

The City of the Dead

George Allan England

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CHAPTER I The Awakening

DIMLY, like the daybreak glimmer of a consciousness began to dawn in the face of the dead girl.

Once more the breath of life began to stir in that cold form, to which again a vital warmth had on this day of days crept slowly back.

And as she lay there, prone upon the floor, her beautiful face buried and shrouded in the hollow of her arm, a sigh welled from her lips.

Life—life was flowing back again! The pulse of miracles was growing to reality. Faintly now she breathed; vaguely her hand began to throb once more. She stirred, she moaned, still for the moment powerless to cast off wholly the enshrouding incubus of that tremendous, dreamless sleep.

Then her hands closed. The finely tapered fingers tangled themselves in the masses of thick, luxuriant hair which lay outspread all over and about her. The eyelids trembled.

And a moment later, Beatrice Kendrick was sitting up, dazed and utterly uncomprehending, peering about her at the strange vision which since the world began had never been the lot of any human creature to behold—the vision of a place transformed beyond all power of the intellect to understand.

For of the room which she remembered, which had been her last night when (so long, so very long ago) her eyes had closed with that sudden and unconquerable drowsiness of that room, I say, remained only the ceiling, floor of rusted steel and crumbling cement.

Quite gone was all the plaster, as by magic. Here and there a heap of white dust betrayed where some of its detritus still lay.

Gone was every picture, chart and map—which but an hour since, it seemed to her, had decked this office of Allan Stern, consulting engineer, this aerial up in the forty-eighth story of the Metropolitan Tower.

Furniture, there was none. Over the still intact glass of the windows cobwebs were draped so thickly as almost to exclude the light of day—a strange, fly-infested curtain where once neat green shade-rollers had hung.

Even as the bewildered girl sat there, lips parted, eyes wide with amazement, a spider seized his buzzing prey and scampered back into a hole in the wall.

A huge, leathery bat, suspended upside down in the far corner, cheeped with dry, plaintive sounds of irritation.

Beatrice rubbed her eyes.

"What?" she said, quite slowly. "Dreaming? How singular! I only wish I could remember this when I wake up. Of all the dreams I've ever had, this one's certainly the strangest. So real, so vivid! Why, I could swear I was awake—and yet—"

All at once a sudden doubt flashed into her mind. An uneasy expression dawned across her face. Her eyes grew wild with a great fear; the fear of utter and absolute incomprehension.

Something about this room, the weird awakening, bore in upon her consciousness the dread tidings this was not a dream!

Something drove home to her the fact that it was real, objective, positive! And with a gasp of fright she struggled up and amid the litter and the rubbish of that uncanny room.

"Oh!" she cried in terror, as a huge scorpion, malevolent and with tail raised to strike, scuttled away and vanished through a gaping void where once the corridor door had swung. "Oh, oh! Where am I? What—what has happened?"

Horried beyond all words, pale and staring, both hands clutched to her breast, whereon her very clothing now had torn and crumbled, she faced about.

To her it seemed as though some monstrous, evil thing were lurking in the dim corner at her back. She tried to scream, but could utter no sound, save a choked gasp.

Then she started toward the doorway. Even as she took the first few steps her gown—a more or less mockery of raiment—fell away from her.

And, confronted by a new problem, she stopped short. About her she peered in quest for something to protect her disarray. There was nothing!

"Why—where—where's my chair? My desk?" she exclaimed thickly, staring to the place by the window where they should have been, and were not. Her shapely feet lay soundlessly in that strange and impalpable dust which thickly coated everything.

My typewriter? Is—can that be my typewriter? Great Heavens! What's the matter here, with everything? Am I mad? There before her lay a somewhat larger pile of dust mixed with soft and punky splinters of rotten wood. Amid all this decay she saw some bits of rust, a corroded typewriter or two, even a few rubber keys, still recognizable, though with the letters quite obliterated.

All about her, veiling her completely in a waste of wondrous gloom and beauty, her hair fell in the shape of a hood, this strange, incomprehensible phenomenon. She tried to pick up one of the rubber caps. At her merest touch it crumbled to an impalpable white dust, and she recoiled in terror.

