

Innsmouth Clay

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Innsmouth Clay (1971)

The facts relating to the fate of my friend, the late sculptor, Jeffrey Corey-if indeed "late" is the correct reference-must begin with his return from Paris and his decision to rent a cottage on the coast south of Innsmouth in the autumn of 1927. Corey came from an armigerous family with some distant relationship to the Marsh clan of Innsmouth-not, however, such a one as would impose upon him any obligation to consort with his distant relatives. There were, in any case, old rumors abroad about the reclusive Marshes who still lived in that Massachusetts seaport town, and these were hardly calculated to inspire Corey with any desire to announce his presence in the vicinity.

I visited him a month after his arrival in December of that year. Corey was a comparatively young man, not yet forty, six feet in height, with a fine, fresh skin, which was free of any hirsute adornment, though his hair was worn rather long, as was then the custom among artists in the Latin quarter of Paris. He had very strong blue eyes, and his lantern-jawed face would have stood out in any assemblage of people, not alone for the piercing quality of his gaze, but as much for the rather strange, wattled appearance of the skin back from his jaws, under his ears and down his neck a little way below his ears. He was not ill-favored in looks, and a queer quality, almost hypnotic, that informed his fine-featured face had a kind of fascination for most people who met him. He was well settled in when I visited him, and had begun work on a statue of Rima, the Bird-Girl, which promised to become one of his finest works.

He had laid in supplies to keep him for a month, having gone into Innsmouth for them, and he seemed to me more than usually loquacious, principally about his distant relatives, about whom there was a considerable amount of talk, however guarded, in the shops of Innsmouth. Being

reclusive, the Marshes were quite naturally the object of some curiosity; and since that curiosity was not satisfied, an impressive lore and legendry had grown up about them, reaching all the way back to an earlier generation which had been in the South Pacific trade. There was little definite enough to hold meaning for Corey, but what there was suggested all manner of arcane horror, of which he expected at some nebulous future time to learn more, though he had no compulsion to do so. It was just, he explained, that the subject was so prevalent in the village that it was almost impossible to escape it.

He spoke also of a prospective show, made references to friends in Paris and his years of study there, to the strength of Epstein's sculpture, and to the political turmoil boiling in the country. I cite these matters to indicate how perfectly normal Corey was on the occasion of this first visit to him after his return from Europe. I had, of course, seen him fleetingly in New York when he had come home, but hardly long enough to explore any subject as we were able to do that December of 1927.

Before I saw him again, in the following March, I received a curious letter from him, the gist of which was contained in the final paragraph, to which everything else in his letter seemed to mount as to a climax...

"You may have read of some strange goings-on at Innsmouth in February. I have no very clear information about it, but it must surely have been in the papers somewhere, however silent our Massachusetts papers seem to have been. All I can gather about the affair is that a large band of federal officers of some kind descended upon the town and spirited away some of the citizens-among them some of my own relatives, though which I am at a loss to say since I've never troubled to ascertain how many of them there are-or were, as the case may be. What I can pick up in Innsmouth has reference to some kind of South Pacific trade in which certain shipping interests in the town were still evidently engaged, though this seems to be pretty far-fetched, insofar as the docks are all but abandoned, and actually largely useless for the ships now plying the Atlantic, most of which go to the larger and more modern ports. Quite apart from the reasons for the federal action-and considerably of more importance to me, as you will see-is the

indisputable fact that, coincident with the raid on Innsmouth, some naval vessels appeared off the coast in the vicinity of what is known as Devils' Reef, and there dropped a power of depth charges! These set off such turmoil in the depths that a subsequent storm washed ashore all manner of debris, of which a peculiar blue clay came in along the water's edge here. It seemed to me very much like that moulding clay of similar color found in various parts of interior America and often used for the manufacture of bricks, particularly years ago when more modern methods of brick-making were not available to builders. Well, what is important about all this is that I gathered up the clay I could find before the sea took it back again, and I have been working on an entirely new piece I've tentatively titled 'Sea Goddess'-and I am wildly enthusiastic about its possibilities. You will see it when you come down next week, and I am certain you will like it even more than my 'Rima'."

Contrary to his expectations, however, I found myself oddly repelled at my first sight of Corey's new statue. The figure was lissome, save for rather heavier pelvic structure than I thought fitting, and Corey had chosen to alter the feet with webbing between the toes.

