

INSPIRED BY THE REAL-LIFE QUEEN OF CRIME, AGATHA CHRISTIE

Aspiring writer Aggie Morton is eager to spend the holidays at Owl Park, an enormous manor house in the country.

Owl Park holds many delights, including a troupe of travelling actors, glamorous visitors from Ceylon, a secret passage and an emerald with a curse! Aggie refuses to believe there's anything to the superstition, until she discovers a body instead of presents on Christmas morning.

Aggie and her friend Hector must put their deductive skills and imaginations to work and find a murderer on the loose . . .



A CBC Books' Best Middle Grade Book of the Year

'Wit, character and warmth'

TORONTO STAR



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AGGIE MORTON
MYSTERY QUEEN

PERIL AT
OWL PARK

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AGGIE MORTON

MYSTERY QUEEN

PERIL AT OWL PARK



MARTHE JOCELYN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISABELLE FOLLATH

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Historical Novel Society

AGGIE MORTON

MYSTERY QUEEN

PERIL AT OWL PARK

MARTHE JOCELYN

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FOR ROBIN, CAT, AND EMMA,
NICK, AND KAREN,
BELOVED COUSINS

DECEMBER 23, 1902
TUESDAY



CHAPTER I

AN OMINOUS ARRIVAL

MY SISTER'S NEW HOME was named Owl Park, a manor house surrounded by gardens and woods that were possibly full of owls. Dotted among the gracious old trees were a gazebo and a maze and a pond where swans floated during the summer months. Marjorie's new husband was ever so nice, even with being a lord. James was the sort of person who liked having extra children come for Christmas. Not the sort of person who would invite a murderer on purpose.

James and Marjorie's wedding had been at Owl Park in September this year, but now was my first real visit, and Grannie Jane's as well. Despite being fairly ancient—more than sixty-six years old—Grannie had nobly offered to ride backward in the coach from the rail station, letting

Hector and me have a window each. She knew we liked to spy on the world, ever since our great cleverness in solving a mystery several weeks ago. She had become nearly as fond of Hector as I was, as he came for tea most days when his school was done, and made us laugh and showed off his good manners. Our teas were also more delicious than what he'd get as a boarder at the vicarage.

Snow began to whirl as our coach rumbled up the drive, dancing flakes making the stone chimneys and gabled windows look as if they belonged on a picture postcard.

"I wonder if the ice on the pond is thick enough for skating?" I said.

Hector blinked in alarm. "I am hoping not," he said.

"*You* needn't go skating," I assured him. "But some of us might like to try, if the pond cooperates. You needn't do anything you don't want for this whole week!"

Except for the one dire thing that I did not say out loud. Hector and I both would be having Christmas without a mother or a father beside us. Hector's parents and little sister, Genevie, were kept far away in Belgium by his father's work. My mother was at home in Torquay, flattened by sadness because my Papa, my beloved Papa, had been dead for nearly one whole year. She would finish full mourning in January, but it was not considered correct for a widow to travel or participate in merry festivities until the proper amount of time had gone by.

Hector stared solemnly out the window, one finger idly doodling in the condensation upon the pane. Was he feeling lonely? Was he nervous about staying in a fancy house, with everyone a stranger except for Grannie Jane and me? I would have my sister and James, but Hector would have only me.

“Lucy will be here too,” I said. “She’s not eleven yet, but very jolly and not shy at all.”

Lucy’s mother was my sister’s husband’s sister. That made us cousins of a sort, I was pretty certain. On the day when Marjorie married James in September, Lucy and I were flower girls, dressed like twins in white muslin dresses with wide sashes of blue satin. Marjorie had written that Lucy was *panting* to meet me again.

Our coach swung around in front of the arched and columned entrance of Owl Park.

“Well, well,” said Grannie Jane. “A royal welcome.”

The servants were in a formal line by the entryway, each facing forward like guards at Buckingham Palace. Marjorie and James waited on the flagstones next to the row of dark liveries and white aprons.

Marjorie began waving with both hands. I pushed up the window to wave wildly back.

