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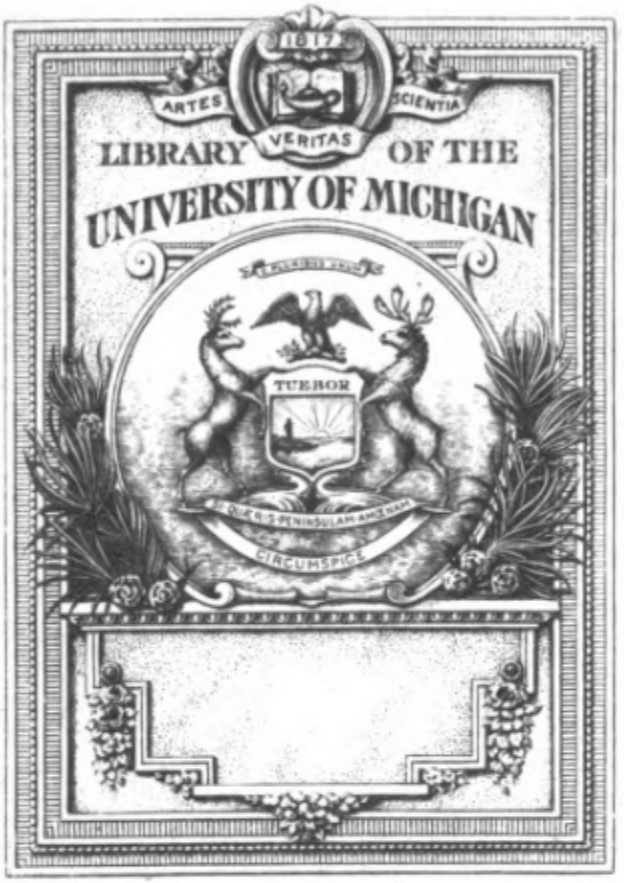

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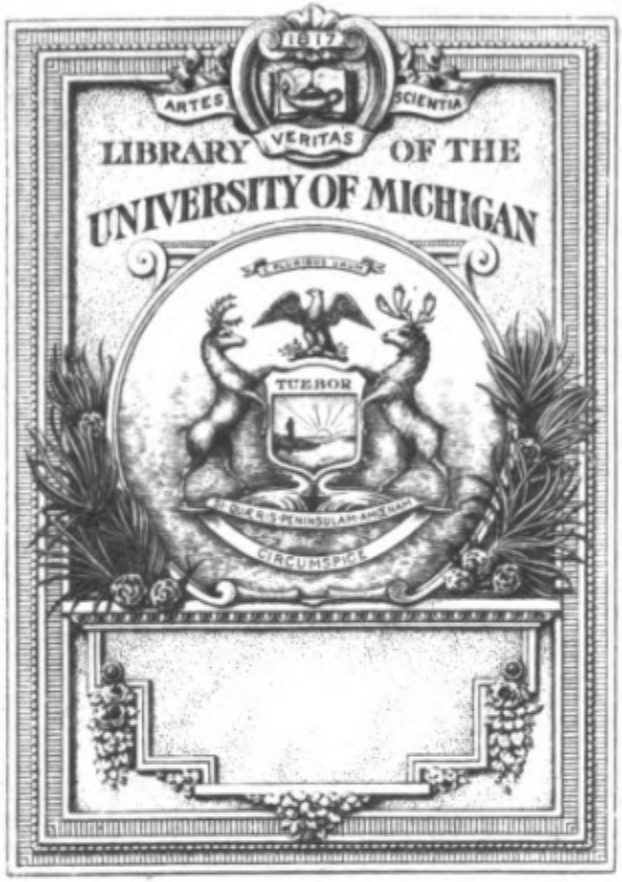

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THE MYSTERY OF BURNLEIGH MANOR

BY

WALTER LIVINGSTON

THE MYSTERY LEAGUE, INC.
PUBLISHERS 1930 NEW YORK

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CHAPTER ONE

"Burnleigh Manor —— County seat of the Earl of ———, located on the edge of a cliff overlooking the North Sea, fifteen miles N. by E. of King's Lynn, Norfolk, and one hundred and fourteen miles N. by E. of London. At one time ranked among the show places of England, it has stood empty for some years and is now in a state of disrepair.

Upon the death of Edward, it became the property of Cecil. Upon the death of Cecil it will in all probability pass from the direct line of succession for the first time in its history, inasmuch as Robert, younger brother of Edward and Cecil, disappeared over fifteen years ago, and Lord Cecil is a bachelor.