"Why?" I asked him.

"I really don't know," he said. "The fact is I hadn't planned to do it. It just happened."

"And those disfiguring marks on the neck?" He was apparently still at work in that area.

He gave an embarrassed laugh, and a strange expression came into his eyes. "I wish I could explain those marks to my own satisfaction, Ken," he said. "I woke up yesterday morning to find that I must have been working in my sleep, for there were slits in the neck below her ears-on both sides-slits like-well, like gills. I'm repairing the damage now."

"Perhaps a 'sea goddess' ought to have gills," I said.

"I'd guess it came about as a result of what I picked up in Innsmouth day before yesterday when I went in for some things I needed. More talk of the

Marsh clan. It boiled down to the suggestion that members of the family were reclusive by choice because they had some kind of physical deformity that related to a legend tying them to certain South Sea islanders. This is the kind of fairy tale that ignorant people take up and embellish-though I grant that this one is more unusual than the kind one commonly picks up, related to the Judaeo-Christian morality pattern. I dreamed about it that night-and evidently walked in my sleep and worked out some part of the dream on my 'Sea goddess'."

However strange I thought it, I made no further comment on the incident. What he said was logical, and I confess that I was appreciably more interested in the Innsmouth lore than in the disfigurement of the "Sea Goddess."

Moreover, I was somewhat taken aback at Corey's evident preoccupation. He was animated enough when we were in conversation, no matter what the subject, but I could not help noticing an air of abstraction whenever we were not-as if he had something on his mind of which he was reluctant to speak, something that vaguely troubled him, but of which he had no certain knowledge himself, or knowledge insufficient to permit him to speak. This showed itself in various ways-a distant look in his eyes, an occasional expression of bafflement, a far gazing out to sea, and now and then a bit of wandering in his talk, an edging off the subject, as were some more demanding thought intruding upon the subject under discussion.

I have thought since that I ought to have taken the initiative and explored the preoccupation so manifest to me; I deferred doing so because I thought it did not concern me and to have done so seemed to me an invasion of Corey's privacy. Though we were friends of long standing, it did not seem that it should be incumbent upon me to intrude upon matters that were patently his alone, and he did not offer to introduce the subject himself, which, I felt, precluded my doing so.

Nevertheless, if I may digress here and leap forward to that period after Corey's disappearance, when I had come into possession of his estate-as directed by him in a formally drawn-up document-it was at about this time that Corey began to jot down disturbing notes in a journal or diary he kept, one that had begun as a commonplace book relating solely to his creative

life. Chronologically, these jottings fit at this point into any account of the facts about Jeffrey Corey's last months.

"March 7. A very strange dream last night. Something impelled me to baptize Sea Goddess. This morning found the piece wet about the head and shoulders, as if I had done it. I repaired the damage, as if no alternative were offered me, though I had planned to crate Rima. The compulsion troubles me."

"March 8. A dream of swimming accompanied by shadowy men and women. Faces, when seen, hauntingly familiar-like something out of an old album. This undoubtedly took rise in the grotesque hints and sly innuendos heard at Hammond's Drug Store today-about the Marshes, as usual. A tale of Great-grandfather Jethro living in the sea. Gilled! The same thing said of some members of the Waite, Oilman, and Eliot families. Heard the identical stuff when I stopped to make an inquiry at the railroad station. The natives here have fed upon this for decades."

"March 10. Evidently sleep-walked in the night, for some slight alterations had been made in Sea Goddess. Also curious indentations as if someone's arms had been around the statue, which was yesterday far too hard to take any sort of impression not made by a chisel or some such tool. The marks bore the appearance of having been pressed into soft clay. The entire piece damp this morning."

"March 11. A really extraordinary experience in the night. Perhaps the most vivid dream I've ever had, certainly the most erotic. I can hardly even now think of it without being aroused. I dreamed that a woman, naked, slipped into my bed after I had gone to sleep, and remained there all night. I dreamed that the night was spent at love-or perhaps I ought to call it lust. Nothing like it since Paris! And as real as those many nights in the Quarter! Too real, perhaps, for I woke exhausted. And I had undoubtedly spent a restless night, for the bed was much torn up."

"March 12. Same dream. Exhausted."

