

The Lamp of Alhazred

August Derleth & H. P. Lovecraft



calibre 1.0.0

THE LAMP OF ALHAZRED

It was seven years after his Grandfather Whipple' s disappearance that Ward Phillips received the lamp. This, like the house on Angell Street where Phillips lived, had belonged to his grandfather. Phillips had had the living of the house ever since his grandfather' s disappearance, but the lamp had been in the keeping of the old man' s lawyer until the elapsing of the required seven years for the presumption of death. It had been his grandfather' s wish that the lamp be safely kept by the lawyer in the event of any untoward circumstance, whether death or any other, so that Phillips should have sufficient time to browse as he pleased in the sizable Whipple library, in which a great store of learning waited for Phillips' attention. Once he had read through the many volumes on the shelves, Phillips would be mature enough to inherit his grandfather' s "most priceless treasure"—as old Whipple himself had put it.

Phillips was then thirty, and in indifferent health, though this was but a continuation of the sickness which had so often made his childhood miserable. He had been born into a moderately wealthy family, but the savings which had once been his grandfather' s had been lost through injudicious investments, and all that remained to Phillips was the house on Angell Street and its contents. Phillips had become a writer for the pulp magazines, and had eked out a spare living by undertaking in addition the revision of countless almost hopeless manuscripts of prose and verse by writers far more amateur than he, who sent them to him, hopeful that through the miracle of his pen they in turn might see their work in print. His sedentary life had weakened his resistance to disease; he was tall, thin, wore glasses and was prey to colds and once, much to his embarrassment, he came down with the measles.

He was much given on warm days to wandering out into the country where he had played as a child, taking his work outdoors, where often he sat on the same lovely wooded riverbank which had been his favorite haunt since infancy. This Seekonk River shore had changed not at all in the years since then, and Phillips, who lived much in the past, believed that the way to

defeat the sense of time was to cling close to unaltered early haunts. He explained his way of life to a correspondent by writing, "Amongst those forest paths I know so well, the gap between the present and the days of 1899 or 1900 vanishes utterly—so that sometimes I almost tend to be astonished upon emergence to find the city grown out of its fin de siecle semblance!" And, in addition to the Seekonk's banks, he went often to a hill, Nentaconhaunt, from the slope of which he could look down upon his native city and wait there for the sunset and the enchanting panoramas of the city springing to its life by night, with the steeples and gambrel roofs darkening upon the orange and crimson, or mother-of-pearl and emerald afterglow, and the lights winking on, one by one, making of the vast, sprawling city a magical land to which, more than to the city by day, Phillips fancied himself bound.

As a result of these diurnal excursions, Phillips worked far into the night, and the lamp, because he had long ago given up the use of electricity to conserve his meager income, would be of use to him, for all that it was of an odd shape and manifestly very old. The letter which came with this final gift from the old man, whose attachment to his grandson had been unbounded and was cemented by the early death of the boy's parents, explained that the lamp came from a tomb in Arabia of the dawn of history. It had once been the property of a certain half-mad Arab, known as Abdul Alhazred, and was a product of the fabulous tribe of Ad—one of the four mysterious, little-known tribes of Arabia, which where Ad—of the south, Thamood—of the north, Tasm and Jadis—of the center of the peninsula. It had been found long ago in the hidden city called Irem, the City of Pillars, which had been erected by Shedad, last of the despots of Ad, and was known by some as the Nameless City, and said to be in the area of Hadramant, and, by others, to be buried under the ageless, ever-shifting sands of the Arabian deserts, invisible to the ordinary eye, but sometimes encountered by chance by the favorites of the Prophet. In concluding his long letter, old Whipple had written: "It may bring pleasure equally by being lit or by being left dark. It may bring pain on the same terms. It is the source of ecstasy or terror."

The lamp of Alhazred was unusual in its appearance. It was meant for burning oil, and seemed to be of gold. It had the shape of a small oblong

pot, with a handle curved up from one side, and a spout for wick and flame on the other. Many curious drawings decorated it, together with letters and pictures arranged into words in a language unfamiliar to Phillips, who could draw upon his knowledge for more than one Arabian dialect, and yet knew not the language of the inscription on the lamp. Nor was it Sanscrit which was inscribed upon the metal, but a language older than that—one of letters and hieroglyphs, some of which were pictographs. Phillips worked all one afternoon to polish it, inside and out, after which he filled it with oil.