For further details, see the Register."

* * * * * * *

I GIVE you the above just as I copied it into my notes some years ago. I can also tell you that it will avail you nothing to turn to the Register. You would find, as I did, that there are no further details.

To be sure, the whole interesting history of the Burnleigh family, beginning somewhere in 1100, is there, with a great deal of furbishing and fanfares; but you will find that when the Recorder reached Edward, Cecil, and the youngest, Robert, his pen had run dry—or else he felt that what could be entered would be better left unsaid.

Figuratively speaking, Cecil Burnleigh walked into my

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office with the manor tucked under his arm. There was nothing unusual in that for I was with an internationally famous firm of American architects, and Burnleigh Manor was presented to me much as the ordinary reconstruction commission. Lord Cecil seemed to be a quiet but pleasant enough old gentleman of rather indeterminate age.

It did seem to me that Lord Cecil was a bit reluctant to speak of Edward Burnleigh. Evidently the present condition of the Manor was the fault of this older brother. Cecil was perfectly frank in saying he had allowed it to run down prior to his death. Early in our conversation I learned that Edward's manner of leaving this World was a matter of quite some disgrace to a very proud family. On a Christmas Eve, sixteen years before I came into this he had died by his own hand, surrounded by what was left of his home.

Until the beginning of the reference work, of which the quotation previously given is a part, I had not heard of Robert. His mysterious and unexplained disappearance was apparently another blot on the family record which Lord Cecil found it hard to discuss. I think I dismissed these family details from my mind at this time because they formed no real part of the architectural and historical background of the old place. I was being retained by the last of the Burnleighs to restore his ancestral house to its original condition, so it was quite natural that I should consider only the architectural features. The peculiarities I began to notice in my client

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I attributed to the peculiarities of his family, and I found later that, in the main, I was quite correct.

However, they did not enhance my first trip abroad. I was made comfortable enough in a suite adjoining that occupied by Lord Cecil, and for the first time in my life I knew the luxury, but rather doubtful enjoyment, of a valet. Personally I still prefer chasing my own collar buttons under beds and bureaus. Irrespective of my preferences which I was not ungracious enough to mention, my every want was ministered to by Burnleigh's own man, Glome. Odd name, that, and at our very first meeting I changed it to Gloom, a much more appropriate designation. He impressed me as the perfect model for an undertaker's assistant.

It would seem to be the height of callousness to make any complaint of a trip which one made at no expense whatever, in a luxurious suite on a fast, comfortable liner, especially when one is provided with a shadow that hovers about the entire day anticipating each wish as it is born. Ungrateful and blasé as it may seem, I can truly say that I have had far more pleasure from trips made later and under far more humble conditions. No matter how sumptuous one's surroundings are they become irksome when they constitute too steady a diet. Let me explain what I mean.

We sailed at twelve, and my luncheon was brought to me shortly after by "Gloom." On the tray with the delicious looking food was a note written in rather a shaky hand. I give it to you here:

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"My dear Mr. Riker,

You may set this all down to an old man's whims if you wish, but I hope you will be kind enough to humor them. Would you mind remaining in your rooms as much as possible—in fact I would appreciate your leaving them only in the evening.

And a still heavier burden on your good nature is the request that you do not associate with any of the other passengers for the present, at least.

I hope you will pardon this seeming intrusion on your affairs until I have an opportunity to explain the reasons that seem to justify it.

Sincerely,
CECIL B.

P. S. I have taken the liberty of keeping both our names from the passenger list."

Certainly he was entitled to say what disposition was to be made of my time from nine in the morning until five at night, and when one is listening to a client with a million dollar commission, his requests with regard to the evening hours are likely to become orders inviolable.

Not that I sank back into the tufted chairs in resigned submission. As I came on board I had seen one or two very attractive young ladies and I had made quite definite, if tentative, plans for these evening hours. Instead I was to be a semi-prisoner in my rooms because of the foolish whims of an old man. I say foolish

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because at this time it had not occurred to me that there might be anything of a serious nature behind them. At least I felt that my case was the first on record. There were probably many people who would like to lock their architects in far more unpleasant and hotter places than these quarters of mine, but up to the present I have never heard of it being done.

After luncheon I roamed about the suite and found on the table beside my bed quite a collection of magazines and books. On top of them lay a card. I seemed to be surrounded with correspondence if not company.

"Perhaps these will partially repay you for the part of the trip of which you have been deprived by my peculiarities.

CECIL B."

