

Creaking Cellars

June winds began to blow harder across the open fields in the late afternoon. The warm moist air felt almost uncomfortable to the walking traveler, hinting an anticipated humid summer. The road was old, and the pavement broken with little tufts of grass poking out of the berm. The sun was unusually bright and casted long shadows.

It didn't take long for the traveler to make his way up the little tavern. His grizzled hand reached up to the latch and he pulled the door open.

"Justin?" Another old man came to the door to welcome the traveler in. "How are ye getting along?"

"Managing, old friend. Just managing." Justin made his way through to the bar and sat himself down on one of the old stools. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large, slight gray handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. The tavern had only a few folk, most elderly and eying the new arrival. The barkeep placed an ale in front of Justin, and Justin nodded in gratitude.

"And, what brings you here, old man? All well up at the estate?"

"Not for me to say, Calvin," he said. And after a long sip, he pulled over a small bowl of nuts. "Mind you, it has become a touch strange in these parts, though."

Calvin stopped wiping the counter and looked up at Justin. Justin had taken off his wide brimmed hat displaying a mop of sparse white hair, high cheekbones, and a knobby nose. His hands were gnarled and bent.

Seeing that Calvin had gotten his attention, Justin put his crooked finger up to his nose and said in almost a whisper: "More stuff's been happening!" Calvin looked surprised and dismayed. "I believe we have a haunting!" Justin peered over his flagon and took another draught then placed the flagon on the counter.

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"I don't believe that this is a necessary procedure for our little town," said the constable, pounding his fist on the table.

"But, Mr. Crenshaw, you have heard the accounts, we need some action to deal with this events. Surely, you don't mean to say that Justin is lying?" Stated a man in a black vest with a short beard sitting at the head of the table.

"Of course I don't want to cast doubt on Mr. Wilhelm. I am saying that we may be acting too hasty; perhaps Mr. Wilhelm heard something that could be explained naturally." He took a quick look at Justin Wilhelm. "After all, what he says could be explained by other things."

"Mr. Crenshaw, the matter is closed," he said moving the paper in front of him to a stack on the table. "I have already called the university and they sending an expert tomorrow." The governor looked up and narrowed his eyes. His reflection in the tabletop seemed to glare as well.

"Oh. I see." Barty Crenshaw stood up from the table and straightened his jacket. Anger and uncertainty clouded his expression. He moved away from the table fidgeting with the rim of his bowler.

"Barty," the governor said more softly, "this may be the thing that this town needs. We have suffered greatly, because the freeway passed us up. A good solid haunting can once again attract the tourists." Barty looked shocked at the personal tone

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and apparent frivolous view. “The expert will be able to confirm the existence and thereby attract others.”

There was a silence, then Barty lifted his head and said: “I may look in on the chap – if you do not mind.” His smile was slightly creased. The governor eyed him for a minute and then nodded.

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Barty arrived at the bus stop in time to see the bus pulling out. Except for only one traveler tending some baggage, the stop was vacant; even the ticket counter was closed. The traveler was dressed in a loose t-shirt and jeans. His straight, dirty-blond hair showed the lengthy travel.

“So, are ye the new parapsychotic?” Barty boomed grinning and with his fists in his waist.

The traveler didn't look up and notice the sardonic grin but continued to fuss over his baggage. He seemed to be looking for something. Barty let the smile fade slightly as he watched the search. After a moment, Barty tried again: “Um, excuse the intrusion, but are you...”

“Yes, my name is Dale. Dale Calwiptern,” he straightened up and extended a hand which Barty took warily. “I am the parapsychologist.” He grinned wistfully and turned back to the baggage and continued to search.

Barty, not knowing how to take the situation, rocked on his heels and fidgeted with his bowler again. The sun reflected brightly on the steam around them. He watched the completely focused quest, and then after a few minutes he cleared his throat. “Do ye mind me asking: but what are ye looking for?” The small pile of boxes and suitcases seemed to be more than any normal man would have need of when traveling. Getting no reply, he reached down and picked up a smallish box with curious knobs and a speaker.

It looked slightly outdated like it had been recycled from the WWII era. He turned it over in his hands and noticed a dial which, as indicated on a label, was a volume/on-off switch. Barty turned the knob sharply and the speaker loudly crackled, like an out of tune AM radio. Startled, he dropped the device which suddenly silenced.

Dale snapped up. “There it is!” He hopped over a box and reached down to the pick up the device. He looked it over and tried to turn it on again, but it appeared broken. Dale looked up at Barty who looked slightly chagrined.

“The thing started me! What is it anyway?” Barty objected.

