

Edgar Allan Poe

The Works of Edgar

Allan Poe (Illustrated)

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PHILOSOPHY OF FURNITURE

In the internal decoration, if not in the external architecture of

their residences, the English are supreme. The Italians have but little

sentiment beyond marbles and colours. In France, *_meliora probant,*

_deteriora _sequuntur--the people are too much a race of gadabouts to

maintain those household proprieties of which, indeed, they have a

delicate appreciation, or at least the elements of a proper sense. The

Chinese and most of the eastern races have a warm but inappropriate

fancy. The Scotch are *_poor _decorists*. The Dutch have, perhaps, an

indeterminate idea that a curtain is not a cabbage. In Spain they are

_all _curtains--a nation of hangmen. The Russians do not furnish. The

Hottentots and Kickapoos are very well in their way. The Yankees alone

are preposterous.



How this happens, it is not difficult to see. We have no aristocracy of blood, and having therefore as a natural, and indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the display of wealth has here to take the place and perform the office of the heraldic display in monarchical countries. By a transition readily understood, and which might have been as readily foreseen, we have been brought to merge in simple show our notions of taste itself.



To speak less abstractly. In England, for example, no mere parade of costly appurtenances would be so likely as with us, to create an impression of the beautiful in respect to the appurtenances themselves--or of taste as regards the proprietor:--this for the reason, first, that wealth is not, in England, the loftiest object of ambition as constituting a nobility; and secondly, that there, the true nobility of blood, confining itself within the strict limits of legitimate taste, rather avoids than affects that mere costliness in which a _parvenu_ rivalry may at any time be successfully attempted.

The people _will _imitate the nobles, and the result is a thorough diffusion of the proper feeling. But in America, the coins current being the sole arms of the aristocracy, their display may be said, in general, to be the sole means of the aristocratic distinction; and the populace, looking always upward for models, are insensibly led to confound the two entirely separate ideas of magnificence and beauty. In short, the cost of an article of furniture has at length come to be, with us, nearly the sole test of its merit in a decorative point of view--and this test, once established, has led the way to many analogous errors, readily traceable to the one primitive folly.

There could be nothing more directly offensive to the eye of an artist than the interior of what is termed in the United States--that is to say, in Appalachia--a well-furnished apartment. Its most usual defect is a want of keeping. We speak of the keeping of a room as we would of the keeping of a picture--for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting, suffice for decision on the adjustment of a chamber.

A want of keeping is observable sometimes in the character of the several pieces of furniture, but generally in their colours or modes of adaptation to use. Very often the eye is offended by their inartistic arrangement. Straight lines are too prevalent--too uninterruptedly continued--or clumsily interrupted at right angles. If curved lines occur, they are repeated into unpleasant uniformity. By undue precision, the appearance of many a fine apartment is utterly spoiled.

Curtains are rarely well disposed, or well chosen in respect to other decorations. With formal furniture, curtains are out of place; and an extensive volume of drapery of any kind is, under any circumstance, irreconcilable with good taste--the proper quantum, as well as the proper adjustment, depending upon the character of the general effect.

Carpets are better understood of late than of ancient days, but we still very frequently err in their patterns and colours. The soul of the apartment is the carpet. From it are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all objects incumbent. A judge at common law may be an ordinary

man; a good judge of a carpet _must be _a genius. Yet we have heard
discursing of carpets, with the air "_d'un mouton qui reve," _fellows
who should not and who could not be entrusted with the management of
their own _moustaches. _Every one knows that a large floor _may _have a
covering of large figures, and that a small one must have a covering
of small--yet this is not all the knowledge in the world. As regards texture, the Saxony is alone admissible. Brussels is the
preterpluperfect tense of fashion, and Turkey is taste in its dying
agonies. Touching pattern--a carpet should _not _be bedizzened out like
a Riccaree Indian--all red chalk, yellow ochre, and cock's feathers. In
brief--distinct grounds, and vivid circular or cycloid figures, _of
no meaning, _are here Median laws. The abomination of flowers, or
representations of well-known objects of any kind, should not be
endured within the limits of Christendom. Indeed, whether on carpets,
or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman coverings, all upholstery of this
nature should be rigidly Arabesque. As for those antique floor-cloth &
still occasionally seen in the dwellings of the rabble--cloths of huge,
sprawling, and radiating devises, stripe-interspersed, and glorious