At least the old fellow was thoughtful. The periodicals were recent and diversified. After glancing idly through one or two I turned up the books and read their titles. There was not a novel among them. If and when I absorbed their contents I would be well versed in some odd phases of architecture. I cannot remember them all now, but two do stand out clearly from the rest,—Thenaud's, "Notes on the Detection of Hidden Spaces" —and Wilson's, "Studies of Ancient Architecture." These two were as fascinating as any novels could have been, and were destined to be of some assistance to me later. They were delightful companions and the first

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two days were spent with them except for an occasional stolen and cautious trip to the rail for a glimpse of the sea and a snatch of sunshine.

Burnleigh was confined to his room for reasons unknown and entirely indeterminate, for the sea was a great smooth lake. I began to wonder if these chaps who had written about "the bounding main" had not been a bit facetious.

Gloom flitted in and out of my quarters, but he was far from a pleasant travelling companion. As a conversationalist he was an excellent running mate to a sphinx. I recall one of my efforts to broaden my knowledge of Burnleigh Manor with his assistance. He had brought in my dinner tray and I opened the conversation along general lines.

"Nice sailing weather, isn't it?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

I found out later that there were two words left out of Gloom's vocabulary, "yes," and "no." He avoided using them even when sailing weather was the topic of conversation on the grounds that they might be incriminating. I do not believe that in all my acquaintance with him I have ever heard him make a statement that could not, somehow, be made to point north and south at the same time. Undaunted, I tried a fresh start.

"Been across often?"

"A few times, sir."

You see? That might mean two or twenty-two.

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"Have you ever been in Burnleigh Manor, Gloom?"

He stiffened as if I had touched him with a hot poker. It was only for a second, and as he relaxed and opened his mouth to speak, I knew instinctively that he had thought his way out of that one, too.

"Glome is the name, sir, begging your pardon."

With the tongs suspended over my tea-cup he turned the tide by asking a question himself.

"One or two lumps, sir?"

Ordinarily I take one lump with lemon, but with an idiotic idea of annoying him by selecting something he had not mentioned, I answered him.

"Three lumps."

His eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch which was quite a dramatic gesture for him to make, and he carefully—almost maliciously—counted out three lumps of sugar. For no good sound reason the man irritated me. He had evaded my question and I was determined he should not do it again.

"I asked you if you had ever been in Burnleigh Manor."

"Why do you ask that of me, sir?"

"Idle curiosity I suppose."

"Oh yes, to be sure, sir."

And that was that. To be sure what? I certainly was not going to humiliate myself to the extent of asking whether the "Oh yes" referred to my curiosity or to Burnleigh Manor. I thought I could get him to dis-

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cuss himself a bit. The most astute and taciturn of men will become quite loquacious when afforded as fascinating a subject as themselves.

"Been in the family long, Gloom?"

I knew that I was irritating him by calling him Gloom, but this time he made a valiant effort to hide his feelings.

"For years, sir, I might say for a good many years."

With this running start I turned the conversation in an abrupt movement against his flank designed to catch him off his guard, to one point on which I really wished enlightenment.

"Then I suppose that you knew Lord Robert?"

He glanced up at me quickly and I was quite surprised at the expression on his face. It was one of the few times that I have ever seen anything on Gloom's face which could be dignified by the term "expression." It was only a flash, but when he spoke again it seemed to be with an enormous effort.

"Begging your pardon, sir, His Lordship asked me to convey his apologies to you and to tell you that as soon as he is feeling well enough he would see you. I —I hope you enjoy your dinner, sir."

With a bow and what, I suppose, was meant to be a smile, he was gone. His attitude, together with the conditions under which I was travelling, began to get on my nerves. I think it was here that I began to suspect that something more than architecture lurked in the air. The next evening my suspicions were confirmed.

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CHAPTER TWO

I HAD come in from a short evening stroll. There is not a great deal of enjoyment to be derived by a young bachelor in strolling about empty decks, listening to the seductive strains of an excellent dance orchestra from somewhere below. Everything was so far from normal that I caught myself giving wide berths to the very shadowy corners that I might otherwise have been seeking, and glancing over my shoulder occasionally as if half expecting something to jump at me from each dark niche.

When I returned to my stateroom I found Gloom waiting there.

"Lord Cecil would like to see you tonight, if you would care to step into his cabin."

"Care is hardly the word, Gloom. An explanation is long since due me."

"I am repeating His Lordship's words, sir."

"Is this game of hide and seek over now?"

"I can't say, sir."

"You mean you won't say!"