That night, putting aside the candles and the kerosene lamp by the light of which he had worked for many years, he lit the lamp of Alhazred. He was mildly astonished at the warmth of its glow, the steadiness of its flame, and the quality of its light, but, since he was behind in his work, he did not stop to ponder these things, but bent at once to the task in hand, which was the revision of a lengthy creation in verse, which began in this manner:

“Oh, ’ twas on a bright and early morn

Of a year long ’ fore I was born,

While earth was yet being torn,

Long before by strife ’ twas worn

.”

and went on even more archaically in a style long ago out of fashion. Ordinarily, however, the archaic appealed to Phillips. He lived so definitely in the past that he had pronounced views, and a philosophy all his own about the influence of the past. He had an idea of impersonal pageantry and time-and-space-defying fantasy which had always from his earliest consciousness been so inextricably bound up with his inmost thought and feeling, that any searching transcript of his moods would sound highly artificial, exotic, and flavored with conventional images, no matter how utterly faithful it might be to truth. What had haunted Phillips’ dreams for decades was a strange sense of adventurous expectancy connected with landscapes and architecture and sky-effects. Always in his mind was a picture of himself at three, looking across and downward from a railway

bridge at the densest part of the city, feeling the imminence of some wonder which he could neither describe nor fully conceive—a sense of marvel and liberation hiding in obscure dimensions and problematically reachable at rare instances still through vistas of ancient streets, across leagues of hill country, or up endless flights of marble steps culminating in tiers of balustraded terraces. But, however much Phillips was inclined to retreat to a time when the world was younger and less hurried, to the eighteenth century or even farther back, when there was still time for the art of conversation, and when a man might dress with a certain elegance and not be looked at askance by his neighbors, the lack of invention in the lines over which he struggled, and the paucity of ideas, together with his own weariness, soon combined to tire him to such an extent that he found it impossible to continue, and, recognizing that he could not do justice to these uninspired lines, he pushed away at last and leaned back to rest.

Then it was that he saw that a subtle change had come upon his surroundings.

The familiar walls of books, broken here and there by windows, over which Phillips was in the habit of drawing the curtains tight so that no light from outside—of sun or moon or even of the stars—invaded his sanctuary, were strangely overlaid not only with the light of the lamp from Arabia, but also by certain objects and vistas in that light. Wherever the light fell, there, superimposed upon the books on their serried shelves, were such scenes as Phillips could not have conjured up in the wildest recesses of his imagination. But where there were shadows—as, for instance, where the shadow of the back of a chair was thrown by the light upon the shelves—there was nothing but the darkness of the shadow and the dimness of the books on the shelves in that darkness.

Phillips sat in wonder and looked at the scenes unfolded before him. He thought fleetingly that he was the victim of a curious optical illusion, but he did not long entertain this explanation of what he saw. Nor, curiously, was he in want of an explanation; he felt no need of it. A marvel had come to pass, and he looked upon it with but a passing question, only the wonder at what he saw. For the world upon which he looked in the light of the lamp

was one of great and surpassing strangeness. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, nor like anything he had read or dreamed about.

It seemed to be a scene of the earth when young, one in which the land was still in the process of being formed, a land where great gouts of steam came from fissures and rocks, and the trails of serpentine animals showed plainly in the mud. High overhead flew great beasts that fought and tore, and from an opening in a rock on the edge of a sea, a tremendous animal appendage, resembling a tentacle, uncoiled sinuously and menacingly into the red, wan sunlight of that day, like a creature from some fantastic fiction.

Then, slowly, the scene changed. The rocks gave way to windswept desert, and, like a mirage, rose the deserted and hidden city, the lost City of the Pillars, fabled Irem, and Phillips knew that, while no human foot any longer walked the streets of that city, certain terrible beings still lurked among the ancient stone piles of the dwellings, which stood not in ruins, but as they had been built, before the people of that ancient city had been destroyed or driven forth by the things which came out of the heavens to lay siege to and possess Irem. Yet nothing was to be seen of them; there was only the lurking fear of a movement, like a shadow out of time. And far beyond the city and the desert rose the snowcapped mountains; even as he looked upon them, names for them sprang into his thoughts. The city on the desert was the Nameless City and the snowy peaks were the Mountains of Madness or perhaps Kadath in the Cold Waste. And he enjoyed keenly bestowing names upon these landscapes, for they came to him with ease, they sprang to his mind as if they had always been lingering on the perimeter of his thoughts, waiting for this moment to come to being.

He sat for a long time, his fascination unbounded, but presently a vague feeling of alarm began to stir in him. The landscapes passing before his eyes were no less of the quality of dreams, but there was a disquieting persistence of the malign, together with unmistakable hints of horrible entities which inhabited those landscapes; so that finally he put out the light and somewhat shakily lit a candle, and was comforted by its wan, familiar glow.