"March 13. The dream of swimming again. In the sea-depths. A sort of city far below. Ryeh or R'lyeh? Something named 'Great Thooloo'?"

Of these matters, these strange dreams, Corey said very little on the occasion of my March visit. His appearance at that time seemed to me somewhat drawn. He did speak of some difficulty sleeping; he was not, he said, getting his “rest”-no matter when he went to bed. He did ask me then if I had ever heard the names “Ryeh” or “Thooloo”; of course, I never had, though on the second day of my visit, we had occasion to hear them.

We went into Innsmouth that day-a short run of less than five miles-and it was evident to me soon that the supplies Corey said he needed did not form the principal reason for going to Innsmouth. Corey was plainly on a fishing expedition; he had come deliberately to find out what he could learn about his family, and to that end led the way from one place to another, from Ferrand’s Drug Store to the public library, where the ancient librarian showed an extraordinary reserve on the subject of the old families of Innsmouth and the surrounding country side, though she did at last mention two names of very old men who might remember some of the Marshes and Gilmans and Waites, and who might be found in their usual haunt, a saloon on Washington Street.

Innsmouth, for all that it had much deteriorated, was the kind of village that must inevitably fascinate anyone with archeological or architectural interests, for it was well over a century old, and the majority of its buildings-other than those in the business-section, dated back many decades before the turn of the century. Even though many were now deserted, and in some cases fallen into ruin, the architectural features of the houses reflected a culture long since gone from the American scene.

As we neared the waterfront, on Washington Street, the evidence of catastrophe was everywhere apparent. Buildings lay in ruins-“Blown up,” said Corey, “by the federal men, I’m told”-and little effort had been made to clean up anything, for some side streets were still blocked by brick rubble. In one place an entire street appeared to have been destroyed, and all the old buildings once used as warehouses along the docks-long since abandoned-had been destroyed. As we neared the sea shore, a nauseating, cloying musk, ichthyic in origin, pervaded everything; it was more than the fishy odor often encountered in stagnant areas along the coast or, too, in inland waters.

Most of the warehouses, Corey said, had once been Marsh property; so much he had learned at Ferrand's Drug Store. Indeed, the remaining members of the Waite and Oilman and Eliot families had suffered very little loss; almost the entire force of the federal raid had fallen upon the Marshes and their holdings in Innsmouth, though the Marsh Refining Company, engaged in manufacturing gold ingots, had not been touched, and still afforded employment to some of the villagers who were not engaged in fishing, though the Refining Company was no longer directly controlled by members of the Marsh clan.

The saloon, which we finally reached, was plainly of nineteenth century origin; and it was equally clear that nothing in the way of improvement had been done to the building or its interior since it had gone up, for the place was unbelievably rundown and shabby. A slovenly middle-aged man sat behind the bar reading a copy of the Arkham Advertiser, and two old men, one of them asleep, sat at it, far apart.

Corey ordered a glass of brandy, and I did likewise.

The bartender did not disguise a cautious interest in us.

"Seth Akins?" asked Corey presently.

The bartender nodded toward the customer who slept at the bar.

"What'll he drink?" asked Corey.

"Anything."

"Let's have a brandy for him."

The bartender poured a shot of brandy into an ill-washed glass and put it down on the bar. Corey took it down to where the old man slept, sat down beside, and nudged him awake.

"Have one on me," he invited.

The old fellow looked up, revealing a grizzled face and bleary eyes under touseled grey hair. He saw the brandy, grabbed it, grinning uncertainly, and

drank it down.

Corey began to question him, at first only establishing his identity as an old resident of Innsmouth, and talking in a general fashion about the village and the surrounding country to Arkham and Newburyport.

Akins talked freely enough; Corey bought him another drink, and then another.

But Akins's ease of speech faded as soon as Corey mentioned the old families, particularly the Marshes. The old man grew markedly more cautious, his eyes darting longingly toward the door, as if he would have liked to escape. Corey, however, pressed him hard, and Akins yielded.

