

An Unpardonable Sin

Night falls quickly during autumn months in Northern Vermont. The moment the sun drops behind the treeless schist walls of Mount Graylock on the bleak eastern ridge of the Green Mountains, darkness descends rapidly down the foothills like the rustle of a velvet shroud.

Many a thoughtless traveler had not allowed enough daylight to traverse the winding mountain pass from the Bartram Marble Quarry on the summit down to the village of Penthorne and found himself upon a treacherous, darkened road as the cask of black surrounded him.

Alphonse Constant and his son were later than usual in leaving the works this particular evening. Tomorrow would begin the month's marble burning and Constant had to make sure that the furnaces were properly cleaned and stoked. The lime kiln was a round, rough-stone, tower-like structure about twenty feet high. It took nearly three days of burning to turn the marble into fine lime ash.

His son could see the cover of nightfall advancing upon the small carriage and knew they would soon be overcome.

"Father, it's very dark. Mother will be most upset."

"Don't fret so much, Levi," his father chastised. "We'll be home before the table is set for supper."

But twilight had turned to dusk and the pair still had not crossed the granite bridge that marked the halfway point of their daily journey.

"We'll stop at the Slater House and see if we can borrow the Mister's light to see our way."

"Father, do we have to? That place frightens me so."

"Aye, Levi, it does have a queer feel about it. Nevertheless, it's that or risk a tumble over the side. Your Mum'd have our hides then, for sure."

In the distance at the far turn in the road, Constant could see the Slater House, glowing faintly gray as it shook off the day's warmth and reluctantly settled down for the night. Constant couldn't bring the thought to words, but it had a strange aspect to it. The wisest choice would have been, had he felt them in any danger, to continue down the mountain, risking the dark of night instead of the dark night of his soul.

Dobbs, their horse, pulled up abruptly, as if reluctant to make the sharp turn up the lane. Before Alphonse could goad the horse forward, a sharp crack could be heard coming from the ridge above the road.

"Father, what was that?"

"That's just God playing candle pins, Levi. We hear that on this range from time to time."

What Alphonse didn't add is that shifts in the earth were sometimes accompanied by a shower of shale. He thought it best not to frighten the boy with rumors of a strange glow observed on the cliffs overlooking the Slater House, a greenish mist, as if some lost visitor were wandering the hills looking for the entrance to the spirit world. Better get home as quickly as we can, thought Alphonse. Don't want to get caught in a slide on this hillside in the dark.

The modest stone structure was erected under the direction of the first Master of Slater House, Edward Slater, from profits earned from his legitimately successful county law firm and equally illegitimate, or so it was generally assumed, land foreclosures in league with town banker Titus Harbinger.

The Master was an undistinguished figure in manner and appearance who had never been seen, in his many years, in the company of a lady. Were it to be told truthfully, he was quite a plain man with a pronounced stoop and an odiously cursed, roving eye that unnerved many a

witness in the dock. His attire pretended to nobility but was more reflective of a common disheveled dignity. He seemed to be a figure of singular authority as if his efforts were capped by the success that attends a man of his stature. His pale face looked not unlike a grotesque gargoyle in marble, weathered by centuries.

Slater House rested on one of the most desolate shale outcroppings and fallow sites on the mountain, but it commanded a stunning view of the village two miles below. The townspeople joked that it was just like the Master to want to look down upon them.

Edward Slater was apparently a thorough and systematic barrister who addressed the intellect and sympathies of the villagers but was too remote, shallow, and insubstantial in his interaction with them on a daily basis. However, there was continual warfare in his heart that produced the infernal blaze of a troubled conscience. In truth, the simple people of Penthorpe viewed him as somewhat of a wearisome fellow.

Conversely, Slater felt the people of Penthorpe were unnaturally attracted to irrational beliefs and marvelous visions, people who saw strange lights above his property and heard eerie whisperings in the air like the dying of massive whales. They were quick with crude tales of haunted spots and exhibited a superstitious nature for which Slater could hold no patience. Lost in the irony was the fact that this supposedly learned solicitor would build his foundation on such unstable, shaky bedrock.