Back with a shuddering cry the girl sprang, terrified.

Merciful heavens! she supplicated.

"What—what is this? What is this? What is this?" she cried, her every power of thought, of motion, numbed. Breathing not, she only started in a wild kind of crisis of confusion, as perhaps you might do if you should see a dead man move.

Then to the door she ran. Out into the hall she peered, this time, and there, amid the dismantled corridor, up the wreckage of the stairs, all cumbered, like the office itself, with dust and webs and vermin.

Head she bowed, she tried to help, she tried to help. No answer. Even the echoes rung back only dull, vacuous sounds that deepened her sense of awful and incredible isolation.

What? No noise of human life anywhere to be heard? None! No familiar hum of the metropolis now rose from what, when she had fallen asleep, had been swarming streets and miles on miles of habitations.

Instead, a blank, unbroken barren silence, that seemed part of the dusty, choking atmosphere—a silence that weighed down on Beatrice like a funeral pall.

Dismayed by all this, and by the unusual crumbling of every perishable thing, the girl ran, shuddering, back into the office. There in the dust her foot struck something hard.

She stooped; she caught it up and stared at it.

"My glass inkwell! What? Only such things remain?"

No dream, then, but reality? She knew at length that some catastrophe, incredibly vast, some disaster cosmic in the tragedy of its sweep, had desolated the world.

"Oh, my mother!" cried she. "My mother—dead, now, how long?"

She did not weep, but just stood covering a chill of anguished horror racking her. All at once her teeth began to chatter, her body to shake as with an ague.

"This for a moment dazed and stunned she remained there, knowing not which way to turn nor what to do. Then her terror-stricken gaze fell on the doorway leading from her outer office to the inner one where Stern had had his laboratory and his consultation room.

This door now hung, a few worm-eaten planks and splintered bits of wood, barely supported by the rusty hinges.

Toward it she staggered. About her she drew the shattering masses of her hair, like a Godiva of another age; and to her eyes, womanlike, the hot tears mounted. As she went, she cried in a voice of horror.

"Mr. Stern! Oh—Mr. Stern! Are you here, dead, too? You can't be! It's too frightful!"

She reached the door. The mere touch of her outstretched hand disintegrated it. Down it crumbled, falling mass it fell. Thick dust belled up in a cloud, through which a single sun ray that entered the cobwebbed pane shot a radiant arrow.

Hesitant, fearful of even greater horrors in that outer room, Beatrice peered through this dust haze. A sick foreboding of evil possessed her at thought of what she might see. Yet yet more afraid was she of what she knew lay behind her.

An instant she stood within the ruined doorway, her left hand resting on the moldy pane. Then, with a cry, she started forward—a cry in which terror had given place to joy, despair to hope.

Forgotten now the fact that, save for the shrouding of her many hair, she stood naked. Forgotten the wreck, the desolation everywhere.

"Oh—thank heaven!" gasped she.

There, in that inner office, half rising from the wreck of many things that had been and were now no more, she startled eyes beheld the figure of a man—of Allan Stern.

He lived!

At her he peered with eyes that saw not, yet toward her he groped a vague, unsteady hand.

He lived!

Not quite alone in this world-ruin, not all alone was she!

CHAPTER II Realization

THE joy in Beatrice's eyes gave way to a poignant wonder as she gazed on him. Could this be he?

Yes, well she knew it was. She recognized him even through the grotesquery of his clinging rags, even behind the mask of a long, red, dusty beard and formidable mustache, even despite the wild and staring incoherence of his whole expression.

Yet how incredible the metamorphosis! To her flashed a memory of this man, her other-time employer—keen and smooth shaven, alert, well dressed, self centered, dominant, the master of a hundred complex problems, the directing mind of engineering works innumerable.

Faltering and uncertain now he stood there. Then, at the sound of the girl's voice, he staggered toward her with outstretched hands. He stopped, and for a moment stared at her.