Grannie Jane clucked her tongue and quietly scolded. “Your sister is behaving like a schoolgirl. No surprise that James’s mother is attempting to adjust her deportment.”

We'd had letters full of woe about Marjorie's efforts to become a proper lady of the manor, and mostly falling short of her mother-in-law's high standards.

"Only because I miss her!" I said. "We've not seen her for nearly two months, since just after Mrs. Eversham's murder. I expect she behaves like a lady most of the time." I fiddled with the door handle the instant the coach came to a stop. Grannie put a hand upon my arm.

"Do not blunder down, Agatha. Allow the footman to assist. For Marjorie's sake, you must show that you've had a tiny amount of breeding—"

A man wearing dark livery, with a nose pink-tipped from the cold, opened my door from the outside. I flashed him a smile, used his shoulder as a vaulting pole, and leapt to the ground to be scooped into my sister's arms. James was right behind her, adding his arms to the embrace.

Grannie Jane descended, more gracefully than I had, and then Hector hopped down to be welcomed by Marjorie and introduced to James. Every person I liked best in the world—except for Mummy and my dog, Tony—was standing right here in a circle.

"Come in, come in, let's get you out of the cold," said James, giving one arm to Grannie and the other to me. "Mother is waiting to greet you."

"Must the servants catch their deaths on our account?" said Grannie Jane.

“Don’t worry about the servants, Mrs. Morton,” said James. “They come from hardy stock.”

Blue-lipped and shivery stock, I thought. *As cold as penguins cast away on an iceberg. As cold as explorers seeking the North Pole. As cold as puppies stranded in a snowbank.*

“I know it seems barbaric,” said Marjorie, “but it’s been done this way for centuries, to honor visitors. I’m afraid you’ll find that we bump up against tradition rather a lot at Owl Park.”

The door to the manor was held open by a gaunt man in a fine black coat, who gazed somewhere over our heads.

“Thank you, Pressman.” James led Grannie in, as Marjorie slid an arm around my shoulder.

“Please appear to be sweet and docile with James’s mother, if you can,” she whispered in a rush. “To fend off her snippy rebukes.”

I hardly listened because we’d arrived in the Great Hall and paused in front of an enormous crackling fire to see how Christmas had already come to Owl Park. A yew tree stood in the center of the hall, its boughs festooned with gold foil bows and paper cornucopias of nuts and sweets. Candles clipped to every branch burned like stars against the dark green branches.

The Dowager Lady Greyson waited beside it, with an indigo cashmere shawl wrapped tightly about her narrow shoulders. She looked nearly as old as Grannie

Jane, with a long nose and a mouth pinched into a button.

I'd practiced my curtsy all week and was pleased at how well I managed. But instead of a polite greeting, I found myself mumbling under her severe inspection. Hector, however, performed his expert bow, and Lady Greyson's face brightened as if she'd seen a butterfly open its wings. Lucy hovered beside her grandmother, trying to catch my eye and grinning.

"Do stop jiggling, Lucy!" said Lady Greyson, before turning to Grannie Jane. "Do you do stairs?" Her accent was the most imperious I'd ever heard. Rather like meeting the Queen. Except that Queen Victoria was dead now, and it was her son, Edward, who ruled as King.

"Slowly but surely," said Grannie Jane.

"I understand you've come without your maid," said Lady Greyson. "I believe we're meant to lend you one." She began to climb the steps as Marjorie swooped in for a whisper.

"Sorry, Grannie," she said. "She's a trial. But if anyone can stand up to her, it's you."

"I am not the one who needs to do that." Grannie Jane gathered her skirts for the hike up what looked like two hundred marble stairs. "But that is the topic of a later conversation."

"I'll come up with you," said Marjorie. "Lucy, you'll

look after Aggie and Hector, won't you? Perhaps a tour of the ground floor? There is just time before the dressing bell rings. Hurry when you hear it, and put on your best things. You mustn't be late."