"Guess thar ain't no harm sayin' things naow," he said finally. "Most o' them Marshes is gone since the guv'mint come in last month. And no one knows whar to, but they ain't come back." He rambled quite a bit, but, after circling the subject for some time, he came at last to the "East Injy trade" and "Cap'n Obed Marsh-who begun it all. He had some kind a truck with them East Injuns-brung back some o' thar women an' kep' 'em in that big house he'd built-an' after that, the young Marshes got that queer look an' took to swimmin' aout to Devil Reef an' they'd be gone fer a long time-haours-an' it wasn't natural bein' under water so long. Cap'n Obed married one o' them women-an' some o' the younger Marshes went aout to the East Injys an' brung back more. The Marsh trade never fell off like the others'. All three o' Cap'n Obed's ships-the brig Columby, an' the barque Sumatry Queen an' another brig, Hetty-sailed the oceans for the East Injy an' the Pacific trade without ever a accident. An' them people-them East Injuns an' the Marshes-they begun a new kind a religion-they called it the Order o' Dagon-an' there was a lot o' talk, whisperin' whar nobuddy heerd it, abaout what went on at their meetin's, an' young folk-well, maybe they got lost, but nobuddy ever saw 'em again, an' thar was all that talk about sacreefices-human sacreefices-abaout the same time the young folks dropped aout o' sight-none o' them Marshes or Gilmans or Waites or Eliots, though, none o' thar young folk ever got lost. An' thar was all them whispers abaout some place called 'Ryeh' an' somethin' named 'Thooloo'-some kin't Dagon, seems like..."

At this Corey broke in with a question, seeking to clarify Akins's reference; but the old man knew nothing, and I did not understand until later the reason for Corey's sudden interest.

Akins went on. "People kep' away from them Marshes-an' the others, too. But it was the Marshes that had that queer look mostly. It got so bad some o' them never went aout o' the house, unless it was at night, an' then it was most o' the time to go swimmin' in the ocean. They cud swim like fish, people said-I never saw 'em myself, and nobuddy talked much cuz we noticed whenever anybuddy talked a lot he sort o' dropped aout o' sight-like the young people-and were never heerd from again.

"Cap'n Obed larnt a lot o' things in Ponape an' from the Kanakys-all abaout people they called the 'Deep Ones' that lives under the water-an' he brought back all kinds o' carved things, queer fish things and things from under the water that wasn't fish-things-Gawd knows what them things wuz!"

"What did he do with those carvings?" put in Corey.

"Some as didn't go to the Dagon Hall he sold an' fer a good price, a real good price they fetched. But they're all gone naow, all gone an' the Order of Dagon's all done an' the Marshes ain't been seen hereabaouts ever since they dynamited the warehouses. An' they wan't all arrested, neither-no, sir, they do say what was left o' them Marshes jist walked daown't the shore an' aout into the water an' kilt themselves." At this point he cackled mirthlessly. "But nobuddy ain't seen a one o' them Marsh bodies, thar ain't been no corp' seen all up an' daown the shore."

He had reached this point in his narrative when something extremely odd took place. He suddenly fixed widening eyes on my companion, his jaw dropped, his hands began to shake; for a moment or two he was frozen in that position; then he shrugged himself up and off the barstool, turned, and in a stumbling run burst out of the building into the street, a long, despairing cry shuddering back through the wintry air.

To say that we were astonished is to put it mildly. Seth Akins's sudden turning from Corey was so totally unexpected that we gazed at each other in astonishment. It was not until later that it occurred to me that Akins's

superstition-ridden mind must have been shaken by the sight of the curious corrugations on Corey's neck below his ears for in the course of our conversation with the old man, Corey's thick scarf, which had protected his neck from the still cold March air, had loosened and fallen to drape over his chest in a short loop, disclosing the indentations and rough skin which had always been a part of Jeffrey Corey's neck, that wattled area so suggestive of age and wear.

No other explanation offered itself, and I made no mention of it to Corey, lest I disturb him further, for he was visibly upset, and there was nothing to be gained by upsetting him further.

"What a rigmarole!" I cried, once we were again on Washington Street.

He nodded abstractedly, but I could see plainly that some aspects of the old fellow's account had made an impression of sorts and a not entirely pleasant one on my companion. He could smile, but ruefully, and at my further comments he only shrugged, as if he did not wish to speak of the things we had heard from Akins.