For he had had no time as yet to correlate his thoughts, to bring them together.

And while one's heart might throb ten times, Beatrice saw terror in his blinking, bloodshot eyes.

But almost at once the engineer mastered himself. Even as Beatrice watched him, breathlessly, from the door, she saw his fear die out, she saw his courage well up fresh and strong.

It was almost as though something tangible were limning the man's soul upon his face. She thrilled at sight of him.

And though for a long moment no word was spoken, while the man and woman stood looking at each other like two children in some dream and unfamiliar attic, an understanding passed between them.

Then, womanlike, instinctively, as she breathed, the girl ran to him. Forgetful of every convention and of her disarray, she seized his hand. And in a voice that trembled till it broke she cried:

"What is it? What does all this mean? Tell me!"

To him she clung.

"Tell me the truth—and save me! Is it real?"

Stern looked at her wonderingly. He smiled a strange, wan, merciless smile.

All about him he looked. Then his lips moved, but for the moment no sound came.

He made another effort, this time successful.

"There, there," he said huskily, as though the dust and dryness of the innumerable years had got into his very voice. "There, now, don't be afraid!"

"Something seems to have taken place here while we've been asleep. What? What is it? I don't know yet. I'll find out. There's nothing to be alarmed about, at any rate."

"Look!" She pointed at the hideous desolation.

"Yes, I see. But no matter. You're alive. I'm alive. That's two of us, anyhow. Maybe there are a lot more. We'll see. Whatever it may be, we'll win."

He turned and, trailing rags and streamers of rotten cloth that once had been a business suit, he waded through the confusion of wreckage on the floor to the window.

If you have seen a weather-beaten scarecrow flapping in the wind, you have some notion of his outward guise. No tramp, yet every laid eyes on could have offered so preposterous an appearance.

Down over his shoulders fell the matted, dusty hair. His tangled beard reached far below his waist. Even his eyebrows, naturally rather light, had grown to a heavy thatch above his eyes.

Save that he was not gray or bent, and that he still seemed to have kept the resilient force of vigorous manhood, you might have thought him some incredibly ancient Rip Van Winkle come to life upon the singular state of affairs.

But little time he gave to introspection or the matter of his own appearance. With one quick gesture he swept away the shroud of tangled rags, spiders and dead flies that obscured the window. Out he peered.

"Good heavens!" cried he, and started back a pace.

"What is it?" she breathlessly exclaimed.

"Why, I don't know—yet. But this is something big! Something universal! It's—no, no, you'd better not look out—not just yet."

"I must know everything. Let me see!"

Now she was at his side, and, like him, staring out into the clear sunshine, out over the vast expanses of the city.

A moment's utter silence fell. Quite clearly hummed the protest of an imprisoned fly in a web at the top of the window. The breathing of the man and woman sounded quick and loud.

"All wrecked?" cried Beatrice. "But—"

"Wrecked? It looks that way," the engineer made answer, with a strong effort holding his emotions in control. "Why not be frank about this? You'd better make up your mind at once to accept the worst. I see no signs of anything else."

"The worst? You mean—"

"I mean just what we see out there. You can interpret it as well as I."

She nodded.

"Same here," said he. "What the deuce can have struck us? He and everybody—and everything? Talk about your problems! Lucky I'm sane and sound, and—"

He did not finish, but fell once more to studying the incomprehensible prospect.

Their view was toward the east, but over the river and the reaches of what had once upon a time been Long Island City and Brooklyn, as familiar a scene in the other days as could be possibly imagined. But now how altered an aspect greeted them!

"It's surely all wiped out, all gone, gone into ruins," said Stern slowly and carefully, weighing each word.

A strange, hairy, dust-covered figure, he knelt there, quickly he plunged his hands into the rubbish and began pawing it over and over with eager haste.

"Ah!" he cried with triumph. "Thank heaven, brass and lenses haven't crumbled yet!"

Up he stood again. In his hand the girl saw a peculiar telescope.

