

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF SYDNEY GAERHAM

I was once a young prince who lived in a hilltop palace, where I lived a carefree and happy life. One morning, struck with wanderlust for the first time in my contented life, I ordered my palanquin be made ready that I might set my sights beyond the castle walls for a time on a tour of the kingdom. At the city's edge, I was accosted by a rag-wrapped mendicant, who begged me for food, that he and his father, the hoary, bent elder who accompanied him, might fill their bellies. Perturbed, I bade them depart from my sight, and urged the litter-bearers onward, back toward the castle. As I passed the city shrine to Stendarr, I witnessed a grotesque scene: a disfigured leper praying at the communal altar for mercy and healing from the Divines. Dejected, I ordered the servants to bear me homeward with yet greater swiftness, but we came suddenly to a stop, for a passing procession of mourners crowded the street, and, following the gestures they made toward the cemetery, I beheld the immolation of a departed citizen atop a funeral pyre. Distraught, I leapt from my cushions and sprinted to the palace, bolting the doors.

Once inside my chambers, I put on my most luxurious robe and poured a generous cup of the finest wine, and called for soothing music to be played while I furiously pored over one of the volumes from my private library. However, I sought surcease of sorrow in vain, for I couldn't escape thoughts of poverty and age. Immediately I disrobed and made for the royal harem, where I spent the remainder of the evening indulging in the pleasures of the flesh with my favorite harlots. My ardor spent, I bade them accompany me to my bed, for I was in no mood to sleep alone that night. I found no rest, tossing and turning all through the night, never sleeping a wink, for I could not help but dwell on the horrors of disease and death. With a cry of frustration, I leapt from bed and bedmates, and quit the palace. I could not abide the vicissitudes of the world, and resolved to leave it.

Bursting from the courtyard gates atop my fastest stallion, hurtling through and out of town, I headed into the woods. I gave no pause, neither rest nor respite, and thought only of flight. As the horse collapsed from exhaustion, I stumbled to my feet, and ran heedlessly headlong through the forest. When I could sprint no more, I shambled, and when I fell to the ground, all but spent, I crawled, such was my disdain for a failing world. At last I could go no farther, my limbs gave way beneath me, and I dropped, prone, to the earth. With what dregs of strength and will remained, I moan, "No, no, no," and weakly flexed my fingers, as if I could slowly haul myself yet a little farther. Suddenly, my fingertips brushed against stone, cold and smooth. I looked upward from the forest floor, and my eyes met with an astonishing sight: a wall loomed upward, until it seemed to touch the night sky, which seemed dull before the brilliant reflective sheen on the face of the bulwark, and it seemed to extend endlessly to either side.

Stepping out from the wall, a Figure approached: aged but with youthful vigor, dressed in a fine robe and leaning on a spindly staff. I struggled to my feet, but, depleted, fell to my knees at the hem of his robe.

“Have I come to the ends of the earth?” I asked.

“You’ve come to the end of the line, yes,” the Figure responded, “Tell Me, why have you come so far?”

I told the Gentleman of everything: my life of leisure, the beggar and his decrepit father, the disease-ridden wretch, the funeral pyre, and the inescapable dread for life and its blemishes. He nodded, and I thought I saw genuine understanding, perhaps even pity, in His glimmering eyes. “Can you help me? Can you show me an end, or a better way?” I pleaded.

He gave a low chuckle. “I can take you beyond this wall, mortal, where you will find enlightenment, a new world.”

“Please, my Lord, take me—mind, body, and soul! I entrust myself to Your care!”

He offered me a wrinkled but strong hand, which I gratefully took, and, feeling a revitalizing energy, I turned with Him to face the mirror-like wall. We stepped through the stonework, as though we were phantoms. I expected a place of dazzling light, but we had simply returned to where we first met! Everything looked as it had, if it was not, in fact, an even darker night now than it was before, and the stars were twinkling irritatingly.

I shouted, “What trickery is this? You promised me a new world, yet everything looks the same and unchanged!”

Unbelievably, He laughed! “I assure you, mortal, you shall indeed find this world the same, but not unchanged! Go your way, now, and I’ll never be far from you,” He said, stepping backward into the wall, which now gave no reflection, but was dully dark, a light-drinking black.