with all hues, among which no ground is intelligible--
these are but the
wicked invention of a race of time-servers and money-
lovers--children
of Baal and worshippers of Mammon--Benthams, who, to
spare thought
and economize fancy, first cruelly invented the
Kaleidoscope, and then
established joint-stock companies to twirl it by steam.

Glare is a leading error in the philosophy of American
household
decoration--an error easily recognised as deduced from
the perversion of
taste just specified., We are violently enamoured of gas
and of glass.

The former is totally inadmissible within doors. Its harsh
and unsteady
light offends. No one having both brains and eyes will use
it. A mild,
or what artists term a cool light, with its consequent
warm shadows,
will do wonders for even an ill-furnished apartment.
Never was a more
lovely thought than that of the astral lamp. We mean, of
course,
the astral lamp proper--the lamp of Argand, with its
original plain
ground-glass shade, and its tempered and uniform
moonlight rays. The
cut-glass shade is a weak invention of the enemy. The
eagerness with
which we have adopted it, partly on account of its
flashiness, but
principally on account of its greater rest, is a good
commentary on

the proposition with which we began. It is not too much to say, that the deliberate employer of a cut-glass shade, is either radically deficient in taste, or blindly subservient to the caprices of fashion. The light proceeding from one of these gaudy abominations is unequal broken, and painful. It alone is sufficient to mar a world of good effect in the furniture subjected to its influence. Female loveliness, in especial, is more than one-half disenchanted beneath its evil eye.

In the matter of glass, generally, we proceed upon false principles. Its leading feature is _glitter--_and in that one word how much of all that is detestable do we express! Flickering, unquiet lights, are _sometimes _pleasing--to children and idiots always so--but in the embellishment of a room they should be scrupulously avoided. In truth, even strong _steady _lights are inadmissible. The huge and unmeaning glass chandeliers, prism-cut, gas-lighted, and without shade, which dangle in our most fashionable drawing-rooms, may be cited as the quintessence of all that is false in taste or preposterous in folly.

The rage for _glitter-_because its idea has become as we before observed, confounded with that of magnificence in the abstract--has

led us, also, to the exaggerated employment of mirrors. We line our dwellings with great British plates, and then imagine we have done a fine thing. Now the slightest thought will be sufficient to convince any one who has an eye at all, of the ill effect of numerous looking-glasses, and especially of large ones. Regarded apart from its reflection, the mirror presents a continuous, flat, colourless, unrelieved surface,--a thing always and obviously unpleasant. Considered as a reflector, it is potent in producing a monstrous and odious uniformity: and the evil is here aggravated, not in merely direct proportion with the augmentation of its sources, but in a ratio constantly increasing. In fact, a room with four or five mirrors arranged at random, is, for all purposes of artistic show, a room of no shape at all. If we add to this evil, the attendant glitter upon glitter, we have a perfect farrago of discordant and displeasing effects. The veriest bumpkin, on entering an apartment so bedizzened, would be instantly aware of something wrong, although he might be altogether unable to assign a cause for his dissatisfaction. But let the same person be led into a room tastefully furnished, and he would be

startled into an exclamation of pleasure and surprise.