"My 'level' see?" he exclaimed, holding it up to view. "The wooden tripod's long since gone. The fixtures that held it on won't bother me much."

"Neither will the spirit-level on top. The main thing is that the telescope itself seems to be still intact. Now we'll see."

Speaking, he dusted off the eyepiece and the objective with a bit of rag from his coat sleeve.

Beatrice noted that the brass tubes were all eaten and pitted with verdigris, but they still held firmly. And the lenses, when Stern had finished cleaning them, showed as bright and clear as ever.

"Come, come with me," he bade.

Out through the doorway into the hall he made his way while the girl followed.

As she went she gathered her wondrous veil of hair more closely about her.

In this universal disorganization, this wreck of all the world, how little the conventions counted!

Together, picking their way up the broken stairs, where now the rust-bitten steel showed through the corroded stone and cement in a thousand places, they cautiously climbed.

Here, spider webs thickly shrouded the way, and had to be brushed down. There, still more bats hung and chattered in protest as the intruders passed.

A fluffy little white owl blinked at them from a dark niche; and, well toward the top of the climb, they flushed up a score of mud swallows which had ensconced themselves comfortably along a broken balustrade.

At last, however, despite all unforeseen incidents of this sort, they reached the upper platform, nearly a thousand feet above the earth.

Out through the relics of the revolving door they crept, he leading, testing each foot of the way before the girl. They reached the narrow platform of red tiling that surrounded the tower.

Even here they saw with growing amazement that the hand of time and of this maddening mystery had laid its heavy imprint.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing. "What this all means we don't know yet. How long it's been we can't tell. But to judge by the appearance up here, it's even longer than I thought. See, the very tiles are cracked and crumbling."

"It's not usually considered highly recalcitrant—but this is gone. There's grass growing in the dust that's settled between the tiles. And—why, here's a young cat that's taken root and forced a dozen slabs out of place."

"The winds and birds have carried seed up here, and acorns," she answered in an awed voice. "Think of the time that must have passed. Years and years."

"But tell me," and her brow wrinkled with a sudden wonder, "tell me how we've ever lived so long? I can't understand it."

"Not only how we've swamped starvation, but we haven't frozen to death in all these

bitter winters. How can that have happened?"

"Let it all go as suspended animation till we learn the facts, if we ever do," he replied, glancing about with wonder.

"You know, of course, how toads have been known to live imbedded in rock for centuries. How fish, hard frozen, have been brought to life again? Well—"

"But we are human beings."

"I know. Certain unknown natural forces, however, might have made no more of us than of nonmammalian and less highly organized creatures."

"Don't bother your head about these problems yet a while. On my word, we've got enough to do for the present without much caring about how or why."

"All we definitely know is that some very long, undetermined period of time has passed, leaving us still alive. The rest can wait."

"How long a time do you judge it?" she anxiously inquired.

"Impossible to say at once. But it must have been something extraordinary—probably far longer than either of us suspect."

"See, for example, the attrition of everything up here exposed to the weather." He pointed at the heavy stone railing. "See how that is wrecked, for instance."

A whole section, indeed, had fallen inward. Its debris lay in confusion, blocking all the southern side of the platform.

The bronze bars, which Stern well remembered—two at each corner, slanting downward and bracing a rail—had now wasted to mere pockmarked shells of metal.

Three had broken entirely and sagged wantonly away with the displacement of the stone blocks, between which the vines and grasses had long been carrying on their deadly warfare.

"Look out!" Stern cautioned. "Don't lean against any of those stones." Firmly he held her back as she, eagerly inquisitive, started to advance toward the railing.

"Don't go anywhere near the edge. It may all be rotten and undermined for anything we know. Keep back here, close to the wall."

Sharply he inspected it a moment.

"Facing stones are pretty well gone," said he, "but, so far as I can see, the steel frame isn't too bad. Putting everything together, I'll probably be able before long to make some sort of calculation of the date. But for now we'll have to call it 'X' and let it go."

"The year 'X'?" she whispered under her breath.

