

—THE HORROR IN THE BOOKSTORE

by Clinton Green

I have always been a gentleman reputed to possess somewhat eclectic tastes, burdened with an insatiable curiosity for the forbidden and unknown. As a young man my days and evenings were spent in the most singular bookstores and libraries, pouring over various obscure texts detailing the myths and beliefs of ancient tribes, as well their adjacent strange and macabre rites. So it came one evening that I was wondering the back alleys of Boston in the pursuit of sellers of curios and tomes, which would somehow bring me a little closer to revealing the hidden things of our world.

If only I could have been content in my blessed ignorance, I may have resisted the lure of that blasphemous place.

I found it in a particularly dark and odorous section of the maze of alleys. All around me the shops had been long ago abandoned. These decrepit structures were either boarded up or their windows had been shattered to give entrance to the pathetic street people who made the neglected premises their foul dwellings. The clicking of my cane on the damp cobblestones sounded the signal for the street-dwellers to lurk out of their shadowy abodes and approach me with outstretched palms. I threw a few coins in their direction, loathe to come into physical contact with the unwholesome creatures. And as I made my way hastily down the darkened alley, I did not hear even the most perfunctory thank-you from the vagrants behind me; only sly, guttural laughter instead.

I saw ahead some respite from the darkness, in a dim glow emanating from a shop window. Eager to leave the darkness of the street creatures and their foul alleyway, I made haste towards the establishment's entrance ignorant and caring little of what trade the little store performed. As I neared the dirty, fly-speckled window, I was overjoyed to sight the long wooden shelves lining the interior walls, packed with the spines of old books. 'A-ha', I thought. 'A find at last!' And yet as I reached for the door handle of the apparently nameless bookstore (for no moniker was displayed on its dusty window), I could not help but be pervaded by a nonsensical urge to flee from this place, to not pass the threshold for the sake of my very soul. Yet despite my mystical interests I had always been a man of science and thus of reason, and so banished this vaguely effeminate urge and opened the door of the bookstore.

The interior was a quite small area which communicated a sense of claustrophobia, as several tall shelves had been cramped into its minuscule dimensions. The shelves reached the store's mould-spotted ceiling, and although

they were crammed with books, they could not bear the store's entire stock alone, for numerous piles of tracts sat upon the threadbare carpet floor. A small table and chair was positioned to the left of the doorway, and on the opposite wall was positioned a plain wooden counter covered with several more towers of books. Behind the counter was a doorway covered by a moth-eaten curtain, doubtless leading to a back room. The light of a candle flickered from behind the curtain, the only other light source a bare bulb swinging from the ceiling in the gentle breeze I had let in from outside. The room was pervaded with an overwhelming odour of mustiness and corruption, as if the place had been closed up from fresh air for some time. Initially, I found this smell disturbing and even of an offensive nature, but after a few moments I made the connexion between the scent and the fragrance of old books, and thus anxiousness was replaced by excitement at what I might find among these decrepit shelves.

A small man in plain, ill-fitting clothes appeared from behind the curtain as I shut the door against the chill night air. I bade him a good evening and he returned my greeting in halting English, from which I detected some foreign accent. As he stepped forward into the bare bulb's light, I could see from the slant of his eyes and the slope of his face the man was of Asiatic blood, although probably mixed with some European background as well. The man was kind enough, though, and after introducing himself as the establishment's proprietor, he placed himself at my service, no doubt eager to make a significant sale to myself, his sole customer. I described my interests to the little man in the simplest layman's terms I could muster, and he directed me to a shelf, inviting me to browse. I perused the spines for a few minutes before taking several volumes of interest to the reading table to study them more closely. Alas, I found little to hold my interest for long. Although there were a number of interesting texts on the dusty shelves, such as Crowley's *The Book of the Law*, the mystical *Lesser key of Solomon*, and the devilish *Ecce Qui Tollit Peccata Mundi*, these titles already furnished my own personal library, and thus they could by no means be called exceedingly rare. Yet, the persistent scholar in me did note the different editions and varying translations of these texts before I began to wonder what small treasures my host might hold elsewhere in his keep.

Every scholar worth his salt knows that all bookstores worth frequenting keep their rarest tomes away from the eyes of the general public, and only bring them to light at the request of their most significant customers. I called the proprietor over to my rude table and inquired after these things whilst pressing a crisp banknote into his clammy hand. I was gladdened to see him nod in understanding of my request, yet somewhat perturbed at hints of malevolence and cunning in his Asiatic eyes as he hastened away into the back room. I sighed inwardly and prepared myself to be shewn laughable forgeries at incredible prices by this foreign rascal. Feeling the disappointment well up inside of me, I stared out of the dirt-clouded windows as I waited to see what the little man would bring me, and spied several forms lurching in the darkness of the alley. The ragged outline of the shadowy forms led me to believe they were the street people whom had assailed me earlier, and yet their forms seemed somehow misshapen and quite singular, as if they were stricken with some kind of twisted palsy.

My musings were interrupted by the return of my doubtful host, who placed a large volume on the desk in front of me. I was immediately intrigued by the nature of