It is an evil growing out of our republican institutions, that here a

man of large purse has usually a very little soul which he keeps in

it. The corruption of taste is a portion or a pendant of the dollar-manufacture. As we grow rich, our ideas grow rusty. It is,

therefore, not among _our_ aristocracy that we must look (if at all, in

Appalachia), for the spirituality of a British _boudoir_. _But_ we have

seen apartments in the tenure of Americans of moderns [possibly "modest"

or "moderate"] means, which, in negative merit at least, might vie with

any of the _or-molu'd_ cabinets of our friends across the water. Even

now, there is present to our mind's eye a small and not, ostentatious

chamber with whose decorations no fault can be found. The proprietor

lies asleep on a sofa--the weather is cool--the time is near midnight:

we will make a sketch of the room during his slumber.

It is oblong--some thirty feet in length and twenty-five in breadth--a

shape affording the best(ordinary) opportunities for the adjustment of

furniture. It has but one door--by no means a wide one--which is at one

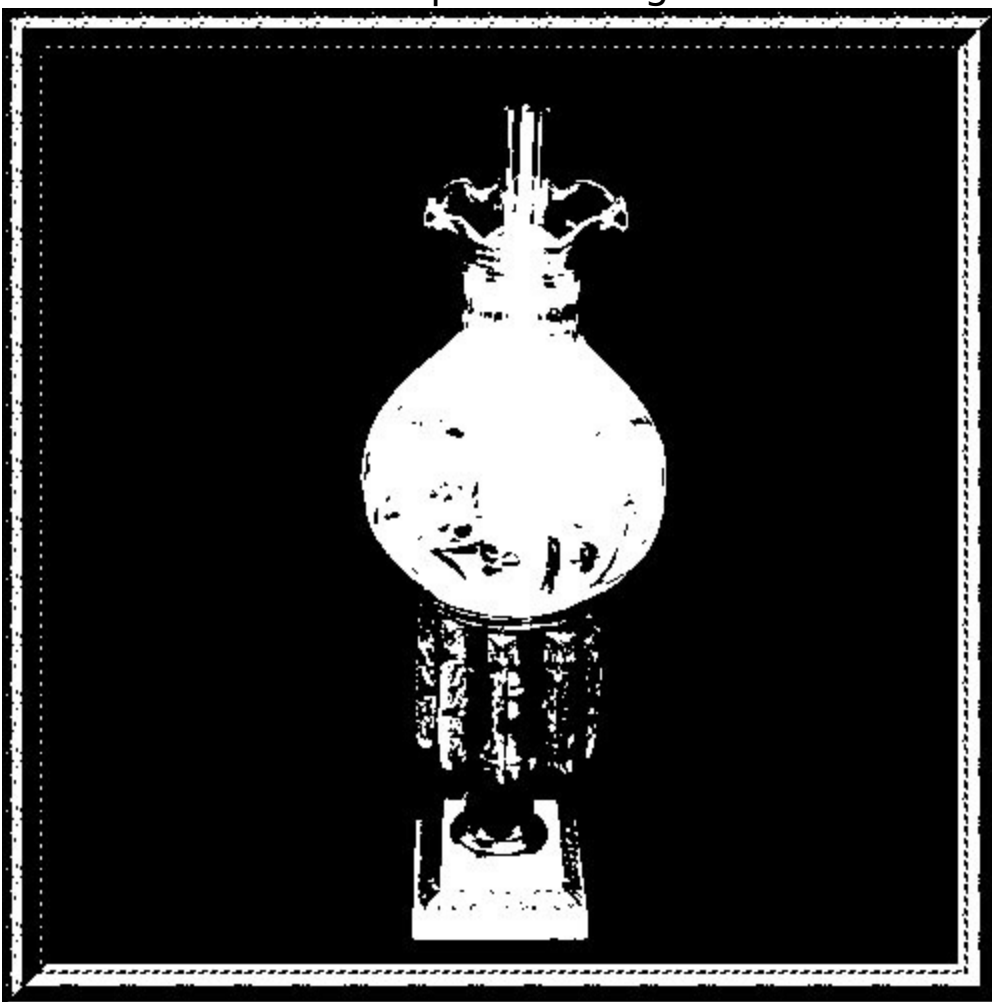
end of the parallelogram, and but two windows, which are at the

