

# Nostrum Paracelsius Crook, Ray Bradbury

Nostrum Paracelsius Crook

"Don't tell me who I am. I don't want to know."

The words moved out into the silence of the great barn behind the incredibly huge House.

Nostrum Paracelsius Crook spoke them. He had been the first but three to arrive and now had threatened never to leave, which bent the backs and wrecked the souls of all who had gathered here the twilight of some days after the Homecoming.

Nostrum P. C, as he was known, had a crook in his back and a similar affliction halfway across his mouth. One eye, also, tended to be half shut or half open depending on how you stared at him, and the eye behind the lid was pure fire crystal and tended to stay crossed.

"Or, in other words ... " Nostrum P. C. paused and then said:

"Don't tell me what I am doing. I don't want to know." There was a puzzled whisper amongst the members of the Family gathered in the lofty barn.

A third of their number had flown or scurried back across the sky or wolf-trotted along the riversides north and south and east and west, leaving at least sixty cousins, uncles, grandfathers, and strange visitors behind. Because

"Why do I say all this?" Nostrum P. C. went on. Yes, why? Five dozen or so strange faces leaned forward. "The wars in Europe have ravaged the sky, shredded the clouds, poisoned the winds. Even the west-to-east oceanic currents of the heavens are redolent of sulfur and brimstone. The trees of China, they say, from their recent wars, are bereft of birds. The Orient wide are thus grounded where the trees lie empty.

Now, the same threatens in Europe. Our shadow cousins not long ago made it to the Channel and across to England where they might survive. But that is mere guesswork. When the last castles of England decay and the people waken from what they call superstition, our cousins may well be in failing health and soon be melted down to sod."

All gasped. There was a soft wail that stirred the Family.

"Most of you," the ancient man went on, "may stay on. You are welcome here. There are bins and cupolas and outdwellings and peach trees aplenty, so settle in. It is however, an unhappy circumstance. Because of it I have said what I have said."

"Don't tell me what I am doing," Timothy recited.

"I don't want to know," whispered the five dozen Family members.

"But now," said Nostrum P. C, "we must know. You must know. Over the centuries we have given no name, found no label, that signified self, which summed up the totality of ... us. Let us begin."

But before anyone could start there was a great silence at the front portal of the house, such a silence as might come from the repercussion of a thunderous knock never delivered. It was as if a vast mouth with wind-filled cheeks had exhaled upon the door and shivered it to announce all things half visible, there but not there.

The ghastly passenger had arrived with all the answers.

No one ever imagined or could figure how the ghastly passenger survived and made it across the world to October Country, upper Illinois. It was only guessed that perhaps somehow he prolonged himself in deserted abbeys and empty churches and lost graveyards of Scotland and England and finally sailed across in a ghost ship to land in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut, and somehow threaded his way among the forest, across the country, to finally arrive in upper Illinois.

This happened on a night when there was little rain except for a small patch of clouds that moved across the landscape and finally battered the front porch of the great House. There was a shimmering and stammering of locks on the portal and when the doors swung wide,

there stood at long last the first of a fine new batch of immigrant members of the Family: the ghastly passenger with Minerva Halliday, looking remarkably dead for someone so dead.

Timothy's father, peering out at this half-perceived vibration of cold air, sensed an intelligence there that could respond to questions before they were asked. And so at last he said:

"Are you one of us?"

"Am I one of you, or with you?" the ghastly passenger replied. "And what are you, or we, or us? Can it be named? Is there a shape? What ambience is there? Are we kin to autumn rains? Do we rise in mists from wetland moors? Do twilight fogs seem similar? Do we prowl or run or lope? Are we shadows on a ruined wall?

Are we dusts shaken in sneezes from angel tombstones with broken wings? Do we hover or fly or writhe in October ectoplasms? Are we footsteps heard to waken us and bump our skulls on nailed-shut lids? Are we batwing heartbeats held in claw or hand or teeth? Do our cousins weave and spell their lives like that creature lassoed to the boy-child's neck?" He gestured.

Arach unraveled its spinneret in dark silence.

"Do we snug with that?" Again the gesture.

Mouse vanished in Timothy's vest.

"Do we move soundless? There?"

Anuba combed good Timothy's foot.

"Are we the mirror glimpses, unseen but there? Do we abide in walls as mortuary beetles telling time? Is the drafting breath upsucked in chimneys our terrible respiration? When clouds curdle the moon are we such clouds? When rainspouts speak from the gargoyles' mouths are we those tongueless sounds?

Do we sleep by day and swarm-glide the splendid night? When autumn trees shower bullions are we that Midas stuff, a leaf-fall that sounds the air in crisp syllables? What, what, oh what are we? And who are you,

and I, and all surrounding gasps of dead but undead cries? Ask not for whom the funeral bell tolls. It tolls for thee and me and all the ghastly terribles who nameless wander in a Marley death of chains. Do I speak the truth?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Father. "Come in!"

"Yes!" cried Nostrum Paracelsius Crook.

"In," cried Timothy.

"In," pantomimed Anuba and Mouse and eight-legged Arach.

"In," whispered Timothy.

And the ghastly passenger lurched into the arms of his cousins to beg merciful lodgings for a thousand nights and a chorus of "ayes" soared up like a rain reversed and the door shut and the ghastly passenger and his wondrous nurse were home.

The End