The Master dwelt alone in the cold house for nearly five years. Then, one cruel March night, Edward Slater brought into that banal household one Caroline Dewese as his wife. It was clearly a month after the event before anyone knew Slater House had a second occupant. In fact, it was a very young Alphonse Constant who first saw the Lady Slater one evening on his way home from the quarry. She was tilling in the rocky soil planting a row of flowers. Alphonse remembered that her beauty was so vivid that she literally glowed under the sunlight and she

illuminated the shuddery recesses of wherever she passed. Under her fragile touch the home flourished and the rugged path from the road to the house burst forth that spring in myriad colors for the only time in the dismal existence of that formidable structure.

Rumors spread about the village as to the circumstances of the strange marriage of the beautiful Caroline and the homely, old recluse Edward. Beauty and the Beast, they mocked. The truth be known, no one ever unraveled the unnatural circumstances that forced the coupling of this most unlikely pair. Before Caroline was shuttered indoors that summer, several of the town's gossips declared that they could easily detect the true reason for the hasty marriage, and the Master wasn't the benefactor of that deposit.

The only other person who was privilege to the truth was Dr. Pyncheon, Penthorne's only physician. The doctor was a somewhat doddering and melancholy old man even then, whose great misfortune was that he was not long ago in his grave. It was he who diagnosed Caroline's delicate "condition" and prescribed a sheltered life if the Lady were to survive the pregnancy.

That November, without sufficient warning, an unusually ferocious winter snow struck the valley, closing the village to all egress and trapping the unfortunate twosome on the mountainside.

Whether it was the effects of the blizzard or just another sad chapter in the cursed life of Edward Slater, Caroline went into early labor just two days into the storm. Who can say how our story might have ended had fate been kinder to them, but it was during this forced period of isolation that Edgar's identical twin sons, Nathaniel and Jonathan, were born. They were as blonde and shining as Edward was dark and brooding, giving rise to the speculation that the Master couldn't have had that much lightness in him.

Slater, although a learned man of letters, was ignorant of most of the common rituals of life, including the particulars of childbirth. He

was unprepared for the complications of the unattended delivery. He only knew that his beloved Caroline would not stop bleeding and her very existence began to wane.

Edward was faced with the choice that has no resolution. He could try to make it down the snow-covered pass to the village and fetch Dr. Pyncheon, but that could take as much as a full day if, indeed, he could survive the trip at all. And that assumed the doctor was in any condition to be transported back up the mountain. The chances were overwhelming that in the interval he would lose not only his Lady but the newborns as well.

It was the brave Caroline, herself, or so we are led to believe, who revealed the obvious. Edward must do whatever he could to nurture the boys through the tempest. While he reluctantly acquiesced to this inevitability, none of us are privy to the terrible torment of those last few moments, to watch helplessly as the essence of one who is loved slowly, ineffably, slip away.

For months after that, Edward stared forth wildly from his hidden soul and spoke as if a man in a dream. He attempted to assuage his guilt by not looking too deeply at his secret. A dark sorrow descended, and thus early had death stepped across the threshold of Slater House.

While the two boys were alike in appearance, they seemed to mature totally opposite in personality and tenor. Jonathan was the wild Slater, taken to drinking excessively on long sojourns to the Tarry Towne Inn on Maule's Lane in Braintree where he could indulge his peculiarities, which tended toward equal measures of laudanum and rum. "The drink of mad poets," he would boast. Since it was nearly impossible for anyone not on intimate terms with the boys to tell them apart, more than once Jonathan cleverly impersonated his brother, causing his twin to be admonished for his excesses. As time passed it became apparent that the good and evil within the elder Slater had not been vested equally upon his two sons.

Nathaniel took avidly to his father's neglected business, turning the family's sagging fortunes once again to prosperity, and becoming the youngest barrister to be affirmed in Vermont. Jonathan, on the converse, used whatever legal knowledge he acquired by osmosis to instigate a series of fruitless investments from which his father grew increasingly reticent to extricate the boy.