other. These latter are large, reaching down to the floor--
have deep
recesses--and open on an Italian _veranda. _Their panes
are of a
crimson-tinted glass, set in rose-wood framings, more
massive than
usual. They are curtained within the recess, by a thick
silver tissue
adapted to the shape of the window, and hanging loosely
in small
volumes. Without the recess are curtains of an
exceedingly rich crimson
silk, fringed with a deep network of gold, and lined with
silver tissue,
which is the material of the exterior blind. There are no
cornices; but
the folds of the whole fabric (which are sharp rather than
massive, and
have an airy appearance), issue from beneath a broad
entablature of rich
giltwork, which encircles the room at the junction of the
ceiling and
walls. The drapery is thrown open also, or closed, by
means of a thick
rope of gold loosely enveloping it, and resolving itself
readily into
a knot; no pins or other such devices are apparent. The
colours of
the curtains and their fringe--the tints of crimson and
gold--appear
everywhere in profusion, and determine the _character
_of the room. The
carpet--of Saxony material--is quite half an inch thick,
and is of the
same crimson ground, relieved simply by the appearance
of a gold cord

(like that festooning the curtains) slightly relieved above the surface of the ground, and thrown upon it in such a manner as to form a succession of short irregular curves--one occasionally overlaying the other. The walls are prepared with a glossy paper of a silver gray tint, spotted with small Arabesque devices of a fainter hue of the prevalent crimson. Many paintings relieve the expanse of paper. These are chiefly landscapes of an imaginative cast--such as the fairy grottoes of Stanfield, or the lake of the Dismal Swamp of Chapman. There are, nevertheless, three or four female heads, of an ethereal beauty--portraits in the manner of Sully. The tone of each picture is warm, but dark. There are no "brilliant effects." _Repose speaks in all. Not one is of small size. Diminutive paintings give that spotty look to a room, which is the blemish of so many a fine work of Art overtouched. The frames are broad but not deep, and richly carved, without being dulled or filigreed. They have the whole lustre of burnished gold. They lie flat on the walls, and do not hang off with cords. The designs themselves are often seen to better advantage in this latter position, but the general appearance of the chamber is injured.

But one mirror--and this not a very large one--is visible. In shape it is nearly circular--and it is hung so that a reflection of the person can be obtained from it in none of the ordinary sitting-places of the room. Two large low sofas of rosewood and crimson silk, gold-flowered, form the only seats, with the exception of two light conversation chairs, also of rose-wood. There is a pianoforte (rose-wood, also), without cover, and thrown open. An octagonal table, formed altogether of the richest gold-threaded marble, is placed near one of the sofas. This is also without cover--the drapery of the curtains has been thought sufficient.. Four large and gorgeous Sevres vases, in which bloom a profusion of sweet and vivid flowers, occupy the slightly rounded angles of the room. A tall candelabrum, bearing a small antique lamp with highly perfumed oil, is standing near the head of my sleeping friend. Some light and graceful hanging shelves, with golden edges and crimson silk cords with gold tassels, sustain two or three hundred magnificently bound books. Beyond these things, there is no furniture, if we except an Argand lamp, with a plain crimson-tinted ground glass shade, which depends from the lofty vaulted ceiling by a single slender gold chain,

and throws a tranquil but magical radiance over all.



A TALE OF JERUSALEM

Intensos rigidarn in frontern ascendere canos

Passus erat----

--Lucan--De Catone

----a bristly bore.

"LET us hurry to the walls," said Abel-Phittim to Buzi-Ben-Levi and

Simeon the Pharisee, on the tenth day of the month Thammuz, in the year

of the world three thousand nine hundred and forty-one--let us hasten

to the ramparts adjoining the gate of Benjamin, which is in the city of

David, and overlooking the camp of the uncircumcised; for it is the

last hour of the fourth watch, being sunrise; and the idolaters, in

fulfilment of the promise of Pompey, should be awaiting us with the

lambs for the sacrifices."

