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The Sandman

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ALMA CLASSICS

Contents

The Sandman	I
<i>Extract from Sigmund Freud's</i> The Uncanny	77
<i>Note on the Text</i>	93
<i>Notes</i>	93

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Nathanael to Lothar

NO DOUBT YOU ARE ALL very worried, because I have not written for such a long, long time. Mother must be angry, and Clara probably thinks that I am living in the lap of luxury here, and that I have quite forgotten the image of my beloved angel, which is engraved so deeply in my heart and soul. Yet this is not so: I think of each one of you every hour of the day, and in sweet dreams I see the delightful form of my dear little Clara passing by; her bright eyes smile at me so charmingly, just as they did when I was last with you. Oh, but how can I write to you in the strife-torn frame of mind which has recently beset my every thought! Something dreadful has entered my life! Dark premonitions of the terrible fate that awaits me lie all around like the shadows of black clouds above, blocking out every friendly ray of sunlight. So now I must tell you what has befallen me. I have to do this, I realize that, yet I burst out in wild laughter at the mere thought.

Oh, my dear, dear Lothar! How can I even begin to give you an inkling of what I have experienced these last few days, when my life has been destroyed in such a malicious way! If only you were here, you would be able to judge for yourself, but now you probably take me for one of those deranged people who see ghosts.* In short, the terrible thing that happened to me, and whose malignant impression I am endeavouring in vain to escape, is simply that a few days ago, at midday on 30th October to be precise, a barometer salesman came to my room and offered me his wares. I didn't buy anything; in fact I threatened to throw him down the stairs, upon which he left of his own accord.

You will have guessed that only something that has a profound and intimate connection with my life could lend such significance to this incident, for a hapless pedlar to have such a baleful effect on me. And so it was. I must try my utmost to compose myself in order to be able to tell you, in a calm and collected way, enough details about my younger days, so that everything will appear clearly and distinctly in glowing images to your lively mind. Yet even as I begin I hear you laugh, and

Clara say: “This is just childish nonsense!” Laugh, please do, laugh heartily at me! Go ahead, I beg of you! But, God in heaven, my hair is standing on end, it is as if I am imploring you to laugh at me in my mad despair, as Franz Moor asked Daniel to do.* But now for the facts!

Apart from at lunchtime, my sister and I rarely saw our father during the day. He was probably taken up with his work. After dinner, which, following the old custom, was served at seven o’clock, accompanied by Mother we would go into Father’s study and sit at a round table. Father would smoke tobacco and drink a large glass of beer. Often he would tell us many wonderful stories, becoming so carried away that his pipe would keep going out; and I would have to hold out a piece of burning paper and relight it for him, which was one of my greatest pleasures. But he also often gave us illustrated books to look at, and would sit perfectly still in his armchair without saying a word, and blow such thick clouds of smoke that soon we were all swimming around as if we were lost in the mist. On evenings like these, Mother used to be very sad, and nine o’clock had only just struck when she

would say to us: “Now children, off to bed with you, off to bed! The Sandman is coming, I can tell.” And every time I really did hear something heavy clumping slowly up the stairs: it must have been the Sandman. On one occasion this muffled clumping sound made me particularly frightened; as Mother was taking us upstairs, I asked her: “Mama, who is this wicked Sandman who always takes us away from Papa? What does he look like?”

“There’s no such thing as the Sandman, my darling boy,” Mother replied. “When I say that the Sandman is coming, it just means that you are sleepy and can’t keep your eyes open, as if someone has sprinkled sand in them.”

Yet I wasn’t satisfied with my mother’s reply, for in my child’s mind a clear idea was already developing, which was that she was only pretending that the Sandman didn’t exist so we wouldn’t be afraid of him, although I always heard him climbing the stairs. Filled with curiosity, longing to find out more about this Sandman and what his connection was with us children, I eventually asked the old woman

who looked after my youngest sister: so what sort of person was he, this Sandman?

“Really, little Nathan,” she replied, “don’t you know? He’s a wicked man who comes to children when they won’t go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes, so that they pop right out of their heads all covered in blood, and then he throws them in a sack and carries them off to the half-moon to feed to his little children; they sit there in the nest, and have hooked beaks like owls, which they use to peck the eyes out of the heads of naughty children.”