"I mean I can't say, sir."

"Oh, go to the devil!"

And Gloom went. Naturally, I mean out of the room.

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I tagged along at his heels for all the World like a blustering little bull pup. Without any further words he led me to Burnleigh's quarters which were duplicates of mine. As I entered, the old man looked up at me from the comfortable depths of his chair with the ghost of a smile. Smiles were a rare thing with him, and when they did come they actually seemed to be the ghosts of others that had died on his lips centuries ago, when smiling came more easily.

"Good evening, Mr. Riker. I know that I could spend the rest of the evening with apologies and not make up for your discomfort. Sit there, will you please?"

He indicated a chair across the table from him. I am afraid my replies to his preliminary remarks were not any too gracious, but being the very acme of the English gentleman he did not seem to notice it.

"It has been quite lonely for you, has it not?"

"Well, I have had better travelling companions than Gloom."

"Gloom?"

"I prefer Gloom. It is more descriptive."

Again that flicker of a smile crossed his face.

"He intimated that your solitude was beginning to be—well—a trifle irksome to you."

"He was putting it mildly."

"Putting it? Ah, yes—will you have one?"

His open cigarette case was passed across the table.

"I do not smoke cigars and I do not like them smoked in the room with me. Another whim."

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When he had lighted up, he leaned forward in his chair.

"Mr. Riker, instead of expressing my gratitude to you for the splendid way you have granted my silly requests, I am going to ask you to do still another thing for me. When I have finished telling you a bit of a story tonight, you may not care to go any further. That is your privilege, but before I start I must have your assurance that what I am about to tell you will be kept a secret by you as long as I live. Will you give me your word on that?"

I did. I had reached a stage where his affairs were not of the slightest interest to me. Enticing as the restoration of an old English Manor was to my architectural heart, I regretted coming. But I have kept my word, for until Lord Cecil's death last year I have not breathed a word of the story to anyone. With my expressed assurance, he went on talking.

"By now the possibility of my being some sort of a crank has occurred to you, I suppose?"

As a matter of fact, it had not. But why not? One brother a suicide—the other disappearing off the face of the earth——

"I see it had not until I mentioned it. That was kind of you. At best, Mr. Riker, sanity is only relative. I believe I am in my right mind at the moment even if I have reason not to be——"

He was watching the smoke curl up from his cigarette,

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lost in thought. With a visible start he brought his attention back to me.

"However, you will have to take my word for that. Now if you are comfortable, I will begin at the very beginning and give you all the facts surrounding this new venture of yours. First, about my family—unless you already know some of our history?"

This was an embarrassing question to answer, and I stammered out the fact that I had glanced at the Register.

"I rather imagine the Register was silent on the present generation, and—I am sorry to say—rightfully so. Suppose I introduce you to the Burnleighs? My father had three sons, in the order of our ages, Edward, myself—and Robert. My father was rather an odd type and he had two great passions in life—my mother, and Egypt. His early manhood was spent there in the diplomatic service and he knew our country as few Englishmen have ever succeeded in knowing it. My mother died when Edward was twenty-three and my father two years later, from grief."

As if to punctuate his sentence, the ash dropped from his cigarette to the floor unheeded.

"As the eldest, Edward became the head of the house. He inherited two things from my father—the finest collection of things Egyptian privately owned in the World—and his love for Egypt itself. To the former Edward added all his life, spending at least half of his

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time in the country of sphinxes and pyramids. Returning from one of these long stays, he surprised us by bringing back a wife. She, too, was Egyptian—in fact she could trace her descent far back into that charming past of a vanished race. Mr. Riker, she was unquestionably the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. The entrancing mystery of the East was about her like an invisible veil and it made of her something that defies——"

He shifted uneasily in his chair and his eyes avoided mine.

"Words are inadequate and it would not help us with our story. One thing that is probably incomprehensible to you is the position of younger brothers in my country. At my father's death, all of his property and influence went to the eldest son, Edward. For myself and for Robert, the youngest, there was a mere pittance. This did not bother me in the least. I expected it and was happy in my work, but it always irked Robert. He was a handsome chap—lovable, talented, and popular. Although given to sulking on occasion, he was always welcome at Edward's home and spent much of his time there. I was by nature and occupation a wanderer and saw little of them. There was one time each year that we all gathered under one roof—that of Burnleigh Manor —and that was Christmas. We never failed to get there Christmas Eve and for a few days we would be together. Lady Burnleigh was the most charming hostess that ever

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lived, and that sample of her hospitality and sweetness remained with me for the rest of the year. Then something happened to Edward."