Simeon, Abel-Phittim, and Duzi-Ben-Levi were the Gizbarim, or

sub-collectors of the offering, in the holy city of Jerusalem.

"Verily," replied the Pharisee; "let us hasten: for this generosity

in the heathen is unwonted; and fickle-mindedness has ever been an

attribute of the worshippers of Baal."



"That they are fickle-minded and treacherous is as true as the Pentateuch," said Buzi-Ben-Levi, "but that is only toward the people of Adonai. When was it ever known that the Ammonites proved wanting to their own interests? Methinks it is no great stretch of generosity to allow us lambs for the altar of the Lord, receiving in lieu thereof thirty silver shekels per head!"

"Thou forgettest, however, Ben-Levi," replied Abel-Phittim, "that the Roman Pompey, who is now impiously besieging the city of the Most High, has no assurity that we apply not the lambs thus purchased for the altar, to the sustenance of the body, rather than of the spirit."

"Now, by the five corners of my beard!" shouted the Pharisee, who belonged to the sect called The Dashers (that little knot of saints whose manner of _dashing _and lacerating the feet against the pavement was long a thorn and a reproach to less zealous devotees-a stumbling-block to less gifted perambulators)--"by the five corners of that beard which, as a priest, I am forbidden to shave!-have we lived to see the day when a blaspheming and idolatrous upstart of Rome shall

accuse us of appropriating to the appetites of the flesh
the most holy
and consecrated elements? Have we lived to see the day
when--"

"Let us not question the motives of the Philistine,"
interrupted

Abel-Phittim' "for to-day we profit for the first time by his
avarice

or by his generosity; but rather let us hurry to the
ramparts, lest

offerings should be wanting for that altar whose fire the
rains of

heaven can not extinguish, and whose pillars of smoke
no tempest can
turn aside."

That part of the city to which our worthy Gizbarim now
hastened, and

which bore the name of its architect, King David, was
esteemed the most

strongly fortified district of Jerusalem; being situated
upon the steep

and lofty hill of Zion. Here, a broad, deep, circumvallatory
trench,

hewn from the solid rock, was defended by a wall of
great strength

erected upon its inner edge. This wall was adorned, at
regular

interspaces, by square towers of white marble; the
lowest sixty, and the

highest one hundred and twenty cubits in height. But, in
the vicinity of

the gate of Benjamin, the wall arose by no means from
the margin of the

fosse. On the contrary, between the level of the ditch and the basement

of the rampart sprang up a perpendicular cliff of two hundred and fifty

cubits, forming part of the precipitous Mount Moriah. So that when

Simeon and his associates arrived on the summit of the tower called

Adoni-Bezek-the loftiest of all the turrets around about Jerusalem, and

the usual place of conference with the besieging army-they looked down

upon the camp of the enemy from an eminence excelling by many feet that

of the Pyramid of Cheops, and, by several, that of the temple of Belus.



"Verily," sighed the Pharisee, as he peered dizzily over
the precipice,
"the uncircumcised are as the sands by the seashore-as
the locusts
in the wilderness! The valley of the King hath become the
valley of
Adommin."

"And yet," added Ben-Levi, "thou canst not point me out a Philistine-no, not one-from Aleph to Tau-from the wilderness to the battlements--who seemeth any bigger than the letter Jod!"

