

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



Phillip Shandler

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Dear Thomas,

I hope you're doing well, and that strange rash has cleared up. I was, I must say, happy to leave Arkham and Miskatonic University last week. After the harrowing adventure that I had there with that witch-cult, I do not know if I shall quite be the same again.

After that ordeal, you will not find it strange at all, I suppose, to learn that I have been having the most peculiar dreams. Still, I feel some need to relate them to you. They do not seem to be normal dreams—if there is such a thing, Thomas.

The first night after I fled from the white pillar where I saw the dark man the cultists called Nyarlathotep, I dreamed of the house where I spent most of my childhood in Providence. As I walked through those familiar halls and nostalgia-filled rooms, I turned a corner to find a strange staircase. Unlike anything that actually existed in my old home, this ornately carved marble staircase descended into unknown darkness. I chose to take the stairs, which led me to a large cavern dominated by a pillar of flame that rose from floor to ceiling. There, I met two strange men who gave me their queer names: Nasht and Kaman-Thah. They seemed men of great age, and their garb was, well, that of an Egyptian pharaoh, at least in a way. These two gents showed me yet another staircase, which they said led to the Gates of Deeper Slumber. I had come to this place, "the Cavern of Flame," they called it, through the Seventy Steps of Light slumber. Isn't that all very odd? More imaginative than my normal dreams, I can tell you.

Well, I became afraid and a bit embarrassed in my dream at this point, as I was not dressed. I mumbled a bit of thanks to my strange hosts and ran back up the stairs down which I had come. Thereupon, I awoke.

Now that, in and of itself, would simply be a strange dream, soon forgotten during the day. However, the next night, as I began to dream, I found the same marble staircase! I do not recall where I was when I came upon it, but I

descended them, once again finding myself in a state of undress in the same Cavern of Flame. The men were there, again, and greeted me, saying that they were glad I had returned. Not a repeat of the same dream, then—but somehow a continuance! This time, however, Nasht and Kaman-Thah gave me clothing, some food and a knife and motioned again toward the other staircase.

This time, I gathered my courage, and took the gifts they had to offer. I asked my generous hosts where the stairs would take me, and one simply said "The land of dreams." The other said "The Dreamlands." Curious, then, I went down the very long staircase (perhaps 10 times as long as the previous one) which strangely transformed from stone to wood on the way down. At the bottom I found a strange wood, more like something from a fairy tale than a real forest. Yet it seemed so real. There was a sense of fancy here, yet a sense of menace as well.

A strange place, this wood, with odd beasts and eerie noises throughout. I suppose one should expect such things in a dream, but the most striking thing is that I can remember every strange sight, every unnerving sound, and every heady smell. It was like I was truly there. Luckily, I soon found my way out of the forest and discovered fields of rolling plains. This was a fertile land, dotted with the occasional farm or quaint cottage. Eventually, I came upon a sparkling blue river and followed it until I came to a tiny village of simple folk. They paid me little heed, except for a striking young woman with long golden hair. She told me her name was Fiona Carlisle, a rather ordinary name, I thought for an inhabitant of this place. Fiona told me that she had been in this land for quite some time and that I was obviously a newcomer. She invited me to accompany her to a nearby city she knew named Ulthar. Enjoying her company, I accepted.

The journey was quick and pleasant. Strangely, there were many cats on the path, gathering around us. I shooed them away, and Fiona looked at me in surprise. She said I should not have done that, but spoke of the

cats no more. Instead, she told me of Ulthar, a town of trade and commerce, where Nasht, the fellow I had met in the Cavern of Flame, was worshipped as a god. She spoke of the Dreamlands as a vast place, filled with a multitude of races and creatures unlike anything that lived in my world. Fiona told me that she once lived in my world as well, but long ago she was forced into the Dreamlands against her will. Still, she had learned to love her new home, and had no desire to return to the world of her birth.

Before I could ask more, we were in sight of Ulthar, a city that—had I not known better—I would have said came directly from a picture of some Medieval European city. It was built on a series of hills, and Fiona pointed out a high tower on the tallest of these as the Temple of the Elder Ones. Dusk began to fall over the land and the large, bulbous moon rose quickly.

Still a fair distance from the city, her description was interrupted by the appearance of a black ship in the sky. It descended as if it came from the moon itself. "Moonbeast slavers!" Fiona warned me and began to run to the city gates. I ran as well. "Moonbeasts?" I asked. She told me that they were bizarre creatures from the moon that revered Nyarlathotep.

That name again, Thomas! I suppose it appeared in my dream because of my experiences awake. Yet still it was disturbing to hear it again.

Suddenly, the cats returned, and gathered protectively around Fiona. They steered clear of me. The black ship descended quickly, and I saw terrible beasts leaning over the sides, leering down at me. Fiona and the cats somehow managed to get ahead, but I was sure to be apprehended by the creatures on the ship. I told myself it was just a dream, and if I could just awaken I would be safe. I threw myself hard upon the ground, then, and awoke with a start, safe in my bed.

I have not had dreams like that in the two days hence, but I am still disturbed by their lucidity. It almost seemed that I still had the smell of the place on me after I awoke.

What do you think, Thomas? Is your old friend finally going mad?

Sincerely,

Phillip Shandler





Dear Thomas,

Those strange dreams have continued to prey upon my mind. I can get neither those strange vistas nor the woman I met out of my thoughts.

I did a little investigating (that is, after all, my profession!) and learned of a woman named Fiona Carlisle in Boston. She is in a coma, and has been for months, the result of a terrible accident.

Of course, I am certain it is all coincidence. It must be.

I must ask you, though, Thomas, as you are so much more well-read than I. Have you ever come across tales of such a place? Could any of this be more than a simple dream? Please let me know at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Phillip Shandler

Dear Thomas,

Well, my curiosity got the better of me and I took the train to Boston. I went to the hospital in which I had learned that Fiona Carlisle rested. I spoke with the nurses there and convinced them that I was an old friend of Miss Carlisle's.

Thomas, I cannot relate to you the sensation of fear, wonder, and even exhilaration as I entered that room and saw Fiona Carlisle, a woman I had never before seen.

Except in my dream.

It was the self same woman I had met on route to Ulthar, the city in the Dreamlands.

What have I discovered here, Thomas? Coincidence? Some sort of shared unconsciousness?

Or an actual "place" below the surface of our minds, where dreamers can go and explore a strange, new land unlike, yet somehow closely related to, our own waking world.

I still have not heard from you, Thomas. Have I befuddled you with these tales of dreams or have you become involved in something that consumes all your time? Please write me soon, my friend. I need your support.

Sincerely,

Phillip Shandler