His voice died away and he sat looking back into the past he was describing. As we sat there in silence it seemed as if something crept into our cabin. Something cold. Something oppressive. Something black and bitter tasting. Burnleigh leaned forward abruptly and took another cigarette. When the first puff of smoke was on its way ceilingward, he picked up his story again.

"I reproach myself for not knowing more about this part. I should have remained in England and tried to —to help. As I look back now I think the first warning I had of the way things were going was a letter from Robert in which he stated that practically the entire collection of Egyptian pieces had disappeared. The fact that he carefully avoided mentioning Edward's name in this connection convinced me that he felt our heritage had been sold and the funds diverted to the personal use of our older brother. Rumors reached me that Edward was changing from an hospitable, generous and brilliant man, to a morose, silent—almost vindictive caricature of his former self. Naturally it was with some trepidation that I approached the Manor on that last Christmas Eve that we ever spent together. From the very first moment my visit was unpleasant. I entered the doors of Burnleigh Manor and found my brothers in a violent quarrel that ended abruptly on my entrance. Neither one would discuss it with me or ex-

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plain its cause, so I was helpless to smooth it out. During my short visit I felt a terrific tension existing in the household. Edward was taciturn and moody. Robert was unnaturally gay, reckless and charming. Underneath Lady Burnleigh's evident effort to carry things along smoothly I sensed a desire to tell me something—warn me of something that was threatening—but Edward never allowed her out of his sight. A day later I left in pique, feeling I was no longer welcome under my brother's roof. I know now that my egotism closed my eyes to the truth. The next evening the papers were full of my brother's disappearance. Robert had vanished from Burnleigh Manor the night of the day I had left. No one saw him go, nor have I ever found anyone who has seen him since. For five long years I did nothing but search for him and in all that time, or in the time since then, I have never found a trace."

An ugly suspicion flashed across my mind and I interrupted him for the first time.

"Did Edward aid you in the search? You spoke of a—a quarrel."

"He did not. You see, Mr. Riker, his wife disappeared at the same time—the same night."

He bowed his head for a second. I could understand what it meant to share this with an outsider and I began to get a glimpse of the reasons for the deep lines in his face and the white hair that seemed somehow premature.

"It seems quite clear at this point, does it not? But the Yard thought of that, too, and no stone was left

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unturned that might yield evidence against Edward. It is not easy to fool the Yard, Mr. Riker. He refused to help the police, but he in no way hindered them, and in the end they gave it up. It left him a crushed man. He rarely spoke to anyone and went about like a man in a dream. So you see we really do not know what did——"

He checked himself and continued quickly.

"There is not much more to tell, so be patient. You must be frightfully bored."

Boredom was far from me at the moment!

"During my search for Robert, or in the years that followed it I never saw my older brother. Then one winter that I happened to be spending in my London quarters I received a telegram from him summoning me to spend Christmas with him. It was a bit of a shock for I had had no replies to my letters to him and it was quite common gossip that no one was welcome at the Manor. However, I left at once for what had once been our home—Burnleigh Manor."

He stopped and I noticed his face was slowly paling. From this point on I do not believe he was conscious of my presence in the cabin. He was feeling the relief of unburdening in speech a horrible memory that had been pent up within too long.

"It had been snowing for two days, but when I stepped down from the train at King's Lynn it was a clear, cold, starry night. The station was deserted. There was no sign of a waiting car, and believing that my telegram in reply had not reached the Manor I stepped over to the

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Inn to secure a conveyance. I will pass over that if you do not mind, by simply saying that there was no one in the town who would drive me to Burnleigh Manor and no one who would tell me why they would not. So I walked those long, cold miles through the snow."

The howl of the wind at the port-hole and the creak of the ship as it rolled made a fitting accompaniment.

"I could never describe to you my feelings as I came toward my brother's gates. They hung open on dilapidated hinges, but not a track showed in the snow. The Lodge was dark and empty—most of its windows broken—its door standing ajar. The shrubbery had grown up in wild disarray as if nature were making an effort to hide its shame. I started up the long, winding drive. I could now hear the pounding of the sea on the cliffs beyond and below. Above the bare trees with their crooked arms the two towers of the Manor lifted themselves into the sky like two sentinels guarding the nothing that was left. Below them was the black dismal bulk of the house with not a light showing. So far there had not been a single indication that would lead me to believe that a living soul was within miles of the place. I began to wonder if the telegram had not been a hoax or a trap to lure me to this lonesome end of the World. The drive ended at the terrace steps and not a footmark marred the snow even here. As I approached the big front doors I saw that there *was* a dim light somewhere in the hall. Weary and cold, with a heart torn by grief and evil foreboding, I knocked. Nothing but hollow