He pondered long on what he had seen. His grandfather had called the lamp his "most priceless possession" its properties must then have been known to

him. And what were its properties but an ancestral memory and a magic gift of revelation so that he who sat in its glow was enabled to see in turn the places of beauty and terror its owners had known? What Phillips had seen, he was convinced, were landscapes known to Alhazred. But how inadequate this explanation was! And how perplexed Phillips grew, the more he thought of what he had seen! He turned at last to the work he had put aside and lost himself in it, pushing back from his awareness all the fancies and alarms which clamored for recognition.

Late next day, Phillips went out into the October sunlight, away from the city. He took the car-line to the edge of the residential district and then struck out into the country. He penetrated a terrain which took him almost a mile from any spot he had ever before trod in the course of his life, following a road, which branched north and west from the Plainfield Pike and ascending a low rise which skirted Nentaconhaunt's western foot, and which commanded an utterly idyllic vista of rolling meadows, ancient stone walls, hoary groves, and distant cottage roofs to the west and south. He was less than three miles from the heart of the city, and yet basked in the primal rural New England of the first colonists.

Just before sunset, he climbed the hill by a precipitious cart-path bordering an old wood, and from the dizzy crest obtained an almost stupefying prospect of outspread countryside, gleaming rivulets, faroff forests, and mystical orange sky, with the great solar disc sinking redly amidst bars of stratus clouds. Entering the woods, he saw the actual sunset through the trees, and then turned east to cross the hill to a more familiar cityward slope which he had always sought. Never before had he realized the great extent of Nentaconhaunt's surface. It was in reality a miniature plateau or table-land, with valleys, ridges, and summits of its own, rather than a simple hill. From some of the hidden interior meadows—remote from every sign of nearby human life—he secured truly marvellous glimpses of the remote urban skyline—a dream of enchanted pinnacles and domes half-floating in air, and with an obscure aura of mystery around them. The upper windows of some of the taller towers held the fire of the sun after he had lost it, affording a spectacle of cryptic and curious glamour. Then he saw the great round disc of the Hunter's moon floating about the belfries and minarets, while in the orange-glowing west Venus and Jupiter commenced to twinkle.

His route across the plateau was varied—sometimes through the interior—sometimes getting toward the wooded edge where dark valleys sloped down to the plain below, and huge balanced boulders on rocky heights imparted a spectral, druidic effect where they stood out against the twilight.

He came finally to better-known ground, where the grassy ridge of an old buried aqueduct gave the illusion of a vestigial Roman road, and stood once more on the familiar eastward crest which he had known ever since his earliest childhood. Before him, the outspread city was rapidly lighting up, and lay like a constellation in the deepening dusk. The moon poured down increasing floods of pale gold, and the glow of Venus and Jupiter in the fading west had grown intense. The way home lay before him down a steep hillside to the car-line which would take him back to the prosaic haunts of man.

But throughout all these halcyon hours, Phillips had not once forgotten his experience of the night before, and he could not deny that he looked upon the coming of darkness with an increased anticipation. The vague alarm which had stirred him had subsided in the promise of further nocturnal adventure of a nature hitherto unknown to him.

He ate his solitary supper that night in haste so that he could go early to his study where the rows of books that reached to the ceiling greeted him with their bland assurance of permanence. This night he did not even glance at the work which awaited him, but lit the lamp of Alhazred at once. Then he sat to wait for whatever might happen.

The soft glow of the lamp spread yellowly outward to the shelf-girt walls. It did not flicker; the flame burned steadily, and, as before, the first impression Phillips received was one of comforting, lulling warmth. Then, slowly, the books and the shelves seemed to grow dim, to fade, and gave way to the scenes of another world and time.

For hour upon hour that night Phillips watched. And he named the scenes and places he saw, drawing upon a hitherto unopened vein of his imagination, stimulated by the glow from the lamp of Alhazred. He saw a dwelling of great beauty, wreathed in vapors, on a headland like that near

Gloucester, and he called it the strange high house in the mist. He saw an ancient, gambrel-roofed town, with a dark river flowing through it, a town like to Salem, but more eldritch and uncanny, and he called the town Arkham, and the river Miskatonic. He saw the dark brooding sea-coast town of Innsmouth, and Devil Reef beyond it. He saw the watery depths of R' lyeh where dead Cthulhu lay sleeping. He looked upon the windswept Plateau of Leng, and the dark islands of the South Seas—the places of dream, the landscapes of other places, of outer space, the levels of being that existed in other time continua, and were older than earth itself, tracing back through the Ancient Ones to Hali in the start and even beyond.