The rift that finally tore the family asunder happened the evening of the boys' 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, a day the Master, for reasons that are obvious, refused to recognize.

The constable's report of the incident reads: "On the evening of November 22<sup>nd</sup>, Miss Agnes Duff departed her place of employment, the Tarry Towne Inn, at 9:30 of the evening to meet one Jonathan Slater, son of the local solicitor Edward Slater, at her place of residence at 27 Charring Cross Lane. An altercation then took place between Miss Duff and Mr. Slater, the manner of which Miss Duff would not disclose. In the course of this disagreement, a lantern belonging to Mr. Slater was overturned and a fire resulted in the consummation of the residence. Miss Duff suffered severe burns on both hands and the left side of her face. Upon subsequent questioning of the elder Slater, it was learned that the young man had recently fled the home."

And yet, the reader should now posit what the real facts of this singular disturbance actually are. Is it possible that Nathaniel, posing as his brother to seek a modicum of revenge for past wrongs, created the rendezvous with the unfortunate Agnes Duff and, his advances being rebuffed, deliberately and in a fit of pique hurled the lantern back through an open window?

Could it be that the wrong brother willingly accepted a banishment to protect the disguise of his perfect mirror image? Or was Jonathan just as appropriately blamed for this transgression as he had been so many times before?

Whatever the reality, all seemed calm for the next dozen years until one bitter fall evening when Jonathan Slater appeared on his father's doorstep in garments befitting a beggar. He had been severely beaten, and deep lacerations covered his back. He entreated the Master to allow him the winter to recover from his injuries. When spring came he promised he would be on his way again. Even as disappointed as Edward Slater was with Jonathan, he still claimed him as his son. He sent Nathaniel to fetch Dr. Pyncheon who treated Jonathan's wounds, and, for a very brief while, peace again reigned in the house.

But underneath the appearance of resolve there was a tension growing between the prodigal Jonathan and the faithful Nathaniel, who had assisted his father in making Slater & Son the most respected and prosperous law firm in the state. An unhealthy unease settled about the house.

Then, on a fateful and stormy October evening a year ago, a distraught Nathaniel Slater came once again to Dr. Pyncheon seeking his aid. The boy urged the doctor to hurry back with him up the mountain. His father had suffered a severe blow to the head, had fallen unconscious, and Jonathan had run off seemingly without taking as much as a clean shirt. A later inventory of the Master's lock box showed that its contents had been emptied.

Pyncheon and the fevered Nathaniel arrived to find the elder Slater in a comatose state and, despite the doctor's fervent efforts, the patriarch passed into death. Suspicion immediately fell upon the fugitive son. The local constable was called in, made a cursory inspection of the grounds, but was never able to discern the whereabouts of the runaway Jonathan Slater.

The story here loses some of its continuity but time passed and the remaining son, who had shown such a fervent interest in the litigations of his father's enterprise, became saturnine and withdrawn. It was as if Jonathan had not only taken his father's life but had

crushed his brother's substance as well. The daily running of the firm had fallen to Edward's associate, Lawyer Hathornes, a man of modest ability but considerable ambition. The truth appears to have been that Nathaniel had become so forlorn at ever regaining the desire to enter his father's business again that he had requested Hathornes to provide him with an offer for the practice.

It was now to this plagued house that Alphonse Constant and his son Levi approached.

A moment before he reached for the huge, iron, doorknocker, he heard the sound of strange laughter from within. At first thought, he felt the Mister had been entertaining. But as the laughter grew more pronounced it became a sad cry as if from a fiend or hobgoblin.

"Father, he does not laugh like a man who is glad."

A strange chilliness, whether of the body or spirit he could not tell, was gradually creeping over Constant. How often is the case, that, when our fears have congealed their substance into tangible reality, we find ourselves calm and even somewhat self-possessed amid circumstances which our better sense would have us flee.

And so it was, that Alphonse Constant put himself, to a certain extent, into the influences of a malevolent power.