"Good heavens, am I as old as that?"

He made no answer, but only drew her to him protectively, while all about them the warm summer wind swept onward to the sea, over the sparkling expanses of the bay—alone unchanged in all that universal wreckage.

In the breeze her heavy masses of hair stirred luridly. He felt its silken caress on his half-naked shoulder, and in his ears the blood began to pound with strange insistence.

Quite gone now the daze and drowsiness of the first awakening. Stern did not even feel weak or shaken. On the contrary, never had life bounded more warmly, more fully, in his veins.

The presence of the girl set his heart throbbing heavily, but he bit his lip and restrained every untoward thought.

Only his arm tightened a little about that warmly clinging body. Beatrice did not shrink from him. She needed his protection as never since the world began had woman needed man.

To her it seemed that, come what might, his strength and comfort could not fail. And, despite everything, she could not—for the moment—find unhappiness within her heart.

Quite vanished now, even in those brief minutes since their awakening, was all consciousness of their former relationship—employer and employee.

The self-contained, courteous yet unapproachable engineer had disappeared.

Now, through all the extraneous disguise of his outer self, there lived and breathed just a man, a young man, thwarted with the vigor of his plentitude. All else had been swept clean away by this great change.

The girl was different, too. Was this strong woman, eager-eyed and brave, the quiet, low-voiced telegrapher he remembered, busy only with her machine, her file boxes and her carbon copies? Stern dared not realize the transmutation. He ventured hardly fringe it in his thoughts.

To divert his wondering and to ease a situation which oppressed him he began adjusting the "level" telescope to his eye.

With his back planted firmly against the tower, he studied a wide section of the dead world. Just you and I—and everything belongs to us!"

"Everything—all ours?"

"Everything! Even the future—the future of the human race!"

Suddenly he felt her tremble at his side. Down at her he looked, a great new tenderness possessing him. He saw that tears were forming in her eyes.

Beatrice pressed both hands to her face and bowed her head. Filled with strange emotions, the man watched her for a moment.

Then in silence, realizing the uselessness of any words, knowing that in this monstrous Ragnarok of all humanity no ordinary relations of life could bear either cogency or meaning, he took her in his arms.

And there alone with her, far above the ruined world, high in the pure air of mid-heaven, he comforted the girl with words till then unthought of and unknown to him.

There, in that inner office, half rising from the wreck of many things that had been and were now no more, she startled eyes beheld the figure of a man—Allan Stern.

PRESENTLY Beatrice grew calmer. For amidst grief and terror still weighed upon her soul, she realized that she was no fit time to yield to any weakness—now when a thousand things were pressing for accomplishment. She must be strong, she must not presently be snuffed out in all this universal death.

"Come, come," said Stern reassuringly. "I want you, too, to get a complete idea of what has happened. From now on you must know all, share all, with me."

And taking her by the hand he led her along the crumbling and uncertain platform, step by step, very cautiously, they explored the three sides of the platform still uncrushed by ruin.

Out over the incredible mausoleum of civilization they peered. Now and again they fortified their vision by recourse to the telescope.

Nowhere, as he had said, was any slightest sign of life to be discerned. Nowhere a thread of smoke arose; nowhere a sound echoed upward.

The waters, two isolated castaways on their island in the sea of uttermost desolation, beheld a dragging mass of wreckage that dropped from these towers on either shore, down to the sparkling flood.

The other bridges, newer and stronger far, still remained standing. Even from that distance Stern could quite plainly see, without the telescope, that the Williamsburg Bridge had "buckled" downward and that the farther span of the new bridge, the Island Bridge was in ruinous disrepair.

"How horrible, how ghastly is all this waste and ruin!" thought the engineer. "Yet, even this, this horror, how wonderful are the works of man!"

A vast wonder seized him as he stood there gazing; a fierce desire to rehabilitate to this wreckage, to this ruin, to start the wheels of the world-machine running once more.

At the thought of his own powerlessness a bitter smile curled his lips.

Beatrice seemed to share something of his wonder.