What could I do? I turned my back to monolith, and wandered away toward an unknown destination in a dreary world. I found the moonbeams and the sparkling starlight annoyingly glaring, so I stuck to the cover of the trees, grateful for how bearable vision was beneath their shady boughs. I came to a swath of stumps at the forest’s edge, and noticed a woodcutter’s shack and mill, on the edge of a small village, not far from clearing. I knew dawn was approaching, for the pale lightening of the sky was causing me to squint. I saw the cottage kept a cellar door, and I dashed for it, to hide from the encroaching sun and bide my time, until night descended again, and I could again roam under the eaves of the forest.

I stayed hidden for some time, you know. The woodcutter and his family never knew I was there, harmlessly sheltering in their cellar in the day and returning the favor at night. Yes, I took bits of food from their winter stores, but only just enough to last a day, and I repaid their unwitting kindness with my own acts of charity. From sunset to sunrise, for them I gathered kindling, fetched pails of water, sharpened axes, and performed other such quiet chores. I once heard, through the floorboards, the woodcutter remark to his wife that Mara must have sent them a benevolent spirit to aid them nightly. I do not know how long this pleasant existence continued, but I should have known it was not to last—such is the way of this, or any, world.

One day, the woodcutter's daughter flung open the cellar door, and I knew it was day because the intolerable blaze of the sun flooded the basement, burning my eyes! I quickly hid in one of the crates, and stifled my tears until the child grew bored and left, closing shut the cellar door behind her. With hands covering my face, taking in quiet, ragged gasps, I steeled myself, for what I knew had to be done.

However long I had dwelt in the family's blessedly dank cellar, it had been enough to know which floorboards creaked and in which area of the house slept the child. I meant to end her, yes, but I bore the woodcutter and his wife no ill will. In fact, I comforted myself with the knowledge that I was performing for them yet another service; after all, the parents had once called the little girl "the light of their world." What a terrible brat this child must have been to them to merit such a curse! Filled with purpose and a steady spirit, I gagged the girl, and stole away with her from the house toward the woods, where I could quietly unmake her without disturbing the parents' needful rest.

I won't bore you with the details of how I killed the inconsiderate bitch; I'll only say that it took longer than expected, as I was a novice to the art of murder, and the human form, even that of a prepubescent girl, is more resilient and life-clinging than I anticipated. I watched as the light left her eyes. It was mysterious. It was beautiful. It...wasn't fair! She, the loathsome brat who walked about stupidly in the full light of day, was now all dark inside while I was left to only know half a life—toiling in the night and cowering in the day! No! Intolerable! I must have that darkness, and I knew it lay within her! I tore open her chest, and began to heap her bloody insides onto my face, that my vision might be forever shielded from the baleful sun.

They called me a madman, but I knew—then as now—that I was a visionary. I was right, for they found me at dawn, and so drenched was my head in the girl's blood that even the hateful sun had not blinded me, and had gone unnoticed. The woodcutter and his woman had not appreciated my ridding them of their spawn; I suppose they were disappointed they would never be able to do it themselves. They seized me, and dragged me to the village square, where the guardsmen took me to the stockades. Vile fools! They would not hear me as I tried to explain why all that I had done had been a blessing, not only to myself, but to the family as well! They hated me for my higher comprehension, and scoured the brat's darkling blood from my face, and I wept to see the sunlight again.

Cruelly, the villagers resolved to burn me at the stake at midday, under the all-seeing sun. I was fastened to the post, writhing in vain attempts to shield my eyes from the noon light, and uttered my shrieks. Squinting, I saw a Gentleman in the crowd, wearing a fine robe and leaning on a spindly staff, and his glinting eyes were full of pity and pride. My Lord had come, though no one else seemed to notice!

He raised his staff upward, and storm clouds rolled in from all directions, mercifully blackening the sky as a mighty thunderstorm brewed. The imbeciles, in petty malice, lit the painfully bright fire so as to burn me, quickly, before the rains came, but they were too late! My Lord's storm didn't smother the flames, but the drops brought forth an outpouring of smoke to shield my eyes from the wretched brightness of the fire. I died laughing, spiting the foolish knaves, giving my Lord thanks for His blessing.

I was taken into my Lord's House after that, and He still visits me sometimes.