The hollow reverberation of the lime-burner's inquiry at the door faded in the halls of sadness. When the echo subsided, the silence of the house was deep and oppressive. The heavy, oak door parted and the figure of Nathaniel Slater emerged into view. While Constant knew the man to be only thirty and five, he gave all appearances of someone past his middle years, with darkened visage and steel-gray eyes, a face singularly marked with intellect and cultivation, but absent of warmth.

Alphonse had not seen the Mister close for a long time but he appeared odd, distant, preoccupied with specters of the night, as if under the spell of some strong narcotic.



"Good ev'nin', Mister Slater. Sorry to disturb you, sir."

The cold eyes stared back vacantly, as if the man were looking into the depths of perdition. Suddenly, Little Levi shivered and took his father's hand. Slater made no sign of recognition.

"You remember me don't ya sir? Alphonse Constant and this is my son Levi."

The glance Slater gave the boy made him hide behind his father's back.

"You and your father helped me through that entailment after the passin' of the pa of me missus, although that was nearly three years ago. Sorry to bring up the Master's name."

Nathaniel abruptly straightened. To Constant it felt as if the Mister had been awakened suddenly from a fitful trance.

"Yes, of course, good evening, my dear Alphonse. Won't you come in?"

Constant thought this form of address a bit strange. It was the first time he had ever heard the lawyer call him by his Christian name.

Nathaniel Slater's den was an old-fashioned study, sprinkled with cobwebs and antique dust. Around the walls stood several oaken bookshelves filled with law books and tomes from forgotten Transcendentalists. The most prominent feature of the room was an open hearth large enough for a man to enter without stooping.

The scene made Constant shiver with a sensation of foreboding stronger than he had ever felt in the darkest depths of his nighttime watches in front of the lime furnace.

"Whence comes you to my door so late in the day?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but we started a bit late down the mountain this evenin' and we won't pass the bridge before dark. The missus will worry if we don't make it home by supper."

"What service can I provide?" Slater moved to the evening fire and added more wood to what Alphonse felt was already a more than sufficient blaze.

Constant fumbled nervously with his hat as he stood in the strange confines of the den. The impression came over him that he had interrupted the Mister in the midst of some deep and abiding memory, as if the man were mulling over some decision too painful to make.

"Could we...I was wonderin' if we might borrow your lantern for the carriage. I'll take good care of it and return it filled in the mornin'"

"Lantern?" Nathaniel expelled the word as if it were a bit of chicken caught in his throat. His face turned crimson and his eyes were as coals burning through the lime burner's soul. Constant lowered his gaze as if something ugly and monstrous might blast his eyesight should he look too deeply.

Bye the bye, Nathaniel moved to a red velvet chair near the fire and gestured slightly to Alphonse and the boy to sit on the couch opposite. The lawyer nodded his acquiescence slowly as if it were an effort to move his head.

Yet still he did not move, but remained seated, staring into the fire. Silence pervaded the room. The twilight was fading and Levi watched the dusk spread over the various objects in the den. The shadow, taking its own inevitable time, would soon swallow them.

Slater slowly turned back to his two visitors with a conviction in his eyes that some momentous conclusion had been reached.

"It's good that you've come on this of all nights."

"And what night might that be, sir."

"Think about it, Alphonse. Think of the irony of it, to have a guest arrive on my doorstep on this pathetic of all anniversaries."

"Is it *that* day then, sir?"

"Indeed, it was exactly one year ago this very eve that my life faced that woeful night."

Suddenly Alphonse was too uncomfortable to remain any longer. Gladly would he have leapt from the couch, but Nathaniel Slater drew even closer.

"Are you a good Christian, my dear Alphonse?"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Have you been tested by the fire in God's forge? Has your immortal soul been saved?"

"I don't know much about that, sir. I'm just a simple quarryman who tries as best as I can. I leave most of the savin' up to me wife."

"Have you sinned, Alphonse?"

"Oh, I can't deny, Mr. Slater, that sometimes I slip now and again. There's so many rules, don't you know."

"But have you ever committed a sin that you considered unpardonable? Something so horrible from which there can be no redemption?"