"Lower away the basket with the shekels of silver!" here shouted a

Roman soldier in a hoarse, rough voice, which appeared to issue from the

regions of Pluto--"lower away the basket with the accursed coin which it

has broken the jaw of a noble Roman to pronounce! Is it thus you evince

your gratitude to our master Pompeius, who, in his condescension, has

thought fit to listen to your idolatrous importunities? The god Phoebus,

who is a true god, has been charioted for an hour-and were you not to

be on the ramparts by sunrise? Aedepol! do you think that we, the

conquerors of the world, have nothing better to do than stand waiting by

the walls of every kennel, to traffic with the dogs of the earth? Lower

away! I say--and see that your trumpery be bright in color and just in

weight!"

"El Elohim!" ejaculated the Pharisee, as the discordant tones of the

centurion rattled up the crags of the precipice, and fainted away

against the temple--"El Elohim!--who is the god Phoebus? --whom doth the

blasphemer invoke? Thou, Buzi-Ben-Levi! who art read in
the laws of
the Gentiles, and hast sojourned among them who
dabble with the
Teraphim!--is it Nergal of whom the idolater speaketh?---
or
Ashimah?--or Nibhaz,--or Tartak?--or Adramalech?--or
Anamalech?--or
Succoth-Benith?--or Dagon?--or Belial?--or Baal-Perith?--
or
Baal-Peor?--or Baal-Zebub?"

"Verily it is neither-but beware how thou lettest the rope
slip too
rapidly through thy fingers; for should the wicker-work
chance to hang
on the projection of Yonder crag, there will be a woful
outpouring of
the holy things of the sanctuary."

By the assistance of some rudely constructed machinery,
the heavily
laden basket was now carefully lowered down among the
multitude; and,
from the giddy pinnacle, the Romans were seen
gathering confusedly
round it; but owing to the vast height and the prevalence
of a fog, no
distinct view of their operations could be obtained.

Half an hour had already elapsed.

"We shall be too late!" sighed the Pharisee, as at the
expiration of
this period he looked over into the abyss-"we shall be too
late! we

shall be turned out of office by the Katholim."

"No more," responded Abel-Phittim---"no more shall we feast upon the fat of the land-no longer shall our beards be odorous with frankincense--our loins girded up with fine linen from the Temple."

"Racal" swore Ben-Levi, "Racal do they mean to defraud us of the purchase money? or, Holy Moses! are they weighing the shekels of the tabernacle?"

"They have given the signal at last!" cried the Pharisee--- --"they have given the signal at last! pull away, Abel-Phittim!-- and thou, Buzi-Ben-Levi, pull away!--for verily the Philistines have either still hold upon the basket, or the Lord hath softened their hearts to place therein a beast of good weight!" And the Gizbarim pulled away, while their burden swung heavily upward through the still increasing mist.

"Booshoh he!"--as, at the conclusion of an hour, some object at the extremity of the rope became indistinctly visible-- "Booshoh he!" was the exclamation which burst from the lips of Ben-Levi.

"Booshoh he!--for shame!--it is a ram from the thickets of Engedi, and as rugged as the valley of Jehosaphat!"

"It is a firstling of the flock," said Abel-Phittim, "I know him by the bleating of his lips, and the innocent folding of his limbs. His eyes are more beautiful than the jewels of the Pectoral, and his flesh is like the honey of Hebron."

"It is a fatted calf from the pastures of Bashan," said the Pharisee, "the heathen have dealt wonderfully with us----let us raise up our voices in a psalm--let us give thanks on the shawm and on the psaltery--on the harp and on the huggab--on the cythern and on the sackbut!"

It was not until the basket had arrived within a few feet of the Gizbarim that a low grunt betrayed to their perception a hog of no common size.

"Now El Emanu!" slowly and with upturned eyes ejaculated the trio, as, letting go their hold, the emancipated porker tumbled headlong among the Philistines, "El Emanu!--God be with us--it is _the unutterable flesh!" _

THE SPHINX

DURING the dread reign of the Cholera in New York, I had accepted the

invitation of a relative to spend a fortnight with him in the retirement

of his _cottage ornee_ on the banks of the Hudson. We had here around

us all the ordinary means of summer amusement; and what with rambling

in the woods, sketching, boating, fishing, bathing, music, and books,

we should have passed the time pleasantly enough, but for the fearful

intelligence which reached us every morning from the populous city.