I groaned. Getting dressed for dinner was one aspect of the holiday that I dreaded. Mummy had made such a fuss about me having proper dresses, and Gracious Manners to go with them.

Marjorie gave me a little push. "Count yourself lucky that James's mother has agreed that you may be at table with the adults this evening and not up in the nursery eating buns and hot milk."

"We'll be ready, Aunt Marjorie," Lucy said. "It's *fun* getting dressed for dinner. Grandmamma says I may wear her pearl necklace. I have a lovely neck, she says." She lifted her chin and swished her plaits over her shoulders so that we could appreciate her loveliness.

"Positively swan-like, Lucy," said Marjorie. "We have more visitors arriving any minute, so I shall be right back. Mr. Lakshay Sivam is a good chum of James from university. As it turns out, I knew his wife at school. No hijinks, I beg of you. They will be weary from their travels."

Lucy smiled as brightly as sunshine. "No hijinks before dinner, we promise, Aunt Marjorie."

Marjorie shot her a pretend glare and hurried after Grannie.

Lucy didn't pause to shake hands or be polite with hello-how-are-you. She threw her arms around me and squeezed until I squeaked, much friendlier than I expected after one day's acquaintance as flower girls. Finally, she let me breathe so that I could say, *Hullo*, this is Hector, and he made his little Belgian bow and said *Enchanté*, and Lucy stared. He was wearing a smart new coat that I'm certain the vicar's wife had purchased before our excursion, not wishing anyone to accuse her of neglecting the boy in her care.

"Aunt Marjorie said you were foreign," said Lucy to Hector. "I didn't know if that meant brown or peculiar."

"If this is the only choice," said Hector, "it is logical to deduce that I am peculiar."

Lucy clapped her hands. "Yes! Let's all be peculiar, shall we? Uncle James's foreign friend was born in Ceylon. He has just come back on a sailing ship from visiting there, though, really, he and his wife live in Hampstead like normal people. Won't this be a Christmas unlike any other?"

Hector raised an eyebrow and I tried to raise one back, a trick I had not yet mastered. It would indeed be a Christmas like no other.

"We're sleeping up in the nursery suite," said Lucy. "All the way at the top. It's not so babyish as it sounds because I'm here without my nanny, thank goodness.

There's a new baby at my house. His name is Robert Phillip Charles Chatsworth. I shall call him Robin. Or possibly Bobbo. My mother got sick after the baby came, even though she wishes with all her heart to be at Owl Park for Christmas. She let me come, though, because she hasn't much energy and says I use up most of it. Nanny stayed at home to help with the baby. She very likely may never be *my* nanny again! I am *free*! Utterly free!" Lucy spun in a circle and swooped her arms like a giant heron attempting a takeoff.

"My nursemaid is not here either," I said, without imitating a heron. "Charlotte has gone to visit her mother, in Scunthorpe." I imagined their Christmas would be wholesome and educational, alphabetizing spice jars or translating carols from the original German.

"Shall we not bring with us the luggage?" said Hector.

"Don't be silly." Lucy waved a hand. "The footmen will do that. This place is simply buzzing with servants, and Grandmamma hired extras for the holidays. She always does."

Hector and I exchanged another look. At the vicarage there was only a cook, and a maid for the rough work, laying the fires and doing laundry and such. It was the same at my own house, Groveland. After Papa died, it turned out that we didn't have enough money and had to let the servants go except Mrs. Corner, who still did our

cooking, and Sally, who did everything else. There'd been a gardener, but he was gone now too.

Lucy watched as Grannie Jane's skirt disappeared around the curve of the staircase above us. "Old ladies are so slow to climb steps!" She turned to us with shining eyes. "Now!" she said. "Tell me every little thing about the murder."

A picture of the corpse under the piano flew across my mind, as it had too often since finding Mrs. Eversham. I could not fault Lucy for her curiosity. Being a person with what my mother called a Morbid Preoccupation, I'd have been agog to hear the tale if I hadn't lived through it myself. But it did seem a bit bold for our opening conversation.

