



THE SHANDLER CHRONICLES

New Cthulhu fiction! Supernatural skullduggery runs amok in this continuing series of writings culled from the archives of occult investigator Phillip Shandler, as transcribed by Call of Cthulhu author Monte Cook.

SHANDLER
INVESTIGATIONS

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Dear Thomas,

July 16, 1931

So much has happened, and honestly I dread to relate any of it to you. Somehow describing it in words seems to give it all life and power.

I write this with a shaky hand, to say the least.

I'm still in Boston. I believe when last I wrote you, I told you about my first visit to see Harriet Westbrook of the Starry Wisdom. The night after that brief experience, I could not sleep. My waking mind was haunted with images of the photograph I had seen in her foyer, showing her with the dreaded Simon Carlisle – a man who should be years in his grave yet has seemingly dogged so many of my experiences in the last year or so.

As sickened as I was with that terrifying reminder of the man who I had seen in both dream and waking horror, I knew I needed to know more. The Starry Wisdom was related to the Congregation of the Risen God, the cult Carlisle's had led, but I had no idea that the relationship between Mrs. Westbrook and he was so close. How could I? Simon Carlisle lived more than a century ago.

I dressed and unpacked my pistol, wearing it in my side holster. I took my flashlight and managed to find a taxicab despite the late hour. The driver took me near Westbrook's manor, but not right up to it. I walked the rest of the way, up an impressive hill covered with dark but regal old homes. The night was warm, and the moon was as bright as the streetlamps.

The house was surrounded by an imposing iron-wrought fence, and the gate was unsurprisingly closed and locked. Undaunted, I moved around to the side of the yard and scaled the fence. It wasn't easy – I'm no climber – but I did it, and flung myself over the top, landing ungracefully in a hedge on the other side.

After righting myself, I hadn't taken three steps toward the house before I heard the growling. Earlier that day, I'd noted the guard dogs Mrs. Westbrook kept, and fortunately, I'd thought ahead. I pulled the two steaks I'd purchased just for this occasion, carefully unwrapping the butcher paper as quietly as possible. When I saw them near the house, they began to bark and run forward. I tossed one slab of meat to the left and the other to my right. As I'd hoped, this not only distracted the hulking hounds, it

quieted them. I ran in between them as they leapt upon their juicy treats and reached the manor.

Once there, I saw a light in a second story window blaze to life. I ran along the side of the house trying to keep my footfalls light. Then, I got lucky (or so I believed). I found an outside cellar door. It was latched from the inside, but the door was old and I found that I could slip the blade of my pocketknife through the crack between the door and the jamb, releasing the latch. I opened it and went down the steps into the basement of the house.

It was dark, of course, but my flashlight helped to guide me through some rather typical cellar rooms. I listened for the sounds of someone alerted by the dogs, but heard nothing. Unfortunately, I grew lax and tripped at the top of a stone staircase and tumbled down into a chamber on an even lower level.

The room stank of age and dust. All around me, in throne-like wooden chairs, sat desiccated figures, their visages held eternally in the rictus of death. These ancient corpses wore the clothing of days long gone, although the garments were in surprisingly good condition. Each was covered in dust, no doubt much of it the result of the slow disintegration of their own flesh. There were eleven in number, although I noted a twelfth chair, sitting vacant.

I felt suddenly cold. That seems to you, most likely, like it seemed to me at the time, to be a natural reaction to the sight of so much death, and worse: such obvious and deliberate veneration for death displayed around me. But it was more than that. As I stood up and shined my light upon the unmoving cadavers, one at a time, I felt colder and colder. More than that, really. I felt the heat from my body leaving me.

I swore I heard a distant moaning sound, so faint as to have been uttered on some distant world, but so immediate that I knew it was tied to this place, and these figures around me. I realized then that these figures – the dead men and woman around me – were leeching the warmth from me. Though there was no movement and no spark among them, these corpses still possessed some kind of life, or perhaps unlife. The spirits of these figures held a terrible attachment to their bodies even though most had to have been decades dead, if not more. I had seen the dead, or those that should be dead, walk, but I now

know that such animation is not necessary for the undead to still pose a dire threat to the living.

As I grew colder, they sapped my strength as well. Perhaps my very life. Knowing I had to act quickly, I hefted the heavy flashlight and smashed it into the ancient skull of the corpse nearest me. The blow shattered it, sending corpse dust billowing into the air. The distant moan grew more intense.

I could feel something stirring within the dimly lit chamber. Not physically, though. What I felt existed purely on a spiritual or psychic level. And it terrified me.

Like a man deranged, I began hammering on the husks of dry remains around me. With little thought of the blasphemy of defiling corpses I smashed skulls and kicked in dust-filled chests. Brittle bones yielded to my violence without resistance, except that the moaning became a wail and the disturbance I felt in my mind grew to a fever pitch.

With the destruction of the last grinning skull, however, it all came to an end. Shivering from the unnatural cold, I collapsed to my hands and knees. My flashlight winked out.

I rested in that position as the dust settled on the floor and on me, catching my breath and hoping for some warmth as well as vigor. After some minutes, I fumbled for my flashlight. I couldn't get it to come on. To my horror, I saw that above each chair floated a reddish glow like a sentient malevolence. In this dim, hellish light, I saw a door I had not previously even noticed, open. More of the same crimson light

spilled from the open doorway, and a figure stood in the doorway.

It spoke my name.

I'd like to tell you, Thomas, that I stood there, contemplating my situation and weighing my options. But I didn't. I bolted and ran. I ran up the stairs and up again through the cellar door. I ran across the lawn even though I saw lights in many of the manor's windows now. I ran past the dogs finishing their meaty snacks, probably hungry for more. I reached the fence and fairly vaulted over it, like a college athlete in his prime. I ran and ran through the city streets until dawn broke and my pace slowed to a walk.

A jittery, unsteady walk.

I'm safe now, I think. Although I'm more leery to go to sleep than ever.

The figure I saw, you see, was someone I knew. She had the countenance of a corpse rather than the living, breathing woman as I had last seen her.

In a dream.

The figure, Thomas, was that of Fiona Carlisle, Simon's descendant.

She had, as you well know, gave her life to save me from the clutches of her ancestor. But now she was changed. Corrupted. Like him.

After seeing her deathly visage, and hearing her voice speak my name, I cannot help but dread that there is no goodness left in the world. Not any that can last, in any event.

Phillip