"Gracious, no sir. Not much chance around Penthorne to get into any unpardonable sinnin'."

Slater rose suddenly from the chair and moved to the hearth. Constant wondered if the man might not just walk right into the fire. The action was so consistent with the thought in Constant's mind, that he almost expected to see the fiend, himself, leap forth, red-hot, from the raging inferno. There was something deep within the Mister that begged to be consumed. The devil in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the heart of man.

Almost imperceptibly Constant felt a slight movement under his feet, as if the floor had suddenly relaxed. He was about to inquire of his son if he had felt the same thing when Nathaniel broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, Constant. All this has been praying on my mind...about this night and my father and brother..."

"Jonathan?" asked Alphonse.

Slater turned quickly as if he had heard something familiar.

"What?" he inquired.

"Your brother Jonathan, sir."

"Oh, yes, my long lost brother, Jonathan."

The thought had been festering in the back of Alphonse's mind for some time now. An itchy feeling that had the hairs on the back of his arms tingling. Nathaniel turned slowly to his guests.

"I'm going to tell you a story, Alphonse."

In the interval of quiet, a faintness passed like a shadow over the soul of Alphonse Constant. He felt like he was in the presence of a man fearfully acquainted with the mysteries of death.

"Really, sir, no disrespect on your hospitality, but we got to be getting' down the road. Me missus must be beside herself with worry, not so much over me but the boy, don't you see. If we could just borrow a couple a lanterns we'll be on our way."

"Dear Alphonse," he said, "were you not my father's friend? Perchance, as well, could you not act in a friendly way towards his son?"

"'Cuse please, but does not the Mister see that we are in some haste to get down the pass?"

Slater ignored his guest's protestations and continued.

"This is a simple tale of a widowed father and his two sons. One twin devoted his life to his father while the other was devoted to driving him to ruin because of what the man did to their mother. One boy, let's call him Jonathan..."

"Oh, dear, sir, I don't think I want to hear this story."

"Sit down, Constant. This won't take long and then I'll find those lanterns you came for."

Constant wondered if he would have need of any lanterns after this man finished his story.

"You've heard the rumors, haven't you, Alphonse?"

Throughout his brief contacts with the Mister since the unseemly incident, Alphonse had been haunted by dark surmises as to the nature of the offense. There came, too, as from a deep well, the feeling that the substance of the surviving son of Edward Slater was imbued with a wild and sinister essence of some horror yet unleashed that gripped his countenance.

Alphonse had not a quick mind, but the slow reality convinced him that his host possessed some terrible temperament that had instilled a perversion of his faculties. Should Constant remain any longer near this troubled soul, he might succumb to the wild vagaries that his imagination was now producing.

"Rumors about what, sir?"

"Rumors about what happened that night that ruined my life."

"And what rumors be they, sir?"

"That the reason they never found a trace of Jonathan Slater is because he never left the house. That somehow he killed his father and his devoted brother Nathaniel and then assumed his identity."

"Well, that's just daft now isn't it, sir?"

"Doesn't it make sense, my dear Alphonse? Think about it? Suspicion would always fall upon the evil brother Jonathan, wouldn't it? It's just the thing he would be capable of. He confronts his father one last time. Demands he give him the means to survive. They argue. It turns into confrontation. Jonathan gets carried away and strikes his father with...say...that axe hanging on the wall."

To emphasize his point, Slater took down the mailed battleaxe. Constant cradled his son, protectively, closer to him.

"The good brother...the devoted brother...the one who worked day in and day out for bare subsistence...comes upon the scene. He discovers his father lying in the den, his life slowly seeping out onto the rug...his brother rummaging through his father's lock box. Before he can react, he picks up the axe and strikes his brother...again...and again...and again. It's

clear now his way out. Everyone will believe the good Nathaniel, the devoted son. Everyone so quick to accuse the pernicious Jonathan, the rotten apple fallen so far from the tree. All he must do is find a place to hide the body. There are plenty of caves and outcroppings in the hills above. It's simple once they think Jonathan's run off. No one would ever think to look for the killer hiding in plain sight."