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echoes that reverberated across the great hall and went rambling through the gallery and the rooms above answered my rapping. Again I knocked and again only the echo answered me. Reluctantly my cold hands turned the handles and I pushed the doors open before me. There, facing me, seated at an old table piled high with indiscriminate looking refuse and with a dingy oil lamp at his side, sat my brother. His shaking hand held a revolver leveled in my direction. He was emaciated—shrunken beyond belief and sat huddled down in a pile of rugs and blankets that looked filthy. At sight of me he dropped the gun to his lap and burst out in a gale of cackling laughter.

" 'So it is you, brother dear? Come in—come in—and welcome to Burnleigh Manor! What a sorry welcome I did give you but'—he held his finger cautiously to his lips and whispered—'but I should have known that ghosts do not have to *open* doors!'

"And he gave another of those horrible cackling laughs. I realized that I was dealing with a man who was stark, raving mad—a physical derelict with an insane pilot—my own brother. I shuddered and those darting eyes of his detected it.

" 'Keep your coat on—it is cold in here—cold as the—grave!'

"It was not the cold that kept me shivering. All that had in the previous years been so bright and cheery was now cold—bitter cold and damp and evil smelling. The

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great fire place that had held the blazing Yule log each year was dark and full of trash. So far I had not been able to bring myself to speak. I stood there staring stupidly at the heart-rending sight before me, conscious of the stare of his eyes that looked like the peep holes of a furnace, so glittering was the fire within him that was consuming his brain.

"'I suppose you think I am crazy? Well, I'm not. Not yet. Perhaps I will be if they do not get me first.'

"Here was something more tangible to work on and for the first time since I entered, I spoke.

"'If *who* does not—get you—Edward?'

"'The ghosts. Laugh, if you wish, but you will hear them.'

"His hands that had been lying quietly over the revolver in his lap began to twitch, and he moved his head from side to side with an odd jerky motion. Stepping quickly to his side I patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"'Do not speak of such things! There are no ghosts except those we make for ourselves. The real truth of the matter is that you are too much alone here. Where are the servants?'

"Again he gave that laugh that was weirdly devoid of mirth.

"'They couldn't stand it. I am the only one with nerve enough to stay in this ghastly place. So there are no ghosts, eh Cecil?'

"Just then the clock struck the first note of midnight

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and a look of abject terror came over my brother's face. Half rising from his chair he spoke in a whisper that ended in a shriek.

"'No ghosts you say? Then listen—listen—LISTEN! Good God—why can't she rest?'

"The clock ceased striking and I turned quickly toward the stairs. I could hear the soft footsteps of someone descending them. Believing the dim light of the hall prevented me from seeing who it was, I stepped to the first tread and looked up. The step came nearer and nearer—the stealthy tread of someone tip-toeing down, but as yet I could see no one. I remember spreading my arms completely across the first part of the stairs in the belief that if for some peculiarity of the lighting I was prevented from viewing whoever it was, they certainly could not get past me. I heard my brother moaning in his chair. The footsteps came closer and closer and then they *passed* me and I saw and felt no one. Whoever it was had slipped by me without my arms or body impeding their progress. I followed the sound of the steps, fighting for a rational explanation of the inability of my eyes to descern the figure—across the hall—to the front door. Then Edward shrieked at me.

"'No ghosts, eh? She walked through you—*through* you—do you hear what I say? Don't open that door! DON'T OPEN THAT DOOR!'

"Then he fell back in his chair in what I took to be a faint. Closing the door again I rushed to his side. He revived rapidly for one so terribly weakened and I be-

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lieve he was entirely rational when he opened his eyes and looked up at me. It was a pathetic moment, Riker, for the look he gave me was that of a strong man hopelessly beaten—that of a man who was dreadfully, dreadfully tired.

" 'Cecil, I leave it all to you. I can go on no longer. Promise me that you will never live here, nor allow anyone else to do so. It will make of you what you see me tonight, and I know that you did not find me a pretty sight.' "

The cigarette had gone out in Cecil Burnleigh's hand. His head was bent—chin resting on his chest and at intervals a tremor would pass over him as if he were chilled. His eyes were closed and I knew that it was to keep me from seeing the pain in their sombre depths. He was forcing himself to go on now, and the words fell from his lips in a meticulously metered flow.