"Perhaps," said Hector, gently, "such a story will wait until we have an interlude of time to ourselves."

"If you say so." Lucy did not appear in the least offended. "Later, in the nursery, we'll have a fire and you'll tell the whole gruesome story and scare my hair off!"

At that moment came the chug of a machine from somewhere down the drive. James and Marjorie appeared on the landing, assuming it to be their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Sivam. We all rushed outside to see what could be coming.

The servants hurried behind us to restore their greeting formation.

"Aah," breathed Hector.

“A horseless carriage!” squealed Lucy.

It came up the drive with its motor humming like an enormous insect, flashing yellow wheels, its passengers enveloped in furs. The driver appeared to struggle with the steering, or perhaps the rubber rims on the tires did not meet well with the frosted surface of the road. The vehicle skidded when coming to a stop, causing the row of servants to jump back like a flock of frightened chickens.

“It is a model of the electric variety,” said Hector. “Very popular for city driving, and no need for a hand crank to start the engine.”

“Let’s watch from inside,” said Lucy. “It’s too cold out here.”

Within a minute we were perched on a window seat in the breakfast room, happily nestled on damask cushions instead of shivering on the doorstep like the frostbitten servants.

A footman tugged uselessly on the handle of the door beside Mrs. Sivam. Her husband hurried around from the driver’s side to show how it was done. He assisted his wife in stepping down. They both wore fur coats nearly to their ankles and a bearskin rug was tossed across the back of the seat.

“The vehicle is entirely open to the wind and snow!” said Hector. “They must dress like bears to survive the journey.” He shuddered.

“And they’ve been visiting the tropics!” I said. “England must feel like an Arctic wasteland.”

“He has an excellent mustache!” said Hector.

“She looks like the Snow Queen,” I said. “Her hair is like . . .” *Spun gold? A cloud in the dawn sky? Lemon meringues?*

James introduced Marjorie to his old friend, and Marjorie introduced her school chum to James. Everyone seemed very jolly. Marjorie and Mrs. Sivam, arm in arm, paused to meet Mrs. Frost, the housekeeper, and Pressman, the butler.

“The Sivams didn’t bring their servants either,” said Lucy, “because of traveling. They need to borrow also.”

“There is a trouble with the motorcar.” Hector pointed. Mr. Pressman and the footmen were all shaking their heads in response to a question from James.

“I expect it’s just that none of the servants knows how to drive,” I said. “The owner will have to park it himself.”

Mr. Sivam retrieved an ornate wooden box from the front seat and handed it carefully to James. He climbed in behind the wheel, steered the car backward in an elegant turn, and then drove out of our sight around the side of the manor. James stepped through a drift of deepening snow, carrying Mr. Sivam’s box with both hands.

“What do you suppose is in that box?” I said.

“Let’s find out!” Lucy hopped off the window seat and we did likewise.

When we came into the Great Hall, my sister was leading Mrs. Sivam up the stairs. Lucy beetled over to James before he could disappear. He showed her the box but held it out of reach of her curious fingers.

“She’s very bold,” I murmured.

“Indeed,” said Hector.

“I’ve put you in the Juliet suite,” came Marjorie’s voice from the landing, as she explained to Mrs. Sivam. “You have connecting rooms with a little balcony that overlooks the conservatory.”

Lucy bounded back to join us. James strode away toward his study, the box tucked under his elbow.

“Uncle James says that if we’re lucky, Mr. Sivam will tell us the spooky family legend about the contents of that box . . . something so precious that it has been hidden away in a bank vault for many long years. And now . . . it’s here at Owl Park!”



CHAPTER 2

A BREACH OF MANNERS

A SPOOKY FAMILY LEGEND? A precious something inside a vault for eighteen years?

But Lucy was not one to pause or ponder. She corralled us for a tour of the house.

“We’ll start with the best bits,” she said, “because we won’t have time to see the whole place now. I know everything because I’ve been here hundreds of times, visiting Grandmamma.”