“It allows me to hear ghosts. It's a ULF radio receiver, an important tool for identifying paranormal activity.”

“It shan't have hurt me, then!” His face turning redder, “What is ULF?”

“Ultra low frequency. Human voices are heard as sound between 40 and 2000 hertz. Ghosts can sometimes be heard in the same radio frequency range.” He looked at the device, a bit angry, but carefully concealed it. “This is an important tool for what laymen call ghostbusters. Now this is nothing more than scrap.” He placed on the pile of luggage. “I do have a back up in a field strength meter. It's not as useful, and I will have to repair the other one in order for it to be fully effective.”

Barty started to object, but Dale interrupted: “Look, I don't know what you

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intended, but I have a job to do. Can you call me a cab or give me a ride to the destination?"

The constable blustered a bit while Dale looked at him; then, he finally admitted that there were no taxis in their little town.

After several long and quiet, tense minutes of loading Barty's auto, the two drove away from the bus stop and along the old country road. They rode with only the slight whine of the small auto's engine for several minutes. Barty broke the silence and asked: "Would ye like to freshen up a bit before seeing the estate?"

"No, I would like to see the site, interview the owners, and set up the sensors as quickly as possible." Dale was looking around the countryside, seeing the grassy knolls and rock walls. White and gray birds flew past with straight and crooked beaks.

"Oh, then," finding himself with useful information, "you don't know that the estate has no owners. Yes, it has been vacant for a number of years with only a skeleton staff of caretakers and servants to keep it up. The owners died about 80 years ago, for fact." He glanced over at the newcomer and continued: "The town has held it's upkeep for all these years, but the moneys are getting scarce. It is very costly to keep a vacant estate running, ye know."

They were driving now in higher grounds. On the left the green fields abruptly yielded to bright white cliffs that dropped perilously straight down into the sea. Struck by the sight, Dale tried to lean out the auto's window for a better vantage. The waves on the cold-looking dark sea looked like torn edges of old fabric. Birds effortlessly popped up and dove down the sides of the cliffs.

"Watch it, man!" cried Barty when he noticed Dale. Dale leaned back in and sat down again. "Ye're not from these parts I take it?"

"Nope, I'm from America. Irvine, California, to be exact. I'm studying at the university near London."

"Ye don't sound like an American!"

Dale did not reply, he sat looking at the sights. They had turned onto a rocky dirt road that led to a large gray stone building. He had to hold on to keep from bouncing into the auto's top. He noticed that Barty had not slowed down for the new terrain, and it seemed that his side of the auto bounced a little more than the driver's side.

Soon they were at the front door and the auto stopped. Dale opened the door and made an effort to step out. His rear end ached a little. He looked around at the building. It had several paned windows, a few were boarded up. The walls looked like limestone which was carved into intricate designs, each corner and nook filled with black soot or moss. The air did not feel as welcome here as along the road: it felt cold, stale, dead.

He felt the urge to reach out to touch the wall. The patterns and designs seemed to call him. He lifted his hand and stepped forward.

"Which boxes do you want unloaded?" Dale was back from his reverie.

"Oh, um," then he stepped around to the back and said, "That one, that one, and those two." He pointed to each of the boxes. He picked up a couple himself and started to follow the constable. They walked around, the rocks crunching under their feet, to the side of the building and up to a short narrow door at the bottom of some steps. At the

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landing, Barty pulled on a short chain next to the door.

Seeing Dale's expression, Barty explained: "The servants' entrance is the only way into the estate. The front door ceased to open shortly after the death of the owners. The town has tried on many occasions to unbar the door, but it won't budge! So, here we are," he shrugged.

The door opened to show the old man, Justin Wilhelm, dressed in a trim gray suit and striped tie and white shirt, who opened the door wider for them. Justin looked a little alarmed at all the items they brought in. They walked into a large kitchen with a wooden preparation table in the center of the room. The room was mostly lit from windows through which sun streamed. Old wooden and iron chandlers hung from the ceiling. The floor was made of rows of dark red tiles. Even though the building was very old and the ceiling as high, there were no sight of cobwebs or dust. The equipment was placed on the tabletop.

"Um, Mr. Wilhelm, this is Mr. Dale Calwiptern, the parapsychologist. Mr. Calwiptern, this is Mr. Justin Wilhelm, the head caretaker of Young's Estate." The two men shook hands. Dale went to work opening the boxes and inspecting each instrument while Dale looked on in interest and disbelief.

Noticing he was being watched, Dale glanced up and said: "I would like to speak with each person that claims to have witnessed a spiritual phenomenon."