"Then, muffled by the rugs, there was the sound of a revolver shot and Edward's head fell forward. He had shot himself as I watched—his movements hidden by the blankets he had gathered about his shrunken frame. As I closed the doors of the Hall to go for the assistance I knew to be useless, it was with the realization that another tragedy had been added to the already too long roll against the name of Burnleigh Manor."

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CHAPTER THREE

I SAT literally frozen to my chair during his recital of that last Christmas Eve at Burnleigh Manor. As I watched him I was convinced that he was not as old as he appeared, but that whatever was behind this family's disasters had laid its withering hand on him also and that it was slowly and inevitably pushing him before it. He intercepted my glance and misunderstood it.

"No, I do not want you to think I believe in disembodied spirits wandering about in the dark, Riker. I have told you honestly what happened. Something passed me on those stairs without my seeing it or feeling it, but there is some rational explanation for it somewhere. At least—but suppose I finish the little that is left of my story before we get into a psychic discussion? The next day I buried my brother and I had Burnleigh Manor boarded up so that it was impossible for anyone to enter. It has stood that way for years, at least I thought it had until I received this letter from my solicitors three weeks ago."

He handed me a letter that had been lying on the table between us, and I read it.

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"Lord Cecil,—

In accordance with your instructions we have had our man living in the Lodge of Burnleigh Manor. A few days ago he reported to us that he had found foot-prints leading to the doors of the Manor itself, but none returning therefrom. We immediately had the boarding examined and found that it had unquestionably not been disturbed. However, wishing to be sure that your interests were fully safeguarded, we had sufficient planking removed from the front door, and entered. No one was found on the premises, but on checking with our careful inventory as of the day of closing the building, we found two volumes to be missing from the library table. We also found conclusive evidence that some one had been in the library more than once since the Manor was boarded up. There were fresh muddy footprints as well as what seemed to be dried ones of other visits. The manner of entrance and exit is a mystery to us and before taking any further steps we would like instructions from you.

Our man also reports some peculiar circumstances which we feel certain can be readily explained. Believe us when we say that it is with the greatest reluctance that this matter is brought to your attention.

Faithfully yours,
BURBECK & BRIGGS"

Burnleigh had been watching my face as I read it and the instant I glanced up he spoke.

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"And so you see, Mr. Riker, we not only have someone who is able to come down a stair remaining invisible, but who can also walk through boarded windows and doors leaving footprints going in but none coming out."

The smile on his lips was not matched by the light in his eyes.

"What instructions did you give to your solicitors?"

"I asked them to make doubly sure that the boarding was secure and undisturbed. Nothing further was to be done until they heard from me. I have not communicated with them since that time."

I laid the letter back on the table.

"These—these peculiar circumstances mentioned in the letter—what were they?"

"Inasmuch as I took steamer for your country a few days after I received that letter I know nothing about it."

He leaned toward me over the table and his eyes had an arresting glitter.

"Mr. Riker, as long as Burnleigh Manor slept quietly, I was content to let it sleep. It would seem as if it had laid down its challenge once more—these events have a mysterious undertone—and I, as the last of the Burnleighs, do not intend to let it go unanswered. That is where you enter the affair—if you wish."

It impressed me as a typical case for one of the superhuman, master-mind individuals so prevalent in our mystery novels today, rather than a task for a person specializing in the rebuilding of ordinary houses into hab-

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itable homes. I said as much, and was met with a slow shake of the head.

"Off hand it might seem to be a job for Scotland Yard, but I know it is not. While I have not been near the Manor since the day it was boarded up, it has been a rare moment when it has not been on my mind. The more thought I have put on it the more firmly have I become convinced that the explanation of everything that has seemed so—unusual—lies in that old house itself. It was there, dormant, for anyone who searched to find. Now it is not dormant—it is alive again. I intend to answer its challenge by myself if necessary. The issue is between that building and myself—a building that holds a secret I now want to know—a structure of stone and mortar with a definite personality to me. Is it not natural then, that I should secure the assistance of a man who knew houses—who could at a glance tell more about its character and construction than I would know after years of study?"

He sank back in his chair and his fingers drummed nervously on its arm. I knew he was not through speaking so I held my peace.

"I also wanted someone who was young and who was not steeped in the traditions and the legends of the place. I wanted someone who will, if necessary, tear it stone from stone until it yields its secret—or until it is proven that I am an old man with foolish notions and a perfectly normal ancestral home. Above all, I need a man

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of courage who can look peculiar things in the face and explain them away naturally and rationally."