I had a quick rush of gratitude that Dowager Lady Greyson was not *my* grandmother. So stiff and forbidding! Grannie Jane was nearly perfect, being quite observant about other people and often willing to answer questions.

Lucy led us speedily along a passage painted forest green and lined with portraits of many pudding-faced

ancestors. “You can look at them later,” she said. “They’ve been here for a hundred years and will likely stay another hundred. This door is the lavatory, in case you need to know that. See?” She opened it to show us a sink and a toilet in a room painted the color of a sunset. “Grandmamma might die if she knew I’d shown you a toilet.”

She explained that some of the rooms had been updated with electrical wiring, but others still were lit with gas lamps. James was all for modernizing, but Grandmamma . . . was not so eager.

“This”—Lucy tapped on a set of double doors but didn’t stop—“is the drawing room. You can see the ordinary rooms tomorrow. The drawing room, the music room, the Avon Room, the conservatory, all those and thirty more.” We went a few steps farther. “This”—she tapped on a tall, narrow door that began at waist height—“is the drawing room wood cupboard.” It was painted the same dark green as the wall, only a small knob making it visible.

“What, please, is a wood cupboard?” Hector asked.

Lucy paused her march and opened the door to show us rows of neatly stacked logs. “The servants fill the cupboard from out here in the passage,” she explained, “so they don’t disturb the family and guests. There’s a door on the other side, next to the fireplace, so Uncle James—or whoever—can add wood to the fire when we need it. Do you not have them where you come from?”

“Not in any house I know,” said Hector, “but is most ingenious.”

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” said Lucy, “and see if we can swipe a biscuit. This way!”

Lucy thundered ahead of us around a corner, chattering long past when we could distinguish her words.

I glanced at Hector.

“She *is* a bit much, isn’t she?” I whispered.

He lifted one eyebrow and then the other, making me laugh.

“She’s only ten,” I said.

“And I am pleased,” he said, “to think of biscuits.”

Lucy’s head popped back around the corner. “Are you coming?”

Yes, we were coming.



“This,” said Lucy, “is the kitchen!” She opened the baize door that separated the main house—the Upstairs—from the domain of the servants—the Downstairs—though it was really only four stairs in this case. The kitchen was on the ground floor, not in a basement the way it often is in a town house. The room we came into was the actual kitchen, with a big fire, and the ovens, the sinks and worktables. Stepping from the quiet passage to the buzzing

world within was like arriving at a village fete. Girls in caps and aprons chopped vegetables and stirred soup; a footman polished cutlery; another footman, very blond, came whistling in from the courtyard with a block of ice wrapped in a towel; a boy a bit younger, and certainly skinnier than we were, sat on a stool near the fire rubbing the toe of a man's boot to a high sheen. The cook, Mrs. Hornby, had a row of featherless dead birds on the table in front of her, while a scullery maid frantically plucked another.

The servants' hall, where they ate their meals, was a second room that mirrored the kitchen, with windows the length of the dividing wall, so that anyone sitting at the table in the hall could see what was happening in the kitchen.

"There's the pantry over there," said Lucy, "where some of the food is stored. And the butler's pantry there . . ." She pointed. "Where Mr. Pressman has his headquarters and locks up things that no one's meant to touch. Scullery's in there, bakehouse is out in the courtyard, same as ice and wood and coal. Mrs. Frost's sitting room is that one. She and Mr. Pressman are the head servants, like king and queen of Downstairs."

"Well, I'm queen of the kitchen," said Cook, "and I'm telling you that no one is welcome to hang about gawking. We're making your dinner and we'll thank you to move along."

“Have you got any biscuits, *dear* Mrs. Hornby?” said Lucy.

“There’s squashed flies in the jar, Miss Lucy,” said Mrs. Hornby. “And that’s all before your supper. Now get along out of my hair.”

“Better than nothing, I suppose.” Lucy pouted but I could see it was all for show. She reached for the porcelain cookie jar with eager hands.

“Squashed flies?” Hector murmured, looking miserable. “An English specialty?”

“A delicacy,” I whispered. “Much more difficult to catch than ants.”

