grated skylight.

Both figures in the shaft were calcified, or seemed as much in their shades of gray and chalky-white. The first was enough diabolic in contour to shake a good man half out of his bones. I stepped back. The workmen, each broad-shouldered and strapping, went down almost as a unit. It can only be guessed that the effect of what was presented to their untutored eyes failed to reconcile with anything for which their simple education might have prepared them. The first lay on the ground shivering as if from a nervous tremor. The other sat back against the side of the antique dusty bed, his mouth dropped open with a looseness that suggested mental vacancy.

Only a glance had I taken into the shaft, but it was sufficient to absorb more than any merciful construction of the universe would have permitted. That first figure was execrable in every way, but at least it can be said that in dreams I had seen this creature. It was little differentiated from a great locust grown to the size of a man in full. This type I had encountered far down the fissured reaches of my unquiet sleep. The head of the thing was not that of a locust but a different, bright-eyed presence not human or animal but chitinous, alien, fanged, stony and sleek in aspect. The whole thing was arid and gray and twisted in vine-like cables that led below. Ensconced upon the wall behind it were three smaller, hybrid-type young that

were larval in aspect but yet possessed of a closer semblance to humanity than the progenitor. From their satiny carapaces were expressed a syrupy, sap-like ooze.

Evidence of participant humanity was by far the most disturbing note in a cacophony of intolerable evidence. For here were the accouterments of a domesticity completely at odds with the overall freakishness of circumstance. There were tea cups laid on narrow ledges; jars of commercial goods with their faded labels; ragged nightgowns on wire hangers; even a woman's kit of makeup as if we had broken in on an outlandish bedroom.

Only to assist my own purging of the memory do I now relate the final horror. Entwined, bony, delicately fleshed as if alive in polished stone--most nearly alive in fact!--was what seemed undeniably female. And there!--a glance, a sneer upon the drawn lips. . .I would under oath swear it seemed aimed at me.

It was the unmistakable eroticism of the entwinement of the two bodies that brought home at last what I saw. These fat worms were the offspring. These jars and clothes were the barest configuration of a life and a home, and the dust that clung to these also bespoke long duration of same. We had intruded upon a domesticated couple and a brood of young. The age of the artifacts, including the damnable creatures themselves, looked impossibly older than the edifice itself, as if they had been *in situ* for a thousand or ten thousand years. It appeared they were bound into a stony, aeon-slow echelon upon the ladder of time, in complete defiance of any notion of the wholeness of what science calls the "space-time continuum". Positioning and attitude suggested their living object together perhaps was but half finished.

Bony she-legs wrapped themselves around the thick of the chalky locust-creature, and the angle of the woman's stony pelvis made as if eagerly seeking connubial donation. To a rhythm not measurable by any device but some clock tuned to the aeons of geologic time, they were as alive as the very rock of the harbor is alive with the wind, and like the living rock in the richness of time, they were quietly and deliberately at work.

During that moment's glance I saw too the highlights of a chained pendant upon the slender female figure as she clung to the belly of the great insect. And after a moment of shattering cognition, it became all too clear that the small highlights were known to me as well.

For around the neck of the female were a tarnished necklace surmounted by a jeweled beetle. . .