The last half hour had certainly changed the complexion of the whole affair to a remarkable degree. I was still in a sort of haze into which the story I had just heard had plunged me. How did I know that I could handle any such commission as this weird one? I could certainly take a house apart for him "stone from stone" with a certain amount of intelligence but——

"I think I can understand your viewpoint, Lord Cecil, and yet houses do not make muddy footprints—nor do ghosts for that matter, although my experience in that line has been decidedly limited. I am still of the opinion that you can find better hands than mine to help you."

He looked at me for a moment or two through the smoke of a new cigarette, and then nodding his head as if satisfied on some point he had been considering, went on.

"With equal logic I might point out to you that people do not walk into an ordinary house that is securely boarded up, leaving tracks of their entrance, but no outgoing ones. I do not wish to urge you in the least, for I have no way of knowing what I am asking you to get involved in, but please bear in mind that the Yard has had its chance and retired without throwing light on the matter. I am now convinced it was because they confined themselves to *people*. If you will recall it was the Manor that my brother warned me against—not any living person. I intend to find out all there is to know

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about the Manor, and then rebuild into it the closest approximation of its former splendor that your judgment recommends."

He exhaled a cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

"And I hoped that you might be interested."

It was hardly a question of interest and I told him as much. I was fascinated by the whole aspect, but the realization of just what I had been employed to do bowled me over somewhat and left me rather skeptical of the entire commission. His assurance that in any case the place was to be rebuilt brought back some of my enthusiasm. There was an obstinate doubt in my mind of the legitimacy of the affair and I decided to clear up one point that did not seem to fit in with the explanations to date.

"If you are so certain that the explanation of it all lies entirely with the house, why all the secrecy in connection with this trip? You do not expect Burnleigh Manor to spy on us here on the boat, do you?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"Hardly, and I am delighted that you brought it up. It indorses my judgment in selecting a technically trained mind accustomed to looking at facts squarely and analyzing them. I most certainly have not permitted myself to go to the extreme of feeling that I am being watched by the Manor, nor do I feel that it made the footprints. I do not believe my brother was alone in the house the night he killed himself even though he was so sure of it himself. Someone besides outselves is interested in

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what the old place holds. Their interest is a compelling one, for on the gates is a sign informing all trespassers that the deputy stationed there has received orders to shoot on sight. Their errand cannot be even partially legal or they would have applied to me for permission to enter. I have had other indications that I will tell you about later. It is relatively certain that I was followed on my trip over—at least to the boat. I wished to be certain that I was not being followed back before we were seen together or our identities known to the other passengers. I preferred that our mission at Burnleigh Manor be unknown to any competitors we might have until the last possible moment. So I 'hid my threat' as you Americans say, in a stateroom until I felt it was safe to bring him out. From now on the ban is lifted."

That certainly was plausible enough to satisfy anyone. I even was conscious of a feeling of irritation that anyone was to lay hands on the place before I could get at it. The realization that they had a clear field at the present moment was especially annoying. Burnleigh's face was expressionless. He was watching for my reaction.

"Well, your competitors seem to have somewhat of a head start."

He nodded quickly.

"Indeed, yes. They seem to know a lot about the place too, but if they had found that for which they were searching they would not be returning now. One thing over which I have pondered and which still re-

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mains a puzzle to me, is the fact of their silence and inactivity for all these intervening years."

As he wearily leaned toward me I noticed for the first time the tremendous cost of his narration. His face was chalk white and his eyes had sunken into his head.

"Perhaps you would like to think this over quietly by yourself, Mr. Riker, and let me have your decision in the morning. There are two days more before we dock."

My answer to that was a surprise to myself.

"Not at all. I haven't the least idea of backing down. Frankly I think it is much ado about nothing, and I am anxious to begin the reconstruction work."

He was unquestionably delighted and relieved by my attitude and proffered me another cigarette as a tacit invitation to stay with him a bit longer. As a matter of fact I had no desire to go back to my cabin. I am the sort of person that reads a "thriller" with a supercilious and tolerant smile and with much mental "tush-tushing" and then leaps wildly out of his chair with hair literally on end when the clock strikes. I much preferred sitting with him and discussing the necessary details and plans of procedure to returning to my empty cabin that would surely be dark.

It was the "wee small hours" when we said goodnight and I was much too tired then to do anything but crawl into bed and sleep soundly. However, I was somewhat chagrined and much ashamed to find, when I awoke the next morning, that I had left the light burning in my cabin all night!

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