



The Salem Alchemist

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North American

Intermediate
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In 1720 there lived in a turreted house at North and Essex Streets, in Salem, a silent, dark-visaged man,—a reputed chemist. He gathered simples in the fields, and parcels and bottles came and went between him and learned doctors in Boston; but report went around that it was not drugs alone that he worked with, nor medicines for passing ailments that he distilled. The watchman, drowsily pacing the streets in the small hours, saw his shadow move athwart the furnace glare in his tower, and other shadows seemed at the moment to flit about it—shadows that could be thrown by no tangible form, yet that had a grotesque likeness to the human kind. A clink of hammers and a hiss of steam were sometimes heard, and his neighbors devoutly hoped that if he secured the secret of the philosopher's stone or the universal solvent, it would be honestly come by.

But it was neither gold nor the perilous strong water that he wanted. It was life: the elixir that would dispel the chill and decrepitude of age, that would bring back the youthful sparkle to the eye and set the pulses bounding. He explored the surrounding wilderness day after day; the juices of its trees and plants he compounded, night after night, long without avail. Not until after a thousand failures did he conceive that he had secured the ingredients but they were many, they were perishable, they must be distilled within five days, for fermentation and decay would set in if he delayed longer. Gathering the herbs and piling his floor with fuel, he began his work, alone; the furnace glowed, the retorts bubbled, and through their long throats trickled drops—golden, ruddy, brown, and crystal—that would be combined into that precious draught.

And none too soon, for under the strain of anxiety he seemed to be aging fast. He took no sleep, except while sitting upright in his chair, for, should he yield entirely to nature's appeal, his fire would die and his work be spoiled. With heavy eyes and aching head he watched his furnace and listened to the constant drip, drip of the precious liquor. It was the fourth day. He had knelt to stir his fire to more active burning. Its brightness made him blink, its warmth was grateful, and he reclined before it, with elbow on the floor and head resting on his hand. How cheerily the logs hummed and crackled, yet how drowsily—how slow the hours were—how dull the watch! Lower, lower sank the head, and heavier grew the eyes. At last he lay full length on the floor, and the long sleep of exhaustion had begun.

He was awakened by the sound of a bell. "The church bell!" he cried, starting up. "And people going through the streets to meeting. How is this? The sun is in the east! My God! I have been asleep! The furnace is cold. The elixir!" He hastily blended the essences that he had made, though one or two ingredients were still lacking, and drank them off. "Faugh!" he exclaimed. "Still unfinished—perhaps spoiled. I must begin again." Taking his hat and coat he uttered a weary sigh and was about to open the door when his cheek blanched with pain, sight seemed to leave him, the cry for help that rose to his lips was stifled in a groan of anguish, a groping gesture brought a shelf of retorts and bottles to the floor, and he fell writhing among their fragments. The elixir of life, unfinished, was an elixir of death.

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