"It's none a my interest, sir. It matters not to me what happened between you and your brother. We'd just as soon leave if it pleases you, sir. We can just forget about those lanterns."

Alphonse rose tentatively keeping a close eye on how Slater would react to his movement. As he was reaching back for his son's hand, Constant felt the floor shake, throwing him back onto the couch. Something was rumbling beneath the planking and they had to escape the house.

"You haven't asked me the most obvious question, have you Alphonse?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Why am I telling you all this? Now? Tonight?"

"That's true, sir. After all, there's nobody left who could tell the two of you apart with any certainty, is there now?"

"Not true, friend Constant. Aren't you aware that when Jonathan returned home he had suffered lashes to his back that had to be treated by Dr. Pyncheon?"

"True enough, sir." Suddenly Alphonse wondered if on that unfortunate night two years ago the Constable ever thought to examine the surviving Slater's back.

"Father Alphonse, my confessor, some things eat away at your soul until there's nothing left. You live constantly with the guilt. It never goes away. And I'm afraid, dear friar, that, oftentimes, there are sins that can never be expiated...unpardonable, unspeakable acts."

"Indeed, you are a strange man, sir. It's as if I had never met you before."

Slater noticed that the face of the quarryman had turned as pale as the ghost of the father who haunted every corner of his mind. Alphonse acknowledged that he might be taken by his fantasies, by whatever testimony of his senses they might appear to substantiate.

"My friend, why the worried face? It's only a tale for the midnight fire. That's all. None of this is real. What is it the man once said? All life is but a dream within a dream."

Alphonse felt the desire to extricate himself from whatever intrigue the Mister was involving him.

"Then, sir, if ya don't mind, I'll be lettin' myself out."

"The lamps are in the shed. Help yourself...and...don't worry about returning them."

Alphonse and Levi made haste to retrieve the lanterns and hang them on the carriage. They glanced at the open doorway and discerned the image of Nathaniel shaking his head as if he regretted, deeply and bitterly, the moral cowardice that had refrained his words when he was about to disclose the truth. He had hidden it so deep into the reaches of his psyche that now it burst forth full-blown into a raging demon. The answer had always loomed there in his consciousness: he had killed his brother out of jealousy and pride, and his father simply because he had witnessed his shame. And now he must pay the penalty for that unrepentant guilt.

Then, straightway, he vanished back into the house, as if the world need never hope for another glimpse of him. For providence dictates that all things must begin and end at exactly the right time and the right place. It was time.

Turning back, Alphonse caught a glimpse of a shadow moving past the window in the den. It seemed to be waving an axe wildly at some unseen phantom.

Constant urged Dobbs along at such a rate that they seemed to fly down the narrow mountain road rushing onward with the instincts that guide mortal man away from impending doom.

Looking over his shoulder, Alphonse gazed upward at the baleful full moon rising above Mount Greylock. The orb seemed no further away than Constant's reach. Partially obscured by a dark cloud, it seemed to be playing hide and seek with its shadow.

From somewhere on the ridge, a cry of grief, rage, or terror pierced the night.

"My God, forgive me!" they heard on the wind.

As they crossed the granite bridge, a sudden tremor shook the ground beneath them. The shelf above the stone house broke loose and crashed down upon the building inundating it in a dark cloud of dust, thus consuming the last Master of Slater House.

It took workmen from the quarry nearly three days to remove the rubble. Slater's body was uncovered in the substructure of the den. The floor had cracked open, swallowing him whole. Entombed in the basement, he had suffocated to death. The undertaker remarked that despite the massive weight of the gray schist that had fallen all around him, his body was remarkably unblemished.

Nearly a century later, workers from the New Bartram Quarry were excavating the ridge above the old Slater House when they discovered the remains of an adult male. The bones indicated that the man had died of blunt force trauma. Indentations in the skull suggested that the weapon was round with sharp spikes, similar to a mace. To this day, the identity of the victim remains unknown.



THE END