"There are, sir, only three of us that care for the estate. They are here, of course, sir." Then after a few minutes watching Dale inspect the equipment, Justin cleared his throat and said: "Sir, if you don't mind my query, but are all those gadgets necessary?" Then seeing the cameras being unpacked, he continued, "We normally do not allow visitors to photograph the interior," with a slight objecting tone.

"I hope that you can make an exception in this case," Dale said slowly as he carefully brushed some dust out from the edges of a small instrument with a long antenna. "Photography is another tool for capturing the auras of apparitions."

"As you wish, sir. I will gather the others for the interviews." He turned and left. After several minutes, Justin returned with two plump older women wearing aprons and carrying a slight air of dust and polish.

By the time they arrived, Dale had set up a tripod and camera which pointed at a chair. He also had moved a small table next to the chair and had placed a device with wires, styluses, and paper. While Dale worked on the apparatus, the four stared. At length, he was done and stepped back and looked at the others. "Who would like to go first?"

Justin and the two women looked at one another and then back to what looked like an interrogation seat. It didn't help matters that the stream of sunlight appeared to focus on the very spot. After a few moments, stepped forward and asked quietly, "What is that, sir?"

"This? Oh, it allows me to see different responses while you talk about your experience. People re-experience a scary or disturbing incident. I will be able to see changes in your skin temperature with this," he pointed to the camera, "infrared camera. And the polygraph shows me changes in your emotions." He looked around at them

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smiling.

With apprehension and resignation, Justin stepped forward, "I shall be first, sir."

"Good. Now just right here, and let me place these probes." He placed the wired devices on the caretaker's hands and forehead. The expression on Justin's face was a mix of dread, curiosity, and annoyance. Dale moved around behind a table that was placed behind the chair. "Please try to relax. I need you to tell what happened the last time you experienced the incident. I need to monitor your signals from behind you; please don't move around too much. Also, if it helps you talk about it, please explain your experience to someone in front of you. You can converse freely with that person."

"Of course, sir," Justin looked up at the others who were watching with varying degrees of apprehension on their faces and settled on Barty. Barty noticed the gaze and tried to object, but the caretaker had already started speaking. "I have felt the ghost in this house on several occasions. Mostly, however, we seem to leave each other alone. Three days ago in a specific instance, I was carrying a valuable vase down the stairs to the storage room. It was the close of the spring months and the vase would not have properly addressed the décor of the room and the outdoor view. In any event, I walked the vase down into the cellar near the wines.

"The room became very chilly, more so than it normally is. It began to shutter and moan."

"The room?" asked Dale.

"Yes, sir. I felt something was watching me in the room. I became anxious and hurried to place the vase on the shelf." One of the maids raised her hand to her mouth and the other hugged herself as if she were getting cold too just from hearing the tale. Barty looked around incredulously at the spectacle he was witnessing. "I stepped away from the shelf and turned to leave when I heard a sound of something solid moving on the self. I turned to see the vase slide off the shelf and shatter on the floor. Just then, I thought I saw a dark shadow standing in front of me." The woman covering mouth gasped audibly. "I became dreadfully frightened and efforted myself out of the cellar."

"Could you tell me about the other incidents?" asked Dale, not expecting such a short recount. Justin obliged with several examples, each having to do with the cellar. The interview lasted for several minutes, and when done. Dale interviewed each of the maids who reported similar experiences in different parts of the house, but none were as detailed as Justin's. When the last interview was completed, Dale asked if Justin would permit him to see the cellar.

The maids left as the two men followed Justin along a hallway and down a flight of stone stairs. The walls changed as they walked from wood paneling and pictures to stone and mortar. The air changed too, from warm and humid to cool and slightly damp. The stonewall corridor opened into a small short room. The room held an earthy, dusty smell. The ceiling overhead was composed of the beams of the subflooring of the building above.

"In here, if you please sir." Justin was waiting for Dale as he looked around the room. He pointed to a doorway that led into an adjacent room. Dale grimaced as he walked into an old cobweb. "My apologies, sir, the caretaker spoke evenly, we have not

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had many visitors for a very long while.”

The room they walked into was similar to the first, but it had a closed doorway on one end and a gate covering an arched entryway. At once, Dale walked toward the gate to peer in. Barty stayed in the rear with a half-amused smirk on his face. “What is in here?” asked Dale, looking earnestly through the locked bars.

“That is our wine cellar. We store several of the finest wines from England and France.”

“Oh, it looked like a crypt,” Dale replied with a little disappointment in his voice. The subdued light struck sharp and odd shadows on the visitors.

“Young’s Estate is not that old, sir. We have laws that require that the dead be interred. This door leads to the storage room.

Dale put down a small pack and opened it. He rummaged around and pulled out a large hand-sized instrument. It had a lighted face that showed a couple signal-strength needles, like those found on old audio amplifiers. The needles twitched slightly as he walked around the room pointing the device in different directions.

“What is that?” asked Barty.

“This is a ULF meter, not as useful as the ULF radio receiver, but it will have to do.” Dale continued without looking up. Barty’s expression soured. “I don’t read any activity on the meter. Mr. Wilhelm, would you please open the storage room.” Dale moved into position near the caretaker with Barty looking over his shoulder straining to see.

The old caretaker’s face tightened and paled. He swallowed and said carefully, “Yes, sir.” His hand shook as he reached for the handle. The latch clicked; the door swung slowly open. The faint light illuminated the broken vase on the floor. Still holding the ULF meter, Dale walked into the storage room and stooped down to inspect the shards. He picked up a large piece and turned it over in his hand. Standing up, he looked at the shelf where the vase had dropped. The dust showed lines where the vase had slid forward. Dale scowled at the lines. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a capped pen. He uncapped the pen and placed it on the shelf. The pen rolled off effortlessly.

“It’s getting a little chilly in here. Could ye hurry it up?” Came Barty’s voice from out in the other room.

Dale quickly looked at the meter. The needles began jumping higher and higher in intensity. The room did seem colder, but without the instruments it was hard to say for sure. Dale felt a shudder and the room began to shake.

“Earthquake!” Dale shouted as he dove under the shelves and covered his head. Dust and boards fell to the ground as the tremor shook the room. Moments later, the room stopped shuddering and dust stopped falling from the ceiling. Dale brushed himself off and stepped out from under the shelves. “Remarkable!” He said looking at the meter. “I never knew that ULF can determine earthquakes.” He inspected the device, and then satisfied, he looked up at the shocked onlookers who were covered with dust. Barty had little pieces of straw sticking out of his hair.

“We had an earthquake?” Barty stared blankly. “But, we have never had

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earthquakes before!” Then, he looked up at Dale and said: “Are you absolutely certain?”

“No, of course not.” Dale stated matter-of-factly. “I am a parapsychologist not a seismologist. But you have to admit,” he continued stepping out of the storage room, “that the evidence is fairly obvious. And, I don’t think that there is a haunting here.”

They looked at each other briefly and shuffled their way up the stairs.

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Barty sat heavily on an antique couch with a small plume of dirt. He looked at the ground and only stared while rubbing his hands slowly. Thoughts of a haunting potentially bringing revenue to the little town – an idea as ridiculous as opening a saloon – seemed to be evaporating rapidly. He flicked little pieces of straw and wood from his sleeve. The caretaker returned to his duties leaving Barty and Dale in the library. He felt unsure that this was what he really wanted. He looked up when he heard the tones as Dale made a phone call.

“Hal? This is Dale. I was wondering if you could tell me if there has been any seismic activity in the Hillshire county. Yes, England.” Dale was speaking quietly into the receiver in a calm even tone. “I see. Uh huh, sure! Thanks.” With another beep Dale hung up the phone.

“Well?”

“The earthquake was registered here in this area with an approximate magnitude 5 on the Richter scale. Dr. Hal Dickerson, a seismologist in London, is working the exact location. He thought it was a little strange that the seismic activity would be happening here.” Dale sat down and sipped a hot cup of tea that tasted more like boiled bitter weeds. Making a face, he put the cup down. “Are you going back into town?”

“Yes, why do ye ask?” Barty stopped rubbing his hands and looked up.

“I will be staying here overnight to be certain that there wasn't a coincidence. Could you please pass on the message that seismic activity could explain some of the apparent haunting experiences?” Dale began to busy himself with his instruments again.

Barty's eyebrows rose. “Don't ye think that it requires a professional hand to report such a conclusion?”

“It is simply a message, so that they may balance their expectations with reality. The reality is that they may not have a haunting to advertise. I will continue my work here through the night to verify the findings. I am also awaiting the call that confirms the exact location of the last temblor.” Dale did not look up as he fiddled with the broken ULF receiver.

“Well, I find yer approach questionable! Indeed, with ruddy faulty equipment – so easy to break, mind you – how can you conclude something that can only mean the eventual eroding of our little town. Surely, ye must wait afore broadcasting such damning conclusions!” Barty's face was flush and his fists clenched.

Dale did not reply. The interviews did not reveal any psychic imprints either, but the argument was not useful. He himself felt a disappointment that the trip was less than what it seemed to be. Barty stood up and waited for an answer for a couple minutes. When none appeared to be offered, he turned and peevishly left the room in a rushed straight gait.

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For a half an hour, Dale continued to work on the broken instrument. Finally, he gave up and tossed it in a box of other equipment. After sitting for a few minutes, he gathered his things again, and headed down to the cellar. An hour later he had a couple specially-configured video cameras, audio equipment, and motion sensors sitting in the room. Checking all the equipment once more, he walked upstairs. As he rounded the corner, his cell phone rang loudly in the quiet building.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Calwiptern? I have been trying to reach you!”

“Yes, Hal, what can I do for you?”

“Dale, the epicenter is directly under the estate less than a quarter of a mile!”

“What does this mean?”

“Dale, you and everyone in that building are in danger. You need to move to a safer area. There have been several quakes in that same location, each one greater in magnitude. Considering the increased frequency and magnitude, you can expect another, stronger temblor within a few hours! You must evacuate the premises.”

“Thank you, Dr. Dickerson. I will work on the evaluation immediately.” Dale hung up furrowing his brow. He looked around at the stacks of electronic equipment that surrounded his workspace. The monitors flickered directly in front of his gaze showing only an empty, cobwebbed room and an open doorway. Checking a couple dials, he moved away still scowling. He restraightened a stack of papers sitting on a nearby desk, all the while glancing at the monitors. Finally, he looked over to the box with the ULF receiver. Putting down the papers he walked over to the box and picked up the receiver. Hefting it, he shook his head and dropped it back in the box. He sat down suddenly, and chair squawked on the floor.

The door creaked open and the caretaker stepped in quietly. “Is there anything that you will be needing, sir?”

“No,” Dale began. “Wait! I got word that the earthquakes are occurring directly underneath this estate. We need to evacuate as soon as possible.”

“Indeed? Have you confirmed this?”

“No,” Dale replied pensively. Just then, one of the younger maids walked in and began dusting some of the furniture. Music was hissing from a headset in her ears. The sound caught Dale's attention. Mr. Wilhelm noticed the distraction and immediately turned to the maid.

“My sincere apologies, sir. We have very young and inexperienced hired help.” He put out his hand, and the maid demurely handed over the small stereo. The maid looked deeply embarrassed and scurried out of the room. “I will have this taken care of immediately.” He started toward the door.

“Wait! Mr. Wilhelm!” Dale called just as the door began to close. The caretaker reopened the door. “What will you do with that?”

“Dispose of it, of course”

“May I have it?”

“Sir?” The caretaker was sincerely shocked.

“No, I have a use for that,” Dale stood up and crossed the room. He took the

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device and turned it over in his hands. He sat down at a desk, got a screwdriver, and began unscrewing the cover. The caretaker was too curious in the happenings to realize that he was staring. The electronics opened to view with wires poking in and around different components. Dale followed two wires from a circuit board to a small black core; he cut the wires. Then, he retrieved the ULF receiver and opened it in a similar manner. His hands moved determinedly as he removed different components and placed them in the little stereo.

The caretaker looked on in interest. "Excuse me, sir. Could you tell me what you are doing?"

"I'm making a new ULF receiver." Dale said after he connected the last few wires. "Let's see if it works!" He flipped the switch, and the speaker made a low BWAAHSSSSKKK sound. It changed to different long tones like a child playing an organ. Dale changed the frequency dial slowly and the tones faded, and only an intermittent hiss remained.

"It should be right here," Dale stated flatly after listening for a minute.

"What should, sir?"

"What should *what*?" Asked Barty as he walked back in the room. Dale and Mr. Wilhem looked up. Barty looked at them completely bewildered by their reactions.

"What are you two doing?"

Dale looked back at the device in his hand. "This is the right frequency. If there is a phenomenon, we should hear it." The makeshift device continue to hiss erratically.

"Well, how can ye hear any such with the volume so low. Turn it up, man!"

Dale turned up the volume slowly. The hiss got louder and louder. But nothing discernible came over the speaker. Dale closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"See, I could'a told ye that this was nothing short of tom foolery."

Dale hung his head still listening. The room was silent for a while the radio made a hissing and crackling racket. Dale's head jerked up suddenly. He reached for the tuner and carefully. The hiss changed slowly to a high static then to mid-tone.

"What good will do?"

"Shh!" Dale turned the volume down little by little and put his ear closer to the speaker. Justin went pale as Dale looked up. Then, Barty began to hear it. "SSSSstheH KKKSSHHfoolsKKKKKKKKKSHHSSKKSHwill paySSSSSSSSSSHHHHHSSKKKK"