

*Lilith*¹

The first time the two young men had witnessed the strange scene they had not suspected anything strange, and they had scarcely taken any notice of it.

After having left their poor mansard by its sole skylight, they had installed themselves in the broad guttering of the roof in order to smoke a pipe in the tranquility of the mild late autumn evening, and they were only thinking about savoring their relaxation while breathing the fresh air rising from the large trees in the solitary garden. Their legs hanging down among the highest leaves, at the very top of the bare wall, devoid of any opening, which served as the background of the garden, they did not even think of looking to see whether anything was happening beneath them. They had, therefore, seen the strange scene, that first time, almost unconsciously, and had no suspicion of anything strange therein.

It had been almost the same the second time, and that occasion had not excited them even more, although they had experienced a slight surprise on seeing exactly the same scene reproduced at exactly the same time.

So what, though? One reflection, was there anything surprising in the fact that the old man behaved for a second time in an identical fashion in identical circumstances? Undoubtedly, hazard alone was the cause of the scenes of the other evening and this one seemed to be the same one, scrupulously repeated. It was a coincidence, of course—no more.

The scene, moreover offered nothing in itself that was not quite simple and quite natural, did it? It was the banal action of an old man making a tour of his garden before going to bed, and calling to someone to come out—his wife, his servant or his dog—and calling in that particular voice because he had that particular voice, and at precisely the same time because that happened to be the time, and that was all!

But the two young men had been forced to astonishment, and to judge the scene positively strange, when, thereafter, their attention awakened and their curiosity on the alert, they were convinced that the repetition of the actions and gestures could not be attributed to hazard, that the old man's conduct was habitual and deliberate, and that the slightest details seemed to have been regulated once and for all, minutely and, one could easily believe, ritually.

Every evening, whatever the weather, even on rainy evenings when the two young men allowed themselves to be soaked in their gutter rather than not see it, the same bizarre ceremony had taken place.

Just at the moment when the last vibrations of the nearby clock were sounding a quarter to midnight, the two battens of the French windows of the pavilion opened, and the old man appeared, clad in a long overcoat, bare-headed, carrying above his head a little muted lantern with a thin and pale beam of light.

He leaned to the left, then to the right, and then forwards, with slow movements that had initially appeared to the two young men to be the attitudes of someone leaning forward in order to see better into the shadows, but which now represented themselves as manifest salutations, like those of a priest to an idol.

The old man then took three large strides forward, and two small ones back—and repeated that combination of steps three times, once in each direction in which he had bowed.

Having arrived thus at the entrance to a cypress arbor, which formed a dense labyrinth in the middle of his garden, he swiftly blew out his lantern, and then, in a plaintive, whistling, emphatic voice, which was low but nevertheless carried a long way, he called into the darkness of the labyrinth: "Lilith! Lilith! Lilith!"

What did he do in the labyrinth? How long did he stay there? By what exit did he emerge to go back to his pavilion? That was what the young men were never able to determine.

The old man probably came back by means of a path that ran along the left hand all of the garden, garnished with a bower of virgin vines, which circled around the pavilion in such a way that he could

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get back in through a door located on the other side—but that was only a supposition, because no furtive human footsteps were audible on the gravel of that pathway, and his extinct lantern did not permit any divination of where he went.

The only thing of which the two young men were certain was that he stayed in the labyrinth for at least a quarter of an hour. When the clock sounded the first stroke of midnight, the old man's voice could be heard there, now as if coming from underground, doubtless because of the thickness of the cypresses—and that voice was no longer appealing, but seemed thankful, and said only once, with a profound sigh of ecstasy: "Lilith!"

The two young men were "apprentice great men"—that was what they called themselves, those poor, ambitious adolescents hungry for power and glory, of the sort that reading Balzac could still create forty years ago. They had made their poverty communal in that Montrouge mansard, where they each took turns to serve the other as cook and housekeeper, and where they had both promised to be Orestes and Pylades, Nisus and Euryale, Pierre and Jaffier.²

They said to one another: "We'll discover the old man's secret of. Perhaps it will be the commencement of our fortune."

