

# There Are More Things

*To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft*

On the point of taking my last examination at the University of Texas, in Austin, I learned that my uncle Edwin Arnett had died of an aneurysm at the far end of the South American continent. I felt what we all feel when someone dies—the remorse, now pointless, for not having been kinder. We forget that we are all dead men conversing with dead men. My course of study was philosophy. I remembered that it was my uncle, at the Casa Colorado, his home near Lomas, on the edge of Buenos Aires, who, without invoking a single proper name, had first revealed to me philosophy's beautiful perplexities. One of the after-dinner oranges was his aid in initiating me into Berkeley's idealism; a chessboard was enough to illustrate the paradoxes of the Eleatics. Years later, he was to lend me Hinton's treatises which attempt to demonstrate the reality of four-dimensional space and which the reader is meant to imagine by means of complicated exercises with multicolored cubes. I shall never forget the prisms and pyramids that we erected on the floor of his study.

My uncle was an engineer. Before retiring from his job with the railroad, he decided to build himself a house in Turdera, which offered the advantages of almost countrylike solitude and of proximity to the city. Nothing was more predictable than that the architect should be his close friend Alexander Muir. This uncompromising man followed the uncompromising teachings of John Knox. My uncle, like almost all the gentlemen of his day, had been a freethinker or, rather, an agnostic, but he was interested in theology, just as he was interested in Hinton's unreal cubes and in the well-constructed nightmares of the young H. G. Wells. He liked dogs, and he had a great sheepdog that he had named Samuel Johnson, in memory of Lichfield, his far-off birthplace.

The Casa Colorado stood on a height of land, bordered on the west by sun-blackened fields. Inside its fence, the araucarias did nothing to soften its air of gloom. Instead of a flat roof, there was a slate-tiled saddle roof and a square tower with a clock. These seemed to oppress the walls and the meager windows. As a boy, I used to accept all this ugliness, just as one accepts those incompatible things which, only because they coexist, are called the world.

I returned home in 1921. To avoid legal complications, the house had been auctioned off. It was bought by a foreigner, a Max Preetorius, who paid double what was offered by the highest bidder. No sooner was the deed signed than he arrived, late one afternoon, with two helpers and they carted off to a rubbish dump, not far from the old Drover's Road, all the furniture, all the books, and all the utensils of the house. (I sadly recalled the dia-

grams in the Hinton volumes and the great globe.) The next day, Preetorius went to Muir and proposed certain alterations that the architect indignantly rejected. In the end, a firm from Buenos Aires took charge of the work. The local carpenters refused to furnish the house again. Finally, a certain Mariani, from Glew, accepted the conditions laid down by Preetorius. For an entire fortnight he had to labor by night behind closed doors. It was also by night that the new owner of the Casa Colorado moved in. The windows no longer opened, but chinks of light could be made out in the dark. One morning, the milkman found the sheepdog dead on the walk, headless and mutilated. That winter they felled the araucarias. Nobody saw Preetorius again.

News of these events, as may be imagined, left me uneasy. I know that my most obvious trait is curiosity—that same curiosity that brought me together with a woman completely different from me only in order to find out who she was and what she was like, to take up (without appreciable results) the use of laudanum, to explore transfinite numbers, and to undertake the hideous adventure that I am about to tell. Ominously, I decided to look into the matter.

My first step was to see Alexander Muir. I remembered him as tall-standing and dark, with a wiry build that suggested strength. Now the years had stooped him and his black beard had gone gray. He received me at his Temperley house, which, foreseeably, was like my uncle's, since both houses followed the solid standards of the good poet and bad builder William Morris.

Conversation was spare—Scotland's symbol,

after all, is the thistle. I had the feeling, nonetheless, that the strong Ceylon tea and the equally generous plate of scones (which my host broke in two and buttered for me as if I were still a boy) were, in fact, a frugal Calvinistic feast offered to the nephew of his friend. His theological differences with my uncle had been a long game of chess, demanding of each player the collaboration of his opponent.

Time passed and I was no nearer my business. There was an uncomfortable silence and Muir spoke. "Young man," he said, "you have not come all this way to talk about Edwin or the United States, a country that I have little interest in. What's troubling you is the sale of the Casa Colorado and its odd buyer. They do me, too. Frankly, the story displeases me, but I'll tell you what I can. It will not be much."

After a while he went on, unhurriedly. "Before Edwin died, the mayor called me into his office. He was with the parish priest. They asked me to draw the plans for a Catholic chapel. My work would be well paid. On the spot, I answered no. I am a servant of God and I cannot commit the abomination of erecting altars to idols." Here he stopped.

"Is that all?" I finally dared ask.

"No. This whelp of a Jew Preetorius wanted me to destroy my work and in its place get up a monstrous thing. Abomination comes in many shapes." He pronounced these words gravely and got to his feet.

Outside, on turning the corner, I was approached by Daniel Iberra. We knew one another the way people in small towns do. He suggested

that we accompany each other back to Turdera. I have never been keen on hoodlums, and I expected a sordid litany of violent and more or less apocryphal back-room stories, but I gave in and accepted his invitation. It was nearly nightfall. On seeing the Casa Colorado come into view from a few blocks off, Iberra made a detour. I asked him why. His reply was not what I anticipated.

"I am don Felipe's right arm," he said. "Nobody has ever called me soft. That young Urgoiti who took the trouble to come looking for me all the way from Merlo—you probably remember what happened to him. Look. A few nights ago, I was returning from a party. A hundred yards or so from that house I saw something. My horse reared up, and if I hadn't had a good grip on him and made him turn down an alley, maybe I wouldn't be telling this story now. What I saw justified the horse's fright." Angrily, Iberra added a swear word.