But he witnessed these scenes as through a window or a door which seemed to beckon him invitingly to leave his own mundane world and journey into these realms of magic and wonder; and the temptation rose ever stronger within him, he trembled with a longing to obey, to discard that which he had become and chance that which he might be; and, as before, he darkened the lamp and welcomed the book-lined walls of his Grandfather Whipple's study.

And for the rest of that night, by candle-light, abandoning the monotonous revisions he had planned to do, he turned instead to the writing of short tales, in which he called up the scenes and beings he had seen by the light of the lamp of Alhazred.

All that night he wrote, and all the next day he slept, exhausted.

And the following night, once again he wrote, though he took time to answer letters from his correspondents, to whom he wrote of his “dreams,” unknowing whether he had seen the visions that had passed before his eyes or whether he had dreamed them, and aware that the worlds of his fiction had been woven inextricably with those which belonged to the lamp, having blended in his mind's eye the desires and yearnings of his youth with the visions of his creative drive, absorbing alike the places of the lamp and the secret recesses of his heart, which, like the lamp of Alhazred, had coursed the far reaches of the universes.

For many nights Phillips did not light the lamp.

The nights lengthened into months, the months into years.

He grew older, and his fictions found their way into print, and the myths of Cthulhu; of Hastur the Unspeakable! of Yog-Sothoth; and Shub-Niggurath, the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young; of Hypnos, the god of sleep; of the Great Old Ones and their messenger, who was Nyarlathotep—all became part of the lore of Phillips' innermost being, and of the shadow-world beyond. He brought Arkham into reality, and delineated the strange high house in the mist; he wrote of the shadow over Innsmouth and the whisperer in darkness and the fungi from Yuggoth and the horror at Dunwich; and in his prose and verse the light from the lamp of Alhazred shone brightly, even though Phillips no longer used the lamp.

Sixteen years passed in this fashion, and then one night Ward Phillips came upon the lamp where he had put it, behind a row of books on one of the lower-most shelves of his Grandfather Whipple's library. He took it out, and at once all the old enchantment and wonder were upon him, and he polished it anew and set it once more on his table. In the long years which had passed, Phillips had grown progressively weaker. He was now mortally ill, and knew that his years were numbered; and he wanted to see again the worlds of beauty and terror that lay within the glow of the lamp of Alhazred.

He lit the lamp once more and looked to the walls.

But a strange thing came to pass. Where before there had been on the walls the places and beings of Alhazred's adventures, there now came to be a magical presentation of a country intimately known to Ward Phillips—but not to his time, rather of a time gone by, a dear lost time, when he had romped through his childhood playing his imaginative games of Greek mythology along the banks of the Seekonk. For there, once again, were the glades of childhood; there were the familiar coves and inlets where he had spent his tender years; there was once more the bower he had built in homage to great Pan; and all the irresponsibility, the happy freedoms of that childhood lay upon those walls; for the lamp now gave back his own memory. And he thought eagerly that perhaps it had always given him an ancestral memory, for who could deny that perhaps in the days of his

Grandfather Whipple's youth, or the youth of those who had gone before him, someone in the Ward Phillips' line had seen the places illuminated by the lamp?

And once again it was as if he saw as through a door. The scene invited him, and he stumbled weakly to his feet and walked toward the walls.

He hesitated only for a moment; then he strode toward the books.

The sunlight burst suddenly all about him. He felt shorn of his shackles, and he began to run lithely along the shore of the Seekonk to where, ahead of him, the scenes of his childhood waited and he could renew himself, beginning again, living once more the halcyon time when all the world was young

It was not until a curious admirer of his tales came to the city to visit him that Ward Phillips' disappearance was discovered. It was assumed that he had wandered away into the woods, and been taken ill and died there, for his solitary habits were well known in the Angell Street neighborhood, and his steady decline in health was no secret.

Though desultory searching parties were organized and sent out to scour the vicinity of Nantaconhaunt and the shores of the Seekonk, there was no trace of Ward Phillips. The police were confident that his remains would some day be found, but nothing was discovered, and in time the unsolved mystery was lost in the police and newspaper files.

The years passed. The old house on Angell Street was torn down, the library was bought up by book shops, and the contents of the house were sold for junk—including an old-fashioned antique Arabian lamp, for which no one in the technological world past Phillips' time could devise any use.