

The Sphinx

by

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Based on the short story by Edgar Allan Poe

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Cast of Characters

James: A citizen of New York evading the cholera epidemic at his cottage on the Hudson River.

Mary: A somewhat squeamish guest of James'.

A cottage. In the darkness, a scream is heard. Lights up on MARY backing away from the window, terrified. JAMES rushes into the room.

JAMES

Mary! What's the matter?

MARY

There! Look out the window!

James goes to the window.

JAMES

What is it? I don't see anything.

MARY

On the hill!

JAMES

Yes? I still don't see anything.

MARY

Oh, it's gone, isn't it? It was disappearing into the trees when I saw it!

JAMES

What was? Mary, you have to tell me what you're talking about or I can't help.

MARY

You won't believe me.

JAMES

What do you mean? Of course I will.

MARY

No, you'll think I've gone mad.

JAMES

Try me.

MARY

You must promise to take me seriously.

James holds up his right hand and tries to look sincere.

MARY

Alright. I was sitting in that chair, with a book. I uplifted my eyes to gaze across the river and suddenly I beheld some... living thing--a monster-making its way down from the summit of the hill!

JAMES
A monster?

MARY
I know it sounds ridiculous!

JAMES
It's alright. Describe to me what it looked like. How large was it?

MARY
Enormous! Its mouth was situated at the end of a long snout of some kind--oh, it was horrible! And there was black, shaggy hair--more than on a score of buffaloes! And it had two gleaming tusks... like a wild boar!

JAMES
Indeed?

MARY
Yes! And on each side of its head was a gigantic staff thirty or forty feet in length made of pure crystal--I swear it! And wings, it had wings nearly a hundred yards in length, covered with metallic scales! And... upon its breast I saw... what surely was... the perfect image of... a death's head! Oh, James, it was real, I tell you--I saw it!

JAMES
Shh. Quiet, my dear. It's alright. I believe you.

MARY
You do?

JAMES
Yes. Of course. Although what you describe seems incredible, outside the description of any known animal of that size living in this epoch of the Earth, I'll still vouch for your sanity.

MARY
But how can you? What I've described is madness!

James ponders this for a moment, at first examining Mary's face and then, when she breaks eye-contact, turning his gaze toward the bookcase across the room. James stands and walks to it.

JAMES
Well. If I remember my natural history...

James removes a book from the shelf, moves to the chairs, and beckons Mary to follow him. She does, and James takes Mary's seat. As James speaks, Mary takes the seat next to him.

JAMES

But for your exceeding minuteness in describing the monster, I might never have thought it in my power to tell you what it was. Ah, here it is. Let me read you a schoolboy account of the genus Sphinx, of the family Crepuscularia, of the order Lepidoptera, of the class Insecta.

James crosses to the chair by the window and sits.

JAMES

"Four membranous wings covered with little colored scales of metallic appearance; mouth forming a rolled proboscis, produced by an elongation of the jaws, upon the sides of which are found the rudiments of mandibles and downy palpi; the inferior wings retained to the superior by a stiff hair, antennae in the form of an elongated club. The Death's-headed Sphinx has occasioned much terror among the vulgar, at times, by the melancholy kind of cry which it utters, and the insignia of death which it wears upon its corslet."

MARY

Yes... yes, that's it exactly! But surely this is mythology, not natural history!

James looks up and leans toward the window.

JAMES

Ah, there it is! Now that I'm sitting in your seat I can see the beast quite clearly.

MARY

(Shocked.)

You can?

JAMES

Oh, yes. It's reascending the face of the hill this very instant.

MARY

(Standing with alarm, peering out the window.)

What!

JAMES

Yes, and a very remarkable-looking creature I admit it to be! Still, it's by no means so large or so distant

(MORE)

JAMES (cont'd)

as you imagined it; for the fact is that, as it wriggles its way up this spiderweb on the window sill, I find it to be about a sixteenth of an inch in length and also about a sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye.

James reaches forward and plucks the thread of a spiderweb, letting the insect at its end dangle in the air. He proffers it to Mary, who shrieks girlishly and jumps backward. James shrugs and pushes open the window. Lifting the thread, he then flicks the insect outside and casually wipes his hands together. He turns to face Mary, whose demeanor is quickly shifting from one of fright to one of extreme, dignity-annihilating embarrassment.

JAMES

Mary?

MARY

Yes?

JAMES

Be a darling and fetch me a cigarette.

THE END