Deep down inside me I began painting a picture of this cruel Sandman, and when he clumped up the stairs of an evening I would be filled with fear and trembling. All my mother could get from me was the cry, which I stammered out between my tears: “The Sandman! The Sandman!” Then I would rush off to my room, where the terrible apparition of the Sandman would no doubt torment me all night long. By this time I was old enough to realize that what our nursemaid had told me about the Sandman and his children in a nest in the half-moon couldn’t be completely accurate;

nonetheless, the Sandman was still a dreadful spectre, and when I heard him not only coming up the stairs, but flinging open the door of my father's room and going in, I would be seized with horror and dismay. Sometimes he wouldn't come for a long time, and then he would make a series of visits in quick succession. This continued for years, but I never could get used to this eerie apparition; the terrible image of the Sandman never faded from my mind. More and more, his dealings with my father came to preoccupy my imaginings: I was held back from questioning him about the Sandman by an insurmountable fear, but, as the years went by, the desire to find out more about this mystery – to see this legendary Sandman for myself – took root in me and kept growing. The Sandman had set me off on the path to adventure and other wondrous things, which find a home for themselves so readily in the minds of children. I liked nothing better than to listen to or read spine-chilling tales of goblins, witches, Tom Thumb and the like; but before all these there was always the Sandman, whom I drew everywhere in all kinds of peculiar and

repulsive forms on the tables, cupboards and walls with a piece of chalk or charcoal. When I was ten, my mother moved me out of the nursery and into a small room just along the corridor from my father's. Yet as the clock struck nine, we still had to make ourselves scarce whenever the unknown stranger was heard in the house. From my little room I would hear him go into my father's, and soon afterwards it seemed as if a fine, strange-smelling vapour was spreading through the house. With my constantly growing curiosity came the resolve to meet the Sandman somehow. Once my mother had gone past, I would quickly slip out of my room into the corridor, but I never managed to see or overhear anything, because, by the time I got to where I was sure I would catch sight of him, the Sandman had already gone in and closed the door behind him. Eventually, driven by an overwhelming urge, I decided to hide in my father's room and wait for the Sandman there.

One evening, I could tell from my father's silence and my mother's air of sadness that the Sandman was coming. Pretending to be very tired, I left the room

before it was even nine o'clock and found myself a hiding place in a corner near the door. The front door creaked, slow, heavy, echoing footsteps made their way across the hall towards the stairs. My mother hurried past, taking my sisters with her. Gently, very gently, I opened the door of my father's room. As usual he was sitting there, silent and motionless, with his back to the door; he didn't notice me, so I quickly went in and hid behind the curtain that was pulled in front of the open wardrobe where my father hung his clothes. Nearer and nearer came the echoing footsteps; from the corridor I heard strange mumbling, coughing, shuffling sounds. My heart was trembling with fear and expectation. Closer, very close to the door now there were short, sharp footsteps: something grasped the handle and the door burst open with a rattle! Summoning up all my courage I peered out cautiously from behind the curtain. The Sandman was standing in the middle of the room in front of my father, the light of the candles shining brightly in his face! The Sandman, the terrible Sandman, was the old lawyer Coppelius,* who often came to lunch with us.

But even the most hideous character could not have aroused such feelings of horror in me than this Coppelius. Imagine, if you will, a tall man with broad shoulders and a large, misshapen head, an ochre-yellow face, bushy grey eyebrows below which sparkled a pair of piercing, greenish cat's eyes, and a great nose that protruded right down over his upper lip. His lopsided mouth often contorted into a mocking laugh, and then dark-red blotches would appear on his cheeks, and a peculiar hissing sound would issue from between his clenched teeth. Coppelius always wore an old-fashioned, dark-grey frock coat and a waistcoat and breeches of the same material, along with black stockings and shoes with tiny, decorative jewels on the buckles. His small wig barely covered the top of his head, with horizontal rolls of hair fixed to the sides some way above his large red ears, while a broad, closed silk pouch stood out from the nape of his neck, so that the silver buckle which held the neckband of his turned-down collar together was visible.* His entire personality was disagreeable and loathsome, but what we children found most repellent