Lucy removed the lid and offered the open jar to Hector. He waved his hand with a polite “Non, merci,” before Lucy and I laughed.

“They’re having you on,” called the boot-polishing boy. “It’s not real flies in there, only currants. Go on! Try one!”

Hector bravely nibbled at a corner. Then he bowed to Mrs. Hornby. “My first squashed fly!” he said. “A memorable occasion.”

A clock chimed the quarter hour in sharp notes. The cook pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket to wipe the perspiration from her face.

“Nearly time for the dressing bell,” she said.

Lucy tugged me toward the stairs. Hector caught my hand and off we galloped, through the green baize door,

along a passage and then another passage until Lucy took us into a dim room. Tall windows were draped with graceful swaths of a pale lavender silk that seemed to reflect the snow outside.

“This is the morning room,” said Lucy. “The fire’s not lit because it’s not morning. Only Aunt Marjorie ever comes in here, to write her letters or to give servants their orders. Grandmamma does letters in her bedroom now that she’s so old. This room is very pretty when the sun is shining.”

“Let’s come back in the morning,” I said, with a shiver.

“Wait!” said Lucy. Her voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. “*This* is where the real tour begins.”

She hurried across the carpet to an ornate cabinet standing against the wall. On the upper shelves, behind a paned glass door, were rows of teapots. None was the ordinary sort that a person might find in a kitchen. No Brown Bettys here. They were shaped like cats and temples, elfin heads and beehives. A matching pair of elephants with raised trunks that worked as spouts. The glazes were Japanese red and glimmering gold, ancient green and cobalt blue.

“These are beautiful,” I said. “May we come back when there is light and heat? To look properly?”

“We’re not here for the silly old teapots,” said Lucy. With a flourish, she turned the handle on one of the lower drawers.

The entire cabinet seemed suddenly to sigh. It swung away from the wall, a thick, oversized door, so quietly and gently that the teapots barely trembled.

“Ohh!”

A secret passage!

We gaped at the entrance to a tunnel, as black and uninviting as a coal chute. *Like the throat of an ogre. Like the opening to a cave that promised a colony of bats . . .*

“May we go in?” said Hector.

“That’s why we’re here!” Lucy grinned as if she’d built it herself. “There’s a torch . . . just . . . here.” She retrieved it from a ledge and pressed the button on its side. “The battery’s quite low, but it will get us there and back.”

“Where is *there*?” said Hector. “If I may ask?”

“Just follow me,” said Lucy. “It’s narrow, but you don’t need to bend over. Even Uncle James can nearly stand up. He’s the one who showed me this, on my tenth birthday. No one else knows, Uncle James says, now that his father’s dead, not even Grandmamma. Not even my mother, because it was meant to be for boys only.” Worry flashed across her face. “I hope he doesn’t regret showing me, now that I have a baby brother.”

“You’ll be the one to show Robert,” I assured her.

“But not for ten more years,” Lucy said.

She stepped blithely into the passage, the torch beam fluttering like the flight of a lightning bug. I followed,

expecting cobwebs to hit my face. Hector came behind, both of us shuffling in the near dark.

“Pull the cabinet shut, will you, Hector?” said Lucy. “We can’t have a maid coming in and finding it!”

“Ugh, Lucy!” I said. “It’s shining right into my eyes.”

“Sorry!” The light swooped down.

Hector ran his hand along the edge of the door, groping for something to hold onto without smashing his fingers.

“It’s higher than you’d expect,” said Lucy. “Shaped like the handle of a suitcase.”

“I have it now.” We were plunged into night with a wheezing thud. The weak shaft of light from Lucy’s torch made a circle the size of an orange on the floor.

“Don’t be bothered if the light goes out,” said Lucy. “I know the way. Keep one hand on the wall and stay close. It’s not far, but we need to be *very* quiet. If we can hear them, you know they can hear us.”

“They?” I said.

“You’ll see,” said Lucy. “Now *ssh*, and follow me.”