With prudence and cunning, they asked around the neighborhood. They learned that the old man have lived there for a long time, looked after by his aged wife, his granddaughter and a maidservant. Yes, looked after—for he was, it seemed, a little crazy. The granddaughter hardly ever went out. Only the old woman was occasionally seen outside; she went to the market herself. They were *rentiers*, owners of the pavilion and the garden. The old man had been "some kind of a teacher." In spite of the fellow's craziness, they were "well-thought-of in the neighborhood."

Armed with a name and the "some kind of teacher" the two young men set out in quest of further information. They did, indeed, find traces of the old man at the Collège de France. Briefly, a long time ago, he had taught a course there on Assyriology. He had published two pamphlets on Chaldean magic. Those publications had got him sacked, as a lunatic.

At the Bibliothèque Nationale, the two young men asked for the pamphlets, tried to understand them, and were obliged to give up. The sentences therein were bristling with occult formulae and shibboleth terms, and thus written either, indeed, by a madman, or with the design of constructing an indecipherable cryptogram. They could not discern anything therein but the name of Lilith, repeated to the point of saturation.

They admitted to one another that it was necessary to seek the commencement of their fortune elsewhere than in the old man's seemingly-vain secret.

Well, they were wrong, and the absurd imagination to which their reading of Balzac had driven them was right. They learned that only a few days ago, and I saw them both become singularly pensive when they were informed of it, and go pale with bitter regret.

It was at one of those dinners whose foundation is also due to a Balzacian idea, at which people of the same generation, all of whom emerged together from the Parisian battle and all of whom have more-or-less hollowed their niche in life, meet up for years on end, three or four times every winter.

The two young men are participants in one such dinner, but only figure there, alas, in minor parts. The former apprentice great men have not become great men. One of them is simply a government official; the other, a good advocate, is the head of a legal firm that does not handle major cases. In the Parisian battle in which they hoped to play Napoléon, they are survivors, no more. They gladly put the blame on destiny, saying: "We didn't have a lucky break."

They were talking about an old comrade who had had all the luck: honorary positions, lucrative positions, renown, power, fortune, happiness—he lacked nothing, as was repeated enviously.

"One could easily believe," someone said, "that he's a sorcerer who has a talisman. I'd think so, if we weren't in the 19th century."

"We've hit the nail on the head," replied Z***. "I can affirm, personally, that our former comrade is indeed a sorcerer in possession of a talisman." And, as people laughed, he added: "He's the heir of the last priest of Lilith, and he possesses a fragment of black stone."

² The first two pairs of exemplary friends derive from Classical mythology; the third is from Thomas Otway's play *Venice Preserv'd* (1682), but the latter is surely included because of its citation by the schemer Vautrin in Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1835).

Z*** then told us the story of an old scholar, an Assyriologist and mage, who had been reputed to be mad, and whose granddaughter had been espoused by our comrade.

Everyone knows that Z*** is one of our best straight-faced humorists, and that he loves to play tricks even on his closest friends, but as he does so wittily, with inventions of the most brilliant fantasy, people listen without resentment and even thank him for putting one over on them. Everyone therefore savored his pretended revelations, his air of mystery and the rich imagination he deployed in reviving the fantastic old man, the last priest of Lilith and possessor of the fragment of black stone that is the ultimate *open sesame* of her supreme worshipers.

Among all those charmed and attentive guests, however, two drank in his words open-mouthed, wide-eyed and pale-faced, racked by dolorous tics. They were the two former apprentice great men, who were tormented by a retrospective and impotent avarice, and the certainty that it was not a fanciful tale, that the comrade who had had all the luck owed it to a real and authentic talisman, that they might have been the esteemed and triumphant Jasons, but that they had lacked the faith necessary to obtain it.

And I, who had once been the confidant of their singular and vain adventure, now saw again, in the troubled mirror of their dilated pupils, behind the veil of suppressed tears that filled them like a tragic fog, the strange scene that they had described to me forty years before, with disdainfully skeptical smiles, of the old man making his three salutes to the idol of shadow, executing his magical march toward the labyrinth and calling into the depths of ancient darkness to the ancient goddess who was thought to be abolished but perhaps lives on, still omnipotent:

“Lilith! Lilith! Lilith!”