Not a day elapsed which did not bring us news of the decease of some

acquaintance. Then as the fatality increased, we learned to expect daily

the loss of some friend. At length we trembled at the approach of every

messenger. The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death.

That palsying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I

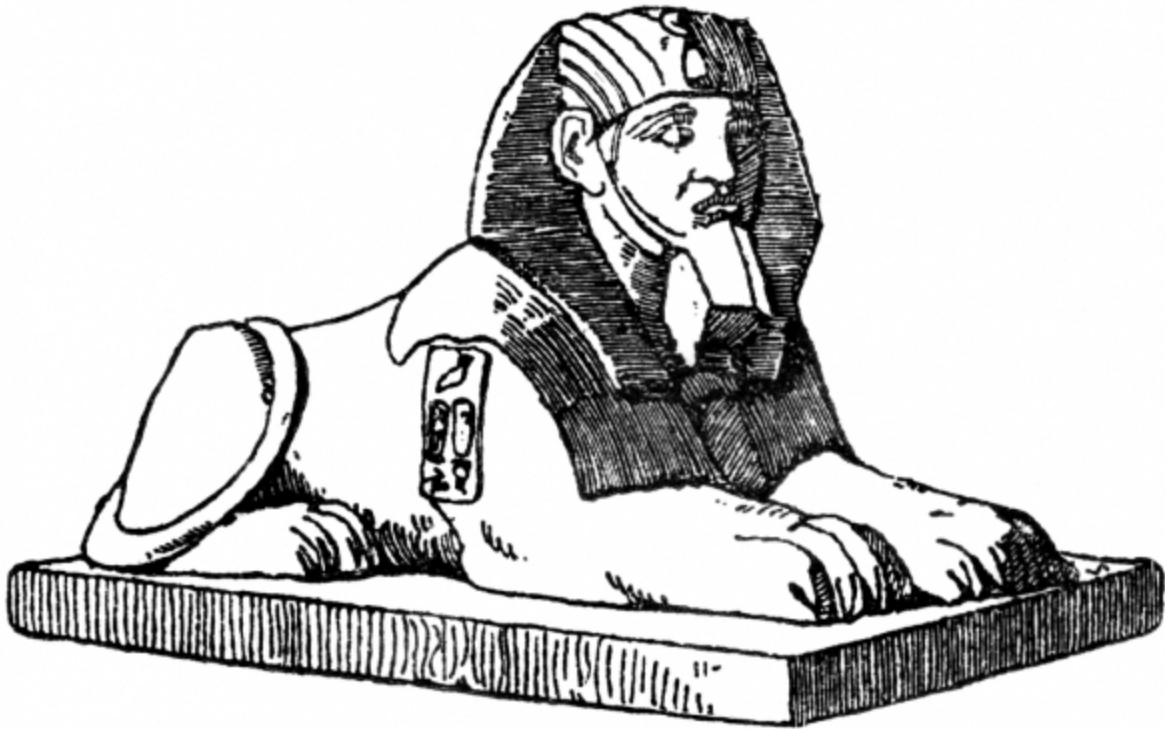
could neither speak, think, nor dream of any thing else. My host was

of a less excitable temperament, and, although greatly depressed in

spirits, exerted himself to sustain my own. His richly philosophical

intellect was not at any time affected by unrealities. To the substances

of terror he was sufficiently alive, but of its shadows he had no apprehension.



His endeavors to arouse me from the condition of abnormal gloom into which I had fallen, were frustrated, in great measure, by certain volumes which I had found in his library. These were of a character to force into germination whatever seeds of hereditary superstition lay latent in my bosom. I had been reading these books without his knowledge, and thus he was often at a loss to account for the forcible impressions which had been made upon my fancy.