We inched forward. I rather wished I could hold one of her plaits for guidance. Instead, I told a story in my head, making us as brave as brave.

Only the long-lost sarcophagus of an Egyptian pharaoh, studded with gems and gleaming with gold, could make this fearsome venture worth the risk. A noise ahead sent a shudder through the small, courageous company of explorers. What

might be moving in such a place as this? A colony of ravening bats? Or ghosts, perhaps? The phantom remains of travelers who had come before, lost and starved to death in the perilous underground maze—

“I’m going to turn off the light,” Lucy whispered, “to save what little is left.”

Click. I blinked several times but could see nothing. I reached out a finger to touch the folds of Lucy’s dress in front of me. Her voice sounded hollow when it came out of the dark.

“There’s a corner just ahead, and then—*oof*—watch it, right turn here.”

We’d inched around the sharp bend when Lucy paused again, her words hushed. “The passage has spy-holes into two different rooms. We’ll stop at the first, where the study is, because the men are always there before the dressing bell rings. Absolute silence, right?”

I should not have been surprised at the word *spy*. The purpose of a passage is to lead a person somewhere. And the purpose of a *secret* passage is that no one knows you’re there. Lucy squeezed herself aside to let me have the first go. She nudged my face into alignment before a narrow slot where I had quite a good view of one slice of James’s study.

James stood behind his desk, laughing as he poured amber liquid from a decanter into three glasses on a tray.

I was so close that I could hear the ice clinking as it shifted. No wonder Lucy had warned us to be quiet! James handed a drink to Mr. Sivam, who sat in front of the desk on an upright chair. Mr. Sivam passed it along to another man whose back was to me and then accepted a glass for himself. The other man was old, I saw, because what little hair he had was gray and tufty, poking out around drooping ears.

“A toast!” James lifted his glass. “To new friends and old.”

“To renewed family honor,” said Mr. Sivam, raising his glass in return.

“Hear, hear!” agreed the other man, slurping his drink.

“Dr. Musselman,” murmured Lucy, into my ear. “Grandmamma’s physician. So dull!”

“You were saying, Lakshay?” said James. “Your intentions for . . .” He tapped the carved box that sat beside the ice bucket on his desk.

Mr. Sivam sighed. “My wife and I differ on this matter, but I feel duty bound . . . to correct a historic wrong, I suppose, by returning the treasure to its original home.”

Lucy poked me. “*Treasure!*” she whispered. “Give Hector a turn.”

Reluctantly, I traded places. Luckily, the voices were still audible even when not watching. I pressed my ear to the wall, not wanting to miss a single word.

“*Honor* is a personal matter,” said James. “We each of us knows what feels right, but it can be difficult to uphold when others declare us mistaken.”

“Yes, yes,” said the doctor. “Whole wars are fought to avenge honor. I could tell you tales that would make your blood run cold.”

“Perhaps not now, Dr. Musselman,” said James, quickly. “Would you like to keep your treasure secure inside my safe, Lakshay?”

“A safe is the first place a thief would look,” muttered Dr. Musselman.

“I thank you for understanding, gentlemen,” said Mr. Sivam. “The notion of a curse is absurd, but I am compelled to return what does not belong to me. Until then, I shall keep it near me at all times, and guard it with my very life!”

“Hear, hear!” said the doctor.

A sudden echoing *bong* made us jump like rabbits after a gunshot. We clamped hands over our mouths to stifle the giggles and scurried back along the darkened passage.

“That was the dressing bell!” cried Lucy, as we emerged. “We have thirty minutes, and half of them will be spent climbing the stairs!” She maneuvered shut the cabinet to hide the secret passage and then rushed to the door.

“Come on!” she cried, and was gone.

“It is not calm, an English visit,” said Hector. “Here is much activity.”

“And mystery!” I said.

“Does he mention there is a curse?” Hector’s voice deepened dramatically as he quoted Mr. Sivam. “I shall guard it—”

“With my very life!” I finished.

“What can he be hiding?” said Hector.

“We are *honor bound* to find out,” I said. “But first we must dress for dinner.”