He was remarkably silent throughout that evening, and rather noticeably preoccupied, even more so than he had been previously. I recall resenting somewhat his unwillingness to share whatever burdened his thoughts, but of course this was his decision to make, not mine, and I suspect that what churned through his mind that evening must have seemed to him far-fetched and out-landish enough to make him want to spare himself the ridicule he evidently expected from me. Therefore, after several probing questions which he turned off, I did not again return to the subject of Seth Akins and the Innsmouth legends.

I returned to New York in the morning.

Further excerpts from Jeffrey Corey's Journal.

"March 18. Woke this morning convinced that I had not slept alone last night. Impressions on pillow, in bed. Room and bed very damp, as if someone wet had got into bed beside me. I know intuitively it was a

woman. But how? Some alarm at the thought that the Marsh madness may be beginning to show in me. Footprints on the floor.”

“March 19. ‘Sea Goddess’ gone! The door open. Someone must have got in during the night and taken it. Its sale value could hardly be accounted as worth the risk! Nothing else taken.”

“March 20. Dreamed all night about everything Seth Akins said. Saw Captain Obed Marsh under the sea! Very ancient. Gilled! Swam to far below the surface of the Atlantic off Devil Reef. Many others, both men and women. The queer Marsh look! Oh, the power and the glory!”

“March 21. Night of the equinox. My neck throbbed with pain all night. Could not sleep. Got up and walked down to the shore. How the sea draws me! I was never so aware of it before, but I remember now how as a child I used to fancy I heard-way off in mid-continent!-the sound of the sea, of the sea’s drift and the windy waves!-A fearful sense of anticipation filled me all night long.”

Under this same date-March 21-Corey’s last letter to me was written. He said nothing in it of his dreams, but he did write about the soreness of his neck.

“It isn’t my throat-that’s clear. No difficulty swallowing. The pain seems to be in that disfigured area of skin-wattled or wart-like or fissured, whatever you prefer to call it-beneath my ears. I cannot describe it; it isn’t the pain one associates with stiffness or friction or a bruise. It’s as if the skin were about to break outward, and it goes deep. And at the same time I cannot rid myself of the conviction that something is about to happen-something I both dread and look forward to, and all manner of ancestral awareness-however badly I put it-obsess me!”

I replied, advising him to see a doctor, and promising to visit him early in April.

By that time Corey had vanished.

There was some evidence to show that he had gone down to the Atlantic and walked in-whether with the intention of swimming or of taking his life could not be ascertained. The prints of his bare feet were discovered in what remained of that odd clay thrown up by the sea in February, but there were no returning prints. There was no farewell message of any kind, but there were instructions left for me directing the disposal of his effects, and I was named administrator of his estate-which suggested that some apprehension did exist in his mind.

Some search-desultory at best-was made for Corey's body along the shore both above and below Innsmouth, but this was fruitless, and a coroner's inquest had no trouble in coming to the conclusion that Corey had met his death by misadventure.

No record of the facts that seemed pertinent to the mystery of his disappearance could possibly be left without a brief account of what I saw off Devil Reef in the twilight of the night of April 17th.

It was a tranquil evening; the sea was as of glass, and no wind stirred the evening air. I had been in the last stages of disposing of Corey's effects and had chosen to go out for a row off Innsmouth. What I had heard of Devil Reef drew me inevitably toward its remains-a few jagged and broken stones that jutted above the surface at low tide well over a mile off the village. The sun had gone down, a fine afterglow lay in the western sky, and the sea was a deep cobalt as far as the eye could reach.

I had only just reached the reef when there was a great disturbance of the water. The surface broke in many places; I paused and sat quite still, guessing that a school of dolphins might be surfacing and anticipating with some pleasure what I might see.

But it was not dolphins at all. It was some kind of sea-dweller of which I had no knowledge. Indeed, in the fading light, the swimmers looked both fish-like and squamously human. All but one pair of them remained well away from the boat in which I sat.

That pair-one clearly a female creature of an oddly claylike color, the other male-came quite close to the boat in which I sat, watching with mixed

feelings not untinged with the kind of terror that takes its rise in a profound fear of the unknown. They swam past, surfacing and diving, and, having passed, the lighter-skinned of the two creatures turned and distinctly flashed me a glance, making a strange guttural sound that was not unlike a half-strangled crying-out of my name: “Ken!” and left me with the clear and unmistakable conviction that the gilled sea-thing wore the face of Jeffrey Corey!

It haunts my dreams even now.