That night I did not sleep. Around dawn, I dreamed about an engraving that I had never seen before or that I had seen and forgotten; it was in the style of Piranesi, and it had a labyrinth in it. It was a stone amphitheater ringed by cypresses, above whose tops it reached. There were neither doors nor windows; rather, it displayed an endless row of narrow vertical slits. With a magnifying glass, I tried to see the Minotaur inside. At last, I made it out. It was a monster of a monster, more bison than bull, and, its human body stretched out on the ground, it seemed to be asleep and dreaming. Dreaming of what or of whom?

That evening, I passed by the Casa Colorado. The iron gate was shut and some of its bars were

bent. What once was garden was now overgrown with weeds. To the right, there was a shallow ditch and its outer edges were trampled.

There was only one move left, but for days I kept putting it off—not because I felt it to be altogether a waste, but because it would drag me to the inevitable, to the last.

Without much hope, I went to Glew. Mariani, the carpenter, was a stout, pink-faced Italian, common and cordial and now somewhat advanced in years. A glance at him was enough for me to dismiss the stratagems I had contrived the night before. I handed him my card, which he pompously spelled out aloud with a certain reverential stumbling when he reached the "Ph.D." I told him I was interested in the furniture made by him for the house in Turdera that had been my uncle's. The man spoke on and on. I shall not try to transcribe his torrent of words and gestures, but he told me that his motto was to satisfy his customer's every demand, no matter how outlandish it was, and that he had carried out his work to the letter.

After rummaging in various drawers he showed me some papers that I could make neither head nor tail of; they were signed by the elusive Preetorius. (Doubtless, Mariani mistook me for a lawyer.) On saying goodbye, he confided to me that even for all the world's gold he would never again set foot in Turdera, let alone that house. He added that the customer is sacred, but that in his humble opinion Mr. Preetorius was crazy. Then he grew quiet, obviously repentant. I was unable to worm anything more out of him.

I had allowed for this failure, but it is one thing to allow for something and quite another to see it

happen. Time and again, I said to myself that the solution of this enigma did not concern me and that the one true enigma was time, that seamless chain of past, present, and future, of the ever and the never. Such reflections turned out to be useless, however; after whole afternoons devoted to the study of Schopenhauer or Royce, night after night I would walk the dirt roads ringing the Casa Colorada. Sometimes I caught a glimpse upstairs of a very white light; other times, I thought I heard a moaning. It went on this way until the nineteenth of January.

It was one of those Buenos Aires days when a man feels himself not only bullied and insulted by the summer but even debased by it. At around eleven o'clock at night the storm broke. First came the south wind, and then the water in torrents. I wandered about looking for a tree. In the sudden glare of a lightning flash I found myself a few steps from the fence. Whether out of fear or hope I don't know, but I tried the gate. Unexpectedly, it opened. I made my way, pushed along by the storm. Sky and earth threatened me. The door of the house was also open. A squall of rain lashed my face and I went in.

Inside, the floor tiles had been torn up and I stepped on matted grass. A sweet, sickening smell filled the house. Right or left, I'm not sure which, I tripped on a stone ramp. Quickly, I went up. Almost unawares, I turned on the light switch.

The dining room and the library of my memories were now, with the wall between them torn down, a single great bare room containing one or two pieces of furniture. I shall not try to describe them, since I am not altogether sure—in spite of

the cruel white light—of having seen them. Let me explain myself. To see a thing one has to comprehend it. An armchair presupposes the human body, its joints and limbs; a pair of scissors, the act of cutting. What can be said of a lamp or a car? The savage cannot comprehend the missionary's Bible; the passenger does not see the same rigging as the sailors. If we really saw the world, maybe we would understand it.

None of the meaningless shapes that that night granted me corresponded to the human figure or, for that matter, to any conceivable use. I felt revulsion and terror. In one of the corners, I found a ladder which led to the upper floor. The spaces between the iron rungs, which were no more than ten, were wide and irregular. That ladder, implying hands and feet, was comprehensible, and in some way this relieved me. I put out the light and waited for some time in the dark. I did not hear the least sound, but the presence there of incomprehensible things disquieted me. In the end, I made up my mind.

Once upstairs, my fearful hand switched on the light a second time. The nightmare that had fore-shadowed the lower floor came alive and flowered on the next. Here there were either many objects or a few linked together. I now recall a sort of long operating table, very high and in the shape of a U, with round hollows at each end. I thought that maybe it was the bed of the house's inhabitant, whose monstrous anatomy revealed itself in this way, implicitly, like an animal's or a god's by its shadow. From some page or other of Lucan there came to my lips the word "amphisbaena," which hinted at, but which certainly did not ex-

haust, what my eyes were later to see. I also remember a V of mirrors that became lost in the upper darkness.

What would the inhabitant be like? What could it be looking for on this planet, no less hideous to it than it to us? From what secret regions of astronomy or time, from what ancient and now incalculable dusk can it have reached this South American suburb and this particular night?

I felt an intruder in the chaos. Outside, the rain had stopped. I looked at my watch and saw with astonishment that it was almost two o'clock. I left the light on and carefully began climbing down. To get down the way I had come up was not impossible—to get down before the inhabitant returned. I guessed that it had not locked the doors because it did not know how.

My feet were touching the next to last rung of the ladder when I felt that something, slow and oppressive and twofold, was coming up the ramp. Curiosity overcame my fear, and I did not shut my eyes.