"Can it be possible," whispered she, "that you and I—really like Macaulay's lone watcher of the world-wreck on London Bridge?"

"That we are actually seeing the thing so often dreamed of by prophets and poets? That 'All this mighty heart is lying still' at last—forever? The heart of the world, never to beat again?"

He made no answer, save to shake his head; but fast his thoughts were running. So then, could he and Beatrice, just the two, be in stern reality the sole survivors of the entire human race? That race for whose material welfare he had, once on a time, done such tremendous work!

Could they be destined, he and she, to witness the closing chapter in the long, painful, glorious Book of Evolution? Slightly he shivered and glanced around. Till he could adjust his reason to the facts, could learn the truth and weigh it, he knew he must not analyze too closely; he felt he must try not to think. For that way lay madness!

Far out she gazed.

The sun, declining, shot a broad glory all across the sky. Purple and gold and crimson lay the light bands over the breast of the Hudson.

Dark blue the shadows streamed across the ruined city with its crowding forests, its black staring windows and sagging walls, its thousands of gaping vacancies where wood and stone and brick had crumbled down—the city where once the tides of human life had ebbed and flowed, roaring relentlessly.

High overhead drifted a few rosy clouds, part of that changeless nature which two be-liequered waits, these chance survivors this man, this woman, left alone together by the hand of fate.

They were dazed, fascinated by the splendor of that sunset over a world devoid of human life. For the moment giving up all efforts to judge or understand.

Stern and his mate peered closer, down at the intervening jungles of Union Square, the leafy tangle of trees that marked the one-time corner of Twenty-third street, the forest in Madison Square, and the truncated columns of the tower where no longer Dick Turner, her husband, lay, to every varying breeze.

They heard their own hearts beat. The intake of their breath sounded strangely loud above them. Above them, on broken corbels, some reeling swallows twittered.

CHAPTER IV
The City of Death

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Dead lay the city, between its rivers, wherein now no sail glistened in the sunlight, no tug puffed rebelliously with plummy jets of steam, no liner idled at anchor or neared its slow course out to sea.

The Jersey shore, the Palisades, the Bronx and Long Island all lay buried in dense forests of conifers, oaks, with only here and there some skeleton mockery of a steel structure jutting through.

The islands in the harbor, too, were thickly overgrown. On Ellis no sign of the immigrant station remained. Castle William was quite gone. And with a gasp of dismay and pain, Beatrice pointed out the fact that no longer Liberty held her torch aloft.

Save for a black, misshapen mass protruding through the tree-tops, the huge gift of France was no more.

Pringing the water-front, all the way around, the mournful remains of the docks and piers lay in a mere sodden jumble of decay, with an occasional hulk sunk alongside.

Even over these wrecks of liners, vegetation was growing, rank and green. At the wooden ships, barges and schooners had utterly vanished.

The telescope showed only a stray, lolling mast of steel, here or yonder, thrusting up from the desolation, like a mute appealing hand raised to a heaven that responded not.

"See," remarked Stern, "upturn almost all the buildings seem to have crumbled in upon themselves or to have fallen outward into the streets. What an inconceivable tangle of detritus those streets must be!"

"And, do you notice the park hardly shows at all? Everything's so overgrown with trees you can't tell where it begins or ends. Nature has her revenge at last, on man!"

"The universal claim, made real," said Beatrice. "Those rather clearer lines of green, I suppose, must be the larger streets. See how the avenues stretch away and away, like ribbons of green, over the thickly overgrown." On Ellis no sign of the immigrant station remained. Castle William was quite gone. And with a gasp of dismay and pain, Beatrice pointed out the fact that no longer Liberty held her torch aloft.

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Save for a black, misshapen mass protruding through the tree-tops, the huge gift of France was no more.

Pringing the water-front, all the way around, the mournful remains of the docks and piers lay in a mere sodden jumble of decay, with an occasional hulk sunk alongside.

Even over these wrecks of liners, vegetation was growing, rank and green. At the wooden ships, barges and